



WHAT IF PROGRESS MEANT WELL-BEING FOR ALL?

U.S. innovators use global insights to shift the narrative and surface opportunities ahead



RAND CORPORATION

Metropolitan Group

the power of voice

TABLE OF CONTENTS

3 Narratives About Progress Shape Mindsets and Behaviors
The power of narrative, the dominant economy-centric narrative, and the potential for an emerging well-being narrative

7 Key Findings
Insights from a global scan; explorations in England, Mexico and New Zealand; and application in the United States

12 Narrative Themes Emerging in Our Global Scan
Mapping three emerging themes: Economy, economy-plus and well-being

17 Connector Stories
Trying on global insights in the U.S. with issue and movement leaders

24 Your Turn: How Can You Build on These Global Learnings?
Questions and recommendations to shape the opportunity ahead

28 Acknowledgements and Notes

29 Appendix
Defining Well-Being
Additional Detail on Learnings From the World

This exploration is a joint effort between RAND Corporation and Metropolitan Group. We hope it will be of use for anyone interested in telling a new story about progress, equity and well-being: nonprofits and movements, governments, funders and impact investors, researchers, economists, storytellers and more.

- RAND is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges. RAND has been leading efforts in **social and economic well-being**, including working with cities to measure community and civic well-being and implement policy and programmatic solutions.
- Metropolitan Group is a **social impact organization** that crafts strategic and creative services to advance a more just and sustainable world. MG has been leading narrative research, development and change strategies in the United States, Latin America and other locations.

The RAND and Metropolitan Group teams co-developed this resource, which is posted on **www.metgroup.com** and linked to **www.rand.org**. It has been formally edited but not reviewed through RAND's Quality Assurance process. It was supported by a grant to RAND by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

NARRATIVES ABOUT PROGRESS SHAPE MINDSETS AND BEHAVIORS

Countries and cities around the world are beginning to take a well-being approach, putting holistic human and planetary well-being at the heart of decision-making. They adapt indicators, policies, practices and budgets to this new core focus.

In explorations of how to advance well-being approaches, the need for a new narrative about progress comes up repeatedly. In many countries, progress is sharply defined only as economic growth. ***What if that narrative shifted and progress were defined as well-being for all people?***

Individuals and communities might begin to envision, expect and demand actions that prioritize opportunity and equity. Social movements might be buoyed by a greater commitment to shared prosperity and connection. Decision-makers, guided by new norms, expectations and measures of their impact, may share power, direct investments, and set policies and practices to foster the conditions for well-being.

Narratives–the combination of stories and experiences that shape our shared ideas about the world and why things are the way they are–have a powerful effect on our behaviors and actions.

For example, as the narrative about smoking shifted from "I have a right to smoke anywhere" to "I have a right to breathe clean, safe air," smoke-free laws and limits on tobacco marketing took off.

One of the most persistent narratives in the United States and other countries is that progress is defined by economic growth, consumption and competition. The strength of the economy is seen as the strength of the country, community or institution–and even the family or individual.

This pervasive notion defines how problems are framed, what solutions are considered and how decisions are made. It can incent short-term actions and incremental shifts that generate quick wealth over bold actions and transformational social changes that benefit people and the planet for generations. "But how will that affect the economy?" can limit innovation, protecting a status quo that is leading to despair, social unrest and destruction of our natural environment.

This economic growth-centered narrative is not accidental:

- It took hold after World War II with the **adoption of Gross Domestic Product** as the measure of progress, and was embraced by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to assess the worth of national economies.[1] (Simon Kuznets, who created the concept of GDP for a U.S. Congressional report in 1934, warned against its use as a measure of how well we are doing.[2])
- It is persistently **maintained through many stories**: Fiscal policies are set to grow GDP; news reporting relies on economic indicators like stock market indices and housing starts; the "American Dream" and other commonly-held ideas about success center on wealth; and more.

But, as critics ranging from U.S. Senator Robert F. Kennedy[3] to Nobel Prize-winning economists Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz[4] to Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon[5] and many others have long argued, **GDP and economic indicators alone are not adequate measures of progress and the human condition**. In the study of this economic framework, many point out that it defines progress in a dangerously narrow way, masking inequities, supporting siloed decisions, perpetuating racial and other forms of injustice, and accelerating threats to human and environmental health.

We can have both robust per capita wealth measures and half the world living in poverty, strong housing market indicators and houselessness, a booming U.S. stock market and more than half the population feeling daily stress and worry.

The effects of this economic growth-centered narrative are evident in decisions that favor individual wealth and competition over shared prosperity and collaboration. The narrative can bolster false "trade-offs" between environment and economy, between living wages and profitability, and other harmful binary constructs. It can lock in zero-sum thinking, the idea that for one person to do well, someone else must do worse. It can limit an appreciation of basic human needs that must include civic engagement and social connection in addition to housing and food.

When this narrative is taken as a given, as immutable, as the way things work, it often drives how the vast majority of our systems and our decision-making are structured.

SETTING OUR TERMS

Well-being: A full look at how people are doing

Well-being means thriving in every aspect of life and having opportunities to create meaningful futures. It includes people's physical, mental and social health, as well as basic needs like food, housing, education, employment and income. It includes social and emotional needs, like sense of purpose, safety, belonging and social connection, and life satisfaction. It must include freedom from racial and other oppression, and active advancement of racial equity. And it is inclusive of well-being of our communities, our environment and our planet.[6] While it often has been incorrectly considered an individual wellness concept, well-being is by nature collective, considering relationships among people, interconnectivity of cultures and societies, and relationships between people and the planet. (See the appendix for a visual summary of all components.)

Narratives: Stories and experiences that shape perceptions

Narratives shape the way people see and think about the world around them. They are expressed, received and internalized through stories and experiences in art, popular culture, traditions and common practices, the built environment, policies, systems and structures, and more. Aggregated over time–and filtered through lived experience, culture and environment, and the echo chambers where people seek feedback and validation–narratives influence the way people make sense of their surroundings, interpret information and make decisions.[7] (See **metgroup.com/narratives** for more information.)

Well-being narratives

Well-being narratives establish well-being, including but not exclusively a sustainable and just economy, as the ultimate goal and the definition of progress. Our hypothesis is that resetting this narrative would have a transformative effect on people's mindsets and decisions, leading to actions, policies and funding that prioritize flourishing, equity and connection.

A NEW APPROACH: SHIFTING TOWARD WELL-BEING

For some time, diverse communities, fields and movements have been pursuing a new definition of progress rooted in well-being.

From New Zealand to Jackson, Mississippi, decision-makers are designing budgets, policies and systems to prioritize well-being for all people, communities and the natural environment, advancing shared health, prosperity and intergenerational equity. International bodies, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development,[8] have proposed indicators and policy approaches to support this shift.[9]

These approaches certainly include access to clean air, water and food, shelter, education and health care. They also prioritize access to civic life and freedom in the public square. Employment measures shift from job reports alone to work that is dignified and sustainable. Natural resource policies not only meet resource needs, but also prioritize biodiversity, natural wonder and wild places for current and future generations. (This is deeply influenced by the generations-long quest by the Māori to have their relationship to the Whanganui River, and the river's to them, recognized, leading to the government's granting of personhood status to the river, and establishing human guardians, in 2017.[10]) Every community is protected from toxins because choices about production, distribution and operations are made according to their impact on human and planetary well-being. All people are safe and able to experience justice they can trust.

In short, for this project, we are defining a well-being approach as one that includes:

- **A focus on all of the dimensions** (physical, emotional, social, spiritual, ecological, etc.) that help people and communities unlock the power of human potential across the lifespan
- **A commitment to equity and actions to advance it,** ensuring well-being for all people, especially those who have been marginalized or excluded from opportunity.
- **An appreciation of structures and systems** that must work together to support whole people and whole community progress

To be certain, a just and sustainable economy is a core component of well-being—it's just not the sole focus, driver and indicator of progress.

These are not new ideas. **The idea of holistic well-being has been part of Indigenous and other communities' cultures and decision-making throughout history.** Advocates, activists, artists and culture makers, grassroots movements and community leaders have prioritized well-being, flourishing, equity and connection in their messages and stories about social justice issues. But these voices are often oppressed, silenced and discarded by powerful people who believe in a prominent economic-focused norm.

EXPLORING WELL-BEING NARRATIVES

In a global gathering hosted by Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to explore how well-being approaches might be implemented, the theme of narrative came up again and again.[11] The hypothesis was clear: As long as the dominant narrative reinforces that progress equals growth and consumption, policies and other actions that prioritize equity, shared benefit and collective well-being will falter.

Conversely, if the narrative shifted to establish well-being as the north star, people might see assets in places where they now see only deficits. They might broaden their notion of what makes up basic needs and establish that all people deserve well-being. Decisions–and who makes them–might shift, along with what gets measured and "counted." Stakeholders and their influencers might become open to new solutions and expect more equitable outcomes because "the way things are" will have fundamentally changed.

Intrigued by this opportunity–and seeing the power of narrative across other social movements–we wondered:

- What is the narrative of progress in places that are taking a well-being approach?
- What is it up against?
- How have well-being and counter-narratives formed, and who is protecting and advancing them?
- Who gets to advance these narratives?
- What is working that can be built upon to shift to a well-being narrative?
- What gaps and challenges need to be addressed?

For insights, we used three lenses:

- **A global scan** of academic literature, international organizations, nonprofits and government websites at the county and community level to capture emergent themes on how well-being is being framed and used in public and organizational discourse.
- **Country scans**, cursory explorations in England, Mexico and New Zealand to find transferable learnings for a U.S. context, with close attention to how a well-being narrative may advance equity.
- **Experiments in the United States** to see how these insights might spark new thinking, with six innovative "narrative connectors" from different sectors.

This research is qualitative, providing an initial account of progress and challenges in several other global locations and insights about an early phase of adaptation and learning in the United States. To that end, this is not a message guide or a how-to document. Rather, our goal is to offer insights, potential next steps in narrative development, and ideas and considerations to try on. **Further exploration, narrative development and narrative testing is needed, and this scan provides a useful jumping-off point for more rigorous analysis.**

KEY FINDINGS

"We can create systems that support the well-being of all people and the natural world. It starts with a new story, one that's centered on well-being, and a community of change agents sharing what creates true wealth and health. We can change the narratives we share and the metrics we use."

–Deb Nelson
Just Economy Institute
(U.S. narrative connector)

1

Intentionally advancing a narrative of progress based on an equitable and holistic idea of well-being shows promise. But no proven, tested well-being narrative exists.

Globally, groups are starting to experiment with new narratives, formally and informally, with some of the most advanced work we saw coming from the United Kingdom. (Although this project did not explore U.S. groups advancing well-being narratives, early work is happening stateside, too.[12])

But the movement is not networked, leading to competing narratives and incremental rather than transformative change–sometimes despite massive efforts to create well-being cabinet positions, transform measures, and set policy and budgets. There are interesting starting points, but gaps exist in research to understand underlying values; to test the narratives that resonate, drive action and are durable; and to explore the link between narratives and shifts in mindsets, policies and more.

The U.S. connectors' projects suggest that using well-being narratives boosts their existing messaging and storytelling, emphasizing shared prosperity and opportunity. Further engaging these and other grassroots organizations to develop, test, refine and advance a proven well-being narrative can both enhance individual issue advocacy and shift the narrative about progress.

The time is right: In a world deeply impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and with ongoing demands for racial justice, there is a new opportunity to talk about complex issues, power and a collective vision for the future–but this window will not remain open forever.

2

"Economy-plus" is the most prominent emerging well-being narrative observed in formal efforts.

Repairing or rebuilding a broken economic system to deliver good, meaningful lives for everyone is the main theme in formal narrative efforts. This narrative makes the case that the economy is something that was intentionally created (not naturally occurring), that it is not working in service of all people, and that it can be rebuilt in a more just and sustainable way. Well-being, then, would be the outcome of a refined economic system.

We wonder whether this inadvertently reinforces an economics-centered narrative and prevents transformative change.

3

Some grassroots organizations are advancing well-being narratives centered in racial equity, but efforts are siloed.

Well-being narratives are present in Indigenous cultures, social movements and grassroots organizations. While most well-being narratives in the grassroots context are tied to single issues like gender equity, environmental justice and health equity, there is also early work to center racial justice in calls for economic system change. But there has not been funding or support to connect these efforts or test which narratives most effectively shift mindsets and actions.

The U.S. connectors emphasized that the holistic notion of well-being is grounded in traditions and narratives of elders and ancestors, and in Black, Latino/a/x and other communities. It is central to the way young people see the world and call for change. Under an extractive economy, however, these efforts are often oppressed. The connectors' work mirrors that of grassroots efforts in other countries: **Their narratives have a strong focus on equity, dignity, justice and liberation, as well as human potential and shared prosperity**. They underscored the need for well-being narratives to establish that all people deserve well-being, and that all people's well-being is essential to our collective prosperity.

"Generalized discourse on 'well-being,' without a deep understanding of inequity, especially income inequality, can result in more harm than good."

Saru Jayaraman, One Fair Wage (U.S. narrative connector)

4

Formal narrative efforts do not adequately address power and equity.

While groups leading well-being narrative work in England and New Zealand have prioritized engaging grassroots organizations, they acknowledge that this is not yet fully happening. The early years focused on well-being advocates, economists and academics, and links to adjacent movements. There is positive momentum in New Zealand due to increasing collaboration with Māori communities.

Grassroots groups in England and New Zealand say the emerging well-being narratives don't represent them and feel academic or elite. Voices lifted up from grasstops organizations (established, formal organizations in a commmunity) may not yet represent the full diversity by race/ethnicity, culture and history. Some grassroots leaders hesitate to join a broad effort that may not go far enough on racial equity and decolonization, or that will "smooth over the rough edges" of people and issues (e.g., Indigenous peoples, women living in poverty, LGBTQ+ rights, young people) often excluded from mainstream dialogue.

Among both grassroots groups in the three countries and U.S. connectors, there is a sense that well-being definitions, approaches and narratives name equity but don't center it, or even that well-being is a panacea for the real need: dismantling systemic oppression. **They emphasized that well-being approaches and narratives must insist on full dignity for all human beings, which they have not found prominent in work to date.**

"It is critical to bring a power analysis into well-being narrative work. All of us, whether we're white or Black, rich or poor, Indigenous to this land or a newcomer, want to be healthy and thrive, now and into the future."

Navina Khanna, HEAL Food Alliance (U.S. narrative connector)

5

More work is needed to clearly establish the term "well-being" or to explore an alternate term.

Well-being, when defined clearly and at a collective versus only individual level, provides a comprehensive way to understand how people are doing and define what societies pursue as progress, with a core focus on equity, shared prosperity and opportunity. It can be a way to expand the idea of basic needs, covering food and shelter and expanding to include connection, opportunity and more. But **there is no consistent understanding or use of the term well-being, creating confusion and even opposition among many stakeholders.**

For some, it evokes a health frame–a broader view of health than health care or disease prevention alone, but still solidly in the health sphere. It is sometimes used in a narrow way to mean mental health, positive psychology or happiness, all of which are components of well-being but not the full picture. And it may be confused with wellness–co-opted by the wellness industry–and perceived as a luxury or "nice to have," once basic needs are met, rather than a core set of expectations for every person.

Some grassroots advocates express concern that the concept and definition of well-being itself is too subjective, not clear, and not grounded in needs and demands of historically oppressed communities.

There is a need to test the term well-being, alongside alternate options, to see what best evokes the full intention of the concept.

6

There is a need to explore the impact of well-being narratives on policy and other actions.

Anecdotal evidence from the countries reviewed suggests that when they put well-being measures in place, new narratives begin to follow. This idea is being tested by two of the narrative connectors: in Jackson, Mississippi, which is introducing "dignity economy" measures and strategies, and across the National League of Cities cohort of Cities of Opportunity, which are focused on health equity.

But this potential link between measures and narratives may be specific to how measures are used to influence policy in some Western contexts; it may not be true in other types of government structures, in Indigenous communities, or in non-Western settings. Further, what is less clear is how shifts in narrative result in changes in behaviors and actions, including policy–something the connectors were eager to see. We did not find evidence of a robust causal link here; while it can be difficult to tease out the role of particular narratives versus other influence on policy change, it is a link that can be further assessed in longer-term narrative, policy or systems change evaluations.

"There is ongoing interest among U.S. cities in continuing the conversation and working to advance a well-being narrative, mindset and ultimately, policy action."

Sue Polis, National League of Cities (U.S. narrative connector)

7

Countering entrenched economic-centered narratives will have significant challenges, but there is momentum to drive change.

In a dominant economic-centric narrative, culture and policy environment, the credibility of well-being approaches is questioned or even attacked. In England, for example, critics charged that Prime Minister David Cameron's well-being approach was an attempt to "pull the wool over people's eyes," a distraction from an economic downturn and the "critical role of government."[13] And certainly "what about the economy?" remains a common warning cry when well-being-oriented solutions are proposed, from extended COVID-19 preventive measures to environmental sustainability measures.

That said, research[14] has suggested that once 10 percent of a population is committed to a new idea, it will eventually become the prevailing norm of the entire group–with consistent, committed effort. **Between the long-time well-being approaches present in Indigenous, social justice and grassroots groups and the emerging interest in amplifying and augmenting these narratives at the population and policy level, the interest is there.**

A shared and broadly accepted well-being narrative is possible–so long as we center equity and fully engage and reflect a range of perspectives and voices across communities and sectors.

"When this narrative is heard, understood, embraced and acted upon by the people with influence and power, no one loses."

Marlin King and Jan Mangana, City of Jackson, Mississippi (U.S. narrative connectors)

REFLECTIONS

How might you try on these ideas and experiment with narratives about progress and success that center on well-being?

What messages, stories (spoken and experienced) or frames are you using that advance a narrative of progress and societal purpose aligned with well-being?

Where do you default to messages, stories and frames that center on economic growth and/or that reinforce zero-sum constructs as the goal?

See page 24 for additional questions to spark your thinking.

NARRATIVE THEMES EMERGING IN OUR GLOBAL SCAN

Pulling from observations across the global landscape scan and three country scans, we identified the following types of progress narratives, detailed in this section.

PROGRESS = ECONOMIC GROWTH

Economic growth is the key to social progress.

PROGRESS = "ECONOMY-PLUS"

The economy should deliver good, meaningful lives for everyone.

PROGRESS = WELL-BEING

Well-being is at the core of all decisions and actions.

NARRATIVE CONCEPT:

PROGRESS = ECONOMIC GROWTH

Economic growth is the key to social progress.

STATUS:

Dominant, enduring narrative in the U.S. and all the countries we scanned

MESSAGES AND THEMES:

Themes include:

- Growth is good and natural.
- Growth is how we know we're making progress.
- We can clearly measure growth, see return on investment.
- Growth brings jobs and opportunities that let people live well.

Plays out via:

- Constant reporting and political discourse on stock markets, GDP and other economic indicators as the sole measure of progress.
- Cultural narratives such as evangelical Christian "destiny and prosperity" concepts.

VALUES:

- Growth
- Wealth
- Competition
- Meritocracy
- Prosperity
- Individuality
- Opportunity (for self and close circle)
- Freedom
- Human and social prosperity, progress, potential

EQUITY:

Absent or focused mainly on working conditions and productivity

DRIVERS:

- Governments
- Private sector
- Conservative civil society influencers
- Mainstream media voices

NARRATIVE CONCEPT:

PROGRESS = "ECONOMY-PLUS"

The economy should deliver good, meaningful lives for everyone.

STATUS:

Emerging, led by organizations and foundations, often elite or academic rather than popular

MESSAGES AND THEMES:

Often tied to a call for or implementation of different measures

Themes include:

- People need support to thrive and flourish.
- Economies need to be regenerative, sustainable, not extractive.
- We need to create an economy that works for everyone (a just or solidarity economy).
- We created the economy (it isn't a living thing) so we can rebuild it.
- Sustainable prosperity, Sustainable Development Goals.

VALUES:

- Equality
- Democratic ownership, provision of basic needs
- Dignity
- Fairness
- Health
- Stewardship
- Efficiency
- Sustainability
- Connection, cooperation, participation
- Respect for all living creatures

EQUITY:

- Mention of inequalities
- Little focus on intersectional or disproportionate impacts
- Language relates more to economic priorities

DRIVERS:

- Coalitions headed by nonprofits or think tanks
- Progressive media
- Isolated sectors within government
- Niche economists
- (Less visible) social justice advocates
- Academia

NARRATIVE CONCEPT:

PROGRESS = WELL-BEING

Well-being is at the core of all decisions and actions.

STATUS:

Enduring at grassroots level, often rendered invisible at mainstream level

MESSAGES AND THEMES:

Often tied to specific issues, such as violence, migration, racial justice, gender equity, environmental sustainability and justice

Themes include:

- Well-being is central to democracy and civic participation.
- Social cohesion is rooted in well-being.
- Well-being is a key part of resilience.

Other elements:

- Social justice and authentic agency
- Thriving and flourishing
- Social foresight
- Caring communities, generosity culture
- Centrality of life
- Interdependence

VALUES:

- Equity, justice
- Community power
- Human dignity
- Collective benefit
- Autonomy, liberation
- Stewardship of the environment
- Fulfillment
- Collaboration
- Nature as a living whole
- Humans as part of a larger system

EQUITY:

- Racial equity
- Human dignity
- Decolonization
- Deconstruction of patriarchy
- Gender equity

DRIVERS:

- Grassroots movements
- Indigenous communities
- Social justice advocates
- Niche media and social media voices

NARRATIVES IN PLAY

We tracked hundreds of media mentions and social posts in each country through our narrative scan. Here are a few examples of how each narrative shows up.

NARRATIVE 1: PROGRESS = GROWTH

Mexico

El Universal article: "Buscaremos que México so convierta en paraiso de la inversión. … Sin crecimiento no existe nada." Alfonso Romo, chief of cabinet for economic growth

("We aim for Mexico to become a paradise to investors. … Without growth nothing else exists.")

New Zealand

The New Zealand Herald headline: "Peter Lyons: Coronavirus exposes our economy to exogenous shock."

England

Independent headline: "Labour urges government to avoid austerity and beat coronavirus recession by creating 400,000 jobs with vast green new deal stimulus."

NARRATIVE 2: PROGRESS = ECONOMY-PLUS

Mexico

Social media post by the Ministry of the Treasury: "Con una inversión equivalente al 2.3% del PIB, el @GobiernoMX trabaja con la iniciativa privada en 68 obras de #infrastructura para generar #empleos y #bienstar para las y los mexicanos."

("With an investment that represents 2.3% of the GDP, the Mexican government works with the private sector on 68 infrastructure projects to create jobs and well-being for the Mexican people.")

New Zealand

Global Citizen headline: "Jacinda Ardern says economic growth is pointless if people aren't thriving. New Zealand's new well-being budget focuses on mental health and poverty reduction."

England

Twitter post from Imperative 21, a business-led network driving economic systems change: "Our economic system is broken. It's time to reset. We need a more just economy that works for everyone and for the long term. This is our opportunity to reimagine and redesign what comes next."

NARRATIVE 3: PROGRESS = WELL-BEING

Mexico

Twitter post by Patricio Solis (@psolisaqi), a renowned researcher on racism, colorism and inequality: "Debemos avanzar en esta línea en México. Los efectos del racismo y la discriminación étnico-racial sobre el estado emocional y la calidad de vida de las personas no son fáciles de registrar en instrumentos convencionales como las encuestas."

("In Mexico we have to make progress in this direction. The impact of racism and ethnic-racial discrimination on people's emotional state and quality of life is not easy to measure in traditional reasearch tools like surveys.")

New Zealand

Newsroom headline: "Radical change needed to address health inequity. It's going to take time and strong leadership to overcome what the health minister calls the 'postcode lottery.'"

England

Twitter post from Build Back Better UK (@BuildBckBetter): "Residents in Ashfield want to #BuildBackBetter. This fantastic new animation tells the story of the area–industrial past, how it's coped with #COVID, and people's vision for a better future."*

* Watch the full video here: **https://www.facebook.com/watch/BuildBackBetterAshfield/**

CONNECTOR STORIES

To help interpret and test insights from the scans, we engaged (and funded) six "narrative connectors," whose work was exploring or could benefit from a well-being narrative. The following connectors designed three-month projects to experiment with well-being approaches:

- **Eric Dawson**, CEO, Peace First
- **Saru Jayaraman**, president, One Fair Wage
- **Navina Khanna**, executive director, HEAL Food Alliance
- **Marlin King** and **Jan Mangana**, chief administrative office, City of Jackson, Mississippi
- **Deb Nelson**, executive director, Just Economy Institute
- **Sue Polis**, director, Health and Wellness, and **Robert Blaine**, senior executive and director of the Institute for Youth, Education and Families, National League of Cities

The connectors reinforced how existing narratives about progress thwart their work. They found the concept of a broader, shared definition of progress–centered in dignity, equity, liberation and collective well-being–was relevant, resonant and helpful. Their reactions to the global scan findings are integrated in the summary of key learnings.

These projects hint at the potential for well-being narratives, identify gaps and needs in current narratives, and suggest opportunities for further narrative development, testing and application.

CONNECTOR: MOVEMENTS AND SOCIAL ISSUES

ONE FAIR WAGE

Saru Jayaraman, president

One Fair Wage is a national coalition, campaign and organization seeking to end all subminimum wages in the United States and to increase sustainable wages and working conditions in the service sector.

THE BIG IDEA:

The restaurant industry cannot fully reopen or recover after COVID-19 without addressing the well-being of its workers. The dominant narrative of economic recovery as the singular goal (helping restaurant owners stay in business) gets in the way of solutions that benefit both restaurants and their workers. A well-being narrative can shift the conversation.

THE PROJECT:

As restaurants reopened post-pandemic and workers refused to go back to subminimum wages and inhumane working conditions, One Fair Wage broadened its narrative to frame fair pay as a part of workers' well-being, including feeling valued and respected. It released data showing that reduced tips and increased customer hostility during the pandemic caused workers to leave the industry. Restaurants reopened massively understaffed, and their overworked and underpaid workers were walking off the job. Thousands of workers attended "high road" job fairs with employers willing to offer higher wages and improved working conditions. Restaurant workers spoke to the press and public about how a paycheck is both money and a reflection of their value, and how their happiness, sense of dignity and self-respect, and ability to spend time with family are part of that value. Significant media coverage demonstrated that unless the restaurant industry addressed the well-being of workers, workers would not return to work, consumers would lose, and the restaurant industry (and economy) would falter.

LEARNINGS AND NEXT STEPS:

Using a well-being narrative helped One Fair Wage shift the debate over why the restaurant industry was experiencing a staffing shortage. It directly countered the narrative that lazy workers were staying home and collecting unemployment insurance, advancing a new narrative: Workers need livable wages and safe working conditions, need to feel valued for their work (through wages, not mere accolades), and need to be treated with civility and respect. Hundreds of restaurant owners raised their wages during the project period.

IDEAS TO BUILD ON:

How might your issue or organization shift how you tell your stories to be centered in a well-being narrative, directly countering narratives that reinforce ideas about economic growth and progress as the singular goal?

CONNECTOR: YOUTH VOICE

PEACE FIRST

Eric Dawson, CEO

Peace First is a global nongovernmental organization and venture philanthropy fund investing in young changemakers. Co-led by young people ages 13-25, Peace First provides startup funding, digital tools, community support and storytelling to help young people advance their ideas and create a more compassionate, just and peaceful world.

THE BIG IDEA:

Young people naturally include concepts of well-being in their understanding of the world and their calls for social change. They are also the chief culture creators and storytellers. Mapping their language and ideas can provide pathways to new narratives about progress.

THE PROJECT:

Using a sampling of 30 projects designed and completed over the past year by young people ages 15-25 across the U.S., Peace First explored well-being narratives emerging in how youth describe both the problems and solutions facing their communities. Through the power of young people's own voice and constructs, this analysis revealed an intersectional understanding of problems and the structural underlying causes including:

- The effect of systemic racism on the blood supply
- Predatory practices of behavioral health practitioners on communities of color
- Lack of community gathering places due to historic government policies
- The unique nutritional needs of refugees who crave food connected to their culture
- Role of sexism in young women's mental health

LEARNINGS AND NEXT STEPS:

For the young people included in this project, well-being is connected to solving root injustices. They argue that certain members of the community deserve more attention because of structural neglect. Concepts of thriving, connection, justice, tolerance and community are powerful throughlines. In their perception, well-being is:

- Both more intimate and bigger than current conversations about health.
- The link between daily experiences and structural issues; between the personal and the political.
- A collective benefit that must prioritize those who are most vulnerable.
- Inextricably linked to liberation. We cannot be free if we cannot be well. Health is linked to structural issues of racism, poverty and other inequities.
- Unique and needs to be responsive to individual contexts.

IDEAS TO BUILD ON:

How can the idea that well-being is inextricably linked to liberation become a narrative frame and be applied and tested in your own work? How might you engage and support young people who are creating and advancing well-being narratives and imbuing it into our collective culture?

CONNECTOR: GRASSROOTS, FOOD SYSTEMS

HEAL FOOD ALLIANCE

Navina Khanna, executive director

HEAL is a national multisector, multiracial coalition of 55 organizations that represent over 2 million rural and urban farmers, ranchers, fishers, farm and food chain workers, Indigenous groups, scientists, public health advocates, policy experts, community organizers and activists building a movement to transform the food and farm systems.

THE BIG IDEA:

Reclaim the original meaning of the word economy–which comes from the Greek *Oikonomia*, meaning the management of home and caring for our ecological and social environments in a way that allows all people to thrive–to demonstrate that economic success should be measured by how resilient an economy is and how much it serves the well-being of its inhabitants.

THE PROJECT:

HEAL and its members created a four-part video series that reimagined local economies as they relate to HEAL's main work areas–health, environment, agriculture and labor. The videos challenge current markers of value and economic progress within food economies, including those that pit the lives and dignity of working people against economic efficiency, and ecological stewardship against food security. They offer an alternative vision for resilient food economies that center a pure well-being narrative of thriving and flourishing, community cohesion, social foresight, deep democracy and resilience. (**Watch the videos here.**)

LEARNINGS AND NEXT STEPS:

The videos, which uplifted and amplified the voices of HEAL members–most of whom are excluded from mainstream narratives–reached broad audiences through its 7,000-follower Instagram account where they were seen by over 3,200 viewers. Although this project was helpful to inform HEAL's messaging around economies and its strategic goal of advancing a shared narrative, the lack of power analysis or justice focus in existing well-being narratives was challenging for the team.

IDEAS TO BUILD ON:

Narratives are the collection of many stories and experiences that coalesce into a shared idea. How can we ensure that a well-being narrative is made up of the broadest collection of stories about how well-being really comes up and is lived and understood in communities? How can we include discussion and mapping of power?

CONNECTOR: LOCAL POLICYMAKER

CITY OF JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI

Marlin King, chief administrative officer (CAO) and Jan Mangana, executive assistant to CAO

Jackson is the capital of Mississippi and the most populous city in the state. The city is distinguished by its role in the civil rights movement.

THE BIG IDEA:

In 2017, Jackson's city government developed a "dignity economy" model responsive to its residents' pleas for an opportunity to raise their quality of life and laid the groundwork for upcoming generations to thrive and new businesses to succeed. This is a well-being approach.

THE PROJECT:

Human dignity does not happen without connection, and Jackson saw improving broadband access as a core strategy in its well-being approach. Using a well-being narrative, the team framed broadband not merely as a technology or economic solution, but as an investment with multiple economic and civic well-being dividends:

- Empowering residents to fully participate in democracy
- Providing educational and employment resources
- Offering better access to health care
- Alerting about crime in nearby communities
- Ensuring support/help in natural disasters and emergency situations

LEARNINGS AND NEXT STEPS:

Jackson is using a well-being narrative to frame discussion of broadband with community leaders, investors, grassroots organizations and state policymakers. Now the challenge is to evaluate and discuss broadband outcomes across multiple dimensions of well-being, not merely economic ROI. Jackson is also exploring how leaders might embrace well-being as the framework for making all decisions, and whether this city approach also can influence state-level policy.

IDEAS TO BUILD ON:

How can well-being narratives center opportunity, connection and dignity as core elements? How can city investment choices and progress be made through a well-being frame that includes dignity, agency and other well-being outcomes in the policy and budget process?

CONNECTOR: FINANCIAL SECTOR

JUST ECONOMY INSTITUTE

Deb Nelson, executive director

The Just Economy Institute (JEI) is a leadership development program and community of practice for financial activists working to shift the flow of money and power to create a just and resilient economy.

THE BIG IDEA:

As the Just Economy Institute launched, embedding a well-being framework in its vision, its narrative and the way it works with its fellows would advance its mission.

THE PROJECT:

This project began as the JEI team was finalizing its identity and brand–including a deepened focus on racial and economic justice–and launching a new cohort of fellows. The creative team considered a well-being approach as they developed the brand narrative and strategy, positioning well-being as the goal of the work and exploring the link between equity, well-being, shared prosperity and community wealth. Some fellows (financial advisors, investors, lenders, foundation leaders, wealth holders, community organizers, consultants and social entrepreneurs) used a well-being narrative or framework in their creative capital products.

LEARNINGS AND NEXT STEPS:

JEI's vision statement, "We envision a just and resilient economy that supports the well-being of all people and the planet," and use of a well-being framework–including social, economic, racial and environmental justice–help ground its work and continually shift away from short-term profitability to long-term, collective well-being. JEI fellows are now testing well-being narratives with their stakeholders. One to watch: Ain Bailey, founder of New Seneca Village, a retreat center for Black, Indigenous and women of color doing social justice work.

IDEAS TO BUILD ON:

Because the JEI team works in the financial and economic sector, in some ways it is in the "economy-plus" lane, working to tell a new story about a just economy that works for all people. If your work also focuses in this sector, how can you counter language and metrics that reinforce an extractive economy and advance an alternate narrative?

CONNECTOR: NATIONAL NETWORK

NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES

Sue Polis, director, Health & Wellness, and Robert Blaine, senior executive and director of the Institute for Youth, Education and Families

The National League of Cities is comprised of more than 2,000 city, town and village leaders across the United States who are focused on improving the quality of life for their current and future constituents.

THE BIG IDEA:

Participants in NLC's Cities of Opportunity are building holistic, equitable approaches to address social determinants of health, the factors that influence how long and how well people live. Because they are already using approaches that align with well-being frameworks, they bring a valuable perspective to interpreting the global scan findings, and can apply insights in their ongoing work.

THE PROJECT:

To understand how the findings from the global scan inform and resonate with current city-level efforts, NLC convened a group of leaders from across the country. The conversation focused on how findings aligned with or differed from efforts in their respective communities, and on their use of narrative as a change strategy. In addition, NLC pulled in initial insights from a scan of messages used by U.S. cities advocating for more expansive measures of progress to guide decision-making, including well-being metrics.

LEARNINGS AND NEXT STEPS:

Most cities are starting with an equity index to guide policy decisions and a related racial equity narrative, which several saw as a precursor to a well-being narrative. Cities need evidence that a well-being approach would be effective, and need help to counter current municipal definitions of progress that are based on growth (e.g., economic, property values, populations). Participatory budgeting and policymaking is a positive step, but siloed structures still get in the way. "We have a bureau of labor," said one participant, "but not a bureau of well-being." There is some risk of well-being existing as a theoretical framework, an elite policy conversation and/or a big statement with no associated action or community dialogue. There is clear desire and interest to convene cities as peers to inform this work going forward.

IDEAS TO BUILD ON:

How can we avoid using new well-being measures–and related narratives–to justify or re-label existing programs that may not advance well-being? How can we shift mindsets, systems, policies and structures by centering progress goals on well-being?

YOUR TURN: HOW CAN YOU BUILD ON THESE GLOBAL LEARNINGS?

Early narrative work around the world, combined with experiments and insights across the U.S., point to the potential to develop, test and unleash a new narrative–or set of narratives–that equate progress with well-being. Building this narrative to be authentic and effective will require developing it with the grassroots, anchoring it in closely-held values and making it adaptable to many issues and sectors.

As new narratives take hold and thousands of issues, organizations and movements adapt and advance them, a fertile ground forms for new priorities, actions and expectations.

QUESTIONS TO SPARK YOUR THINKING

Explore what you are doing already—and could begin doing—to advance well-being narratives.

Narratives gain traction through a wide range of stories and experiences, filtered through lived experiences, environment and culture. We can't just talk about well-being; people have to live it. To that end:

- Review your organization or community's activities, policies and programs. What currently maps to the well-being narrative? Who is already demonstrating well-being narratives through action and/or words?
- What are all the places a well-being narrative might show up, including what is being said and by whom; what gets measured; actions such as policies and business practices; how media and entertainment define what matters most; community experiences; etc.?
- What is the most powerful start point?

Consider how to talk about the broad notion of well-being.

- Does the term well-being adequately capture the holistic idea of people having what they need to thrive and having equitable opportunities to create meaningful futures? Do you talk about well-being when you discuss meeting basic human needs?
- Is the discussion of well-being collective (vs. individual) in nature?
- What other terms are you using or hearing to broaden the idea of progress, equity, connection and other priorities?
- If you are using the term "well-being," how do you give it meaning?
- Try it on: Integrate well-being concepts into your organization's messaging about goals, vision and concept of progress and see what sticks.

Be aware of people's and groups' power and position in the social or political context.

- Who is talking about well-being? What voice or power do they have in the community or organization?
- How is well-being framed as inclusive of expanded basic needs and necessary for all people (versus an elite luxury for a few)?
- Are narratives coming from grasstops organizations representative of community voices?
- What can you learn from narratives organically emerging from the grassroots, youth voices, art and culture, and other non-dominant voices? How might you amplify their voices and narratives?
- How can you include concepts of all people being deserving of well-being in your narratives?

Notice, question and experiment with narratives.

- Where do you see economics-only or economy-plus frames of progress? How might you offer an alternative well-being frame?
- Look at where you have a habit of leading with the economy, even if you are attaching well-being as an outcome. Challenge yourself to consider where you can instead center arguments on equitable well-being with a stable and strong economy as one component/indicator. Play with and test different approaches.

Bring the connectors' narratives and projects into your work.

As relevant and with attribution, see how they work.

THE OPPORTUNITY AHEAD

We have the opportunity to be transformative–to advance a narrative of progress and purpose centered on well-being. We are at the founding moment with much room to grow.

Today, we do not have a prescribed narrative or answers to the question of how to shift this narrative–nor will we advance this work with a narrowly prescribed set of solutions. We need to deepen our understanding of the opportunity to make a shift, of the challenges we face in doing so, of bright spots to build on, and of questions that need to be explored. To that end, we suggest **three essential next steps** for researchers, funders and others to consider.

1

Invest in formative research.

Identify, develop and test various well-being narrative options, in several countries doing this work and in the U.S., and learn what works to shift mindsets and actions. Take an applied learning approach that prioritizes real-time change alongside longer-term learning; for example, fund hundreds of stories or small projects coming from the grassroots and then observe what catches fire. Capture the ingenuity happening at the community level and amplify the solutions that resonate and grow.

There is so much to be curious about here:

- There are challenges with the term well-being. What's a better word or phrase to represent this holistic notion of what people need to thrive and create meaningful futures? Or, if well-being is the best term, how can it be better explained across communities?
- How might we radically shift rather than merely modify the current narrative? Can we reinvent progress (well-being) rather than reinventing capitalism (economy)?
- What are the underlying values that can anchor a well-being narrative to resonate with key stakeholders, including both grassroots and decision-makers? What well-being narratives trigger deeply held values?
- How might a well-being narrative bolster grassroots movements? Might it, for example, increase and shift community power?
- How can we ensure that grassroots priorities and social issues are included in but not subsumed by a well-being narrative?
- What are the best channels to spread new narratives and uplift those from grassroots movements?
- What makes well-being narratives most credible, believable, inspiring and actionable? What narratives best propel discourse and discussion?
- How can well-being narratives prime different decisions, including policy action?
- How do ideas like hope, feeling safe, trust in each other and in government, connectivity and shared fate influence whether a well-being narrative and approach can take hold? What role do social cohesion and inclusion play in both advancing individual and collective well-being and fueling the spread of narratives?
- How has COVID-19, and the response to it, primed or stalled potential for a shift in narratives about what we prioritize and pursue as progress?

2

Lift up and fund the stories and storytellers who are already defining progress through a well-being frame.

- Well-being narratives are long-established in Indigenous communities and many others. The lived experience and wisdom in this work provides vital expertise and leadership for narrative explorations.
- "There is a narrative opening to engage young people as an audience but also as storytellers," says connector Eric Dawson, CEO of Peace First. "These young innovators are defining well-being in powerful, impactful and accessible ways. These stories capture the imagination because they make well-being personal, approachable and real. These young innovators could be our ambassadors, our creators, our narrative architects."

3

Translate research into publicly available tools.

Make them widely available to activists, policymakers, NGOs, academics and others whose work would be elevated by a shared well-being narrative. Provide the infrastructure and collaboration to learn together across the field, even as each entity and collective retains its own framework, approach and language.

The shift toward a well-being narrative may be nascent, but it offers a powerful invitation to dive in, iterate together and establish a new expectation for "the way things should be." Inclusive of many voices and values, this narrative can weave through diverse fields, sectors, coalitions and movements, creating the possibility for a far more just, equitable and sustainable world.

As you try on the ideas here and experiment with stories, messages and experiences that paint a new picture of progress and success, please share what you're finding: **wellbeing@rand.org**.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND NOTES

We are grateful above all to the narrative connectors (see page 16), a group of innovative leaders who were open to trying on global learnings through quick-turn projects that validated, expanded and challenged our understanding of well-being narratives, and provided tangible examples to explore further.

Thank you to the many innovators who participated in interviews in England, Mexico and New Zealand. We value and respect your perspectives and transparency and hope you see your work and insights reflected here.

Our project team:

- RAND Corporation: Anita Chandra
- Metropolitan Group: Eric Friedenwald-Fishman, Jennifer Messenger, Fernanda Salazar Mejía; design by Nate Currie
- Social and media scanners: Daniela Ivonne Méndez, Rabia Abrar, Michael Carney

And a special thank you to Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and in particular the Global Ideas for U.S. Solutions team, for project funding and for ongoing curiosity and exploration of well-being approaches and narratives.

ENDNOTES

1. Felicity Thomas and Nils Fietje, "Capturing the Cultural Narratives of Well-Being," from Alonzo Plough (ed.). *Well-Being: Expanding the Definition of Progress*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 67-68.

2. "Beyond GDP: Measuring progress, true wealth and the well-being of nations," Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, accessed June 13, 2021. **https://www.oecd.org/site/worldforum06/38433373.pdf**.

3. Robert F. Kennedy, Remarks at the University of Kansas, March 18, 1968. **https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/the-kennedy-family/robert-f-kennedy/robert-f-kennedy-speeches/remarks-at-the-university-of-kansas-march-18-1968**.

4. Joseph E. Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, and Jean-Paul Fitoussi. *Mismeasuring Our Lives: Why GDP Doesn't Add Up*. (New York: New Press, 2010).

5. "Nicola Sturgeon: Wellbeing as important as economic growth," BBC, January 22, 2020, accessed June 6, 2021. **https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-51200821**.

6. "Enhanced Individual and Community Well-Being," Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, accessed May 21, 2021. **https://www.rwjf.org/en/cultureofhealth/taking-action/outcome-improved-population-health--well-being--and-equity/individual-and-community-well-being.html**.

7. "Shifting Narratives to Create a More Just and Sustainable World," Metropolitan Group, accessed May 21, 2021. **https://www.metgroup.com/ideas/voice-shifting-narratives-to-create-a-just-and-sustainable-world/**.

8. "Better Life Initiative: Measuring Well-Being and Progress," Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, accessed May 21, 2021. **https://www.oecd.org/statistics/better-life-initiative.htm**.

9. For a full discussion of well-being approaches and opportunity to advance them via narrative and other levers, see "Well-Being: Expanding the Definition of Progress," Alonzo Plough, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). **https://rwjf.org/wellbeingbook**.

10. "The New Zealand river that became a legal person," BBC.com, accessed May 21, 2021. **http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20200319-the-new-zealand-river-that-became-a-legal-person**.

11. Alonzo Plough (ed.). *Well-Being: Expanding the Definition of Progress*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 63.

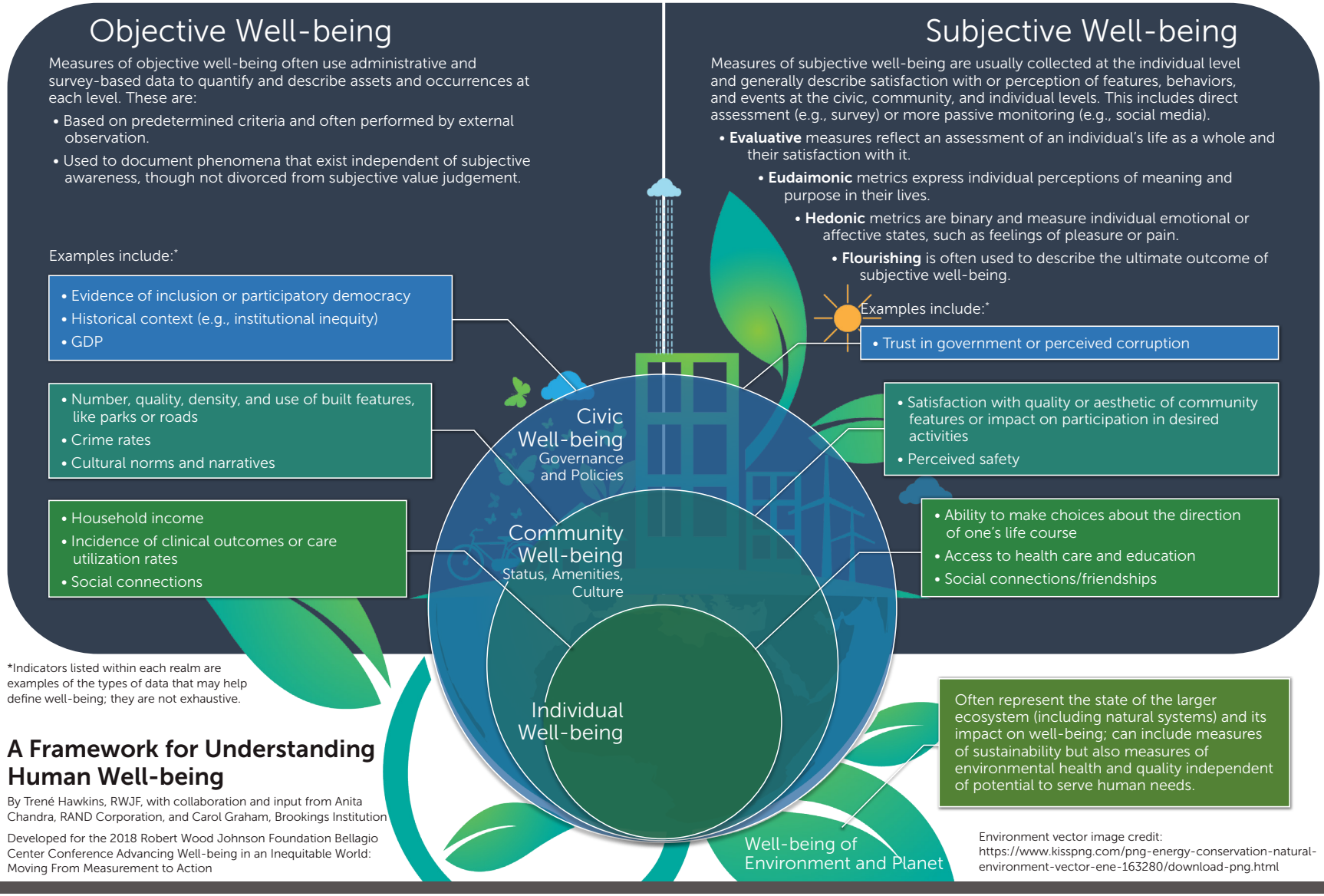
12. For an example of emerging U.S. well-being narrative efforts, see Well Being in the Nation (WIN) Network, **https://winnetwork.org**.

13. Hélène Mulholland and Nicholas Watt, "David Cameron Defends Plans for Wellbeing Index," *The Guardian*, Nov. 25, 2021, accessed June 4, 2021. **https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2010/nov/25/david-cameron-defends-wellbeing-index**.

14. "Minority Rules: Scientists Discover the Tipping Point for the Spread of New Ideas," Social Cognitive Networks Academic Research Center, accessed June 16, 2021. **https://freakonomics.com/2011/07/28/minority-rules-why-10-percent-is-all-you-need/**.

APPENDIX: DEFINING WELL-BEING

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, in "Well-Being: Expanding the Definition of Progress" published with Oxford University Press, offered this definition of the dimensions of well-being.



*Indicators listed within each realm are examples of the types of data that may help define well-being; they are not exhaustive.

A Framework for Understanding Human Well-being

By Trené Hawkins, RWJF, with collaboration and input from Anita Chandra, RAND Corporation, and Carol Graham, Brookings Institution

Developed for the 2018 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Bellagio Center Conference Advancing Well-being in an Inequitable World: Moving From Measurement to Action

Environment vector image credit: https://www.kisspng.com/png-energy-conservation-natural-environment-vector-ene-163280/download-png.html

APPENDIX: MORE DETAIL ON LEARNINGS FROM THE WORLD

EXPLORING THE GLOBAL LANDSCAPE

Global approaches to well-being and why it matters can be traced to many conversations on economic progress and human potential, and on measurement and policy. But in recent years, global conversations have accelerated, precipitated by interests in understanding how life satisfaction and other measures of subjective well-being link to concepts such as work productivity, concerns about hopelessness and despair, interest in how the well-being of people and places matters in discussions of health and environmental sustainability, and concerns about racial equity.

Our narrative exploration began with a brief scan of global well-being narratives—in academic literature, international organizations, nonprofits and government websites at the county and community levels—including how well-being is defined and how key concepts are used in discussions of well-being. The scan was structured but not intended to be comprehensive or constitute a systematic literature review.

Overwhelmingly, the narrative around positive psychology, happiness and wellness was predominant in government resources and various organizational guides. But there were other themes as well, and terms such as dignity, justice and civic life appeared alongside "well-being." Measurement efforts, such as those with the Office of National Statistics in the United Kingdom, have been moving to personalize well-being within day-to-day life experiences and sharing information on national well-being trends. In addition, the use of the "well-being" term has been showing up in social movements, namely movements to address community violence, close the gap in income inequality, or stem the negative impacts of climate change.

Themes that emerged from this global narrative scan:

- **People need supports to thrive and flourish.** Well-being is a key part of helping people thrive and flourish, meaning that people need more than basic happiness to ensure their human potential is fully realized—they need investments in well-being dimensions, such as the capacity to create, to be emotionally healthy, to learn across the lifespan, and so forth.
- **Economies need to be generative not extractive.** Economies need to generate all the conditions for a thriving life, prioritizing social wealth, meaning the total value of resources people have to meet their social or emotional needs. Economies must ensure beneficial rather than harmful outcomes to holistic well-being, and guard against overuse of resources.
- **Well-being is central to civic participation.** A democracy cannot survive if people do not have the well-being to participate and engage.
- **Social cohesion is rooted in well-being.** Global and community conflicts stem from a lack of connection, and investing in well-being can build connections, support kindness and counter these conflicts.
- **Well-being is a key part of resilience.** Given the nature of global disasters and the increasing concern that societies must be able to adapt to acute and chronic stresses, supporting the social, civic, economic and environmental well-being of a community is a path to greater resilience.

While these themes appear to propel the well-being narrative, one of the critical gaps in some of the global discussions was, at times, an apparent papering over of deeply entrenched histories and social inequities.

One finding the U.S. connectors were especially interested in is any causal link between well-being narratives and policy change. We did not find a robust causal link in this scan, but it remains a critical need in future exploration, particularly by reorienting how benefit-cost analyses are operationalized to

track well-being investments and outcomes.[15] That said, well-being approaches have been cited as part of policy design and policy changes, elements critical for shaping a new narrative. For example, just in the U.K:

- Well-being has shown up in governance standards for Public Health England, as part of local Health and Wellbeing Boards, in annual budgets for community learning, in harmonization of occupational safety and employee assistance across civil service, and in a myriad of other agencies, budgets and programs.[16]
- Well-being has been used to guide policy recommendations through a Parliamentary review in the U.K. in key areas of economy, planning and transport policy, arts and culture policy, and health policy.[17]
- In a report on well-being by What Works Wellbeing–an independent collaborative organization working with governments, businesses, communities and individuals–the authors summarized data on youth participation in public service (e.g., volunteering), a key dimension of community well-being.

REFLECTIONS

- What themes from the global scan that integrate well-being (e.g., thriving and flourishing) are most resonant in the U.S. and for which populations?
- How might you experiment with these themes in your messaging and narratives? Do some of these themes lend themselves more or less to shifting overall narratives about progress and what matters most in decision-making?

STORIES FROM ENGLAND, MEXICO AND NEW ZEALAND

To explore well-being narratives at the country level, we made virtual visits to England, Mexico and New Zealand. Those three countries are each taking concrete policy or programmatic actions toward a well-being approach, and offer transferable learnings to the U.S.

In each country, we conducted a brief online scan, interviewed two well-being and/or narrative experts, and spoke with four other people from various perspectives including local government, grassroots or movements, private sector, culture and youth leadership. Our sources spoke candidly and confidentially so we are not directly quoting or identifying interviewees. We also scanned social and news media conversations over the past year. (All work in Mexico was done in Spanish; reporting is in English.)

REFLECTIONS

- The idea behind this project is to learn from other countries and see what's applicable, relevant and interesting in the U.S. context. As you think about your field, sector and/or issue, what feels most applicable?
- More broadly, as someone living in the U.S., what feels most relevant?
- What ideas or opportunities could you pull in and try in your work?
- What new ideas does this spark?
- What are examples of places in your work, field and community where advances in well-being narratives are already being made?

WELL-BEING NARRATIVES IN ENGLAND

We focused on England, within the U.K, because it was grappling with nationalism in a similar way to the U.S. during the scan period, and it is the most aligned, among the nations within the United Kingdom, with the U.S. economic and cultural context. That said, at times it was difficult to tease England-only insights out of U.K. observations.

Well-being measurement and data are well-established at the government level in the U.K. The National Index of Well-being debuted in 2009, and the Office of National Statistics adopted well-being indicators in 2011. An All-Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics provides a central focus, and well-being approaches are evident in labor, transportation, health and education, arts and culture and other policy arenas. Some cities, such as Liverpool, have also adopted well-being approaches; the nonprofit Centre for Thriving Places supports local efforts.

As one of our interview sources shared, "We said the right thing at the right time–and we put data on it so people had to take it seriously. Policymakers must now realize it's a broader debate beyond the economy." The durability of that realization wavered a bit in the wake of austerity policies, several sources shared, when well-being was painted as a way of not talking about the economy because the economy was struggling. But a well-being focus seems to be rebounding, especially in the context of pandemic relief.

In England, dominant narratives of growth, balanced budgets and free markets, and converting labor and nature into financial wealth, continue to dominate, leaning into values of individual responsibility and profit for individuals and companies. But well-being narratives are gaining traction, too, thanks in part to multiple organizations and foundations–as well as sector-specific collaborations in banking[18] and business[19]–focused on developing and establishing well-being narratives as a strategy to advance a well-being agenda. Those groups predominantly use what we've come to think of as an "economy-plus" frame: remaining focused on the economy (with well-being as a desired outcome) versus centering well-being (with economic vitality and sustainability as one of multiple priorities). Examples: "An economy that provides a foundation for everyone to live a good life,"[20] "organising our economy to deliver good, meaningful lives for everyone"[21] and "a healthier economy that puts life at the center."[22]

Perhaps as a result of this they've had less success centralizing this narrative and securing a broad policy platform. Initial research by a U.K. foundation confirmed that conversations about well-being continue to center on poverty, problems versus solutions, and fragmented issues and approaches rather than a holistic vision.

A more recent expression of this narrative from Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll) moves more toward a well-being-centered narrative, even as the call to action remains rebuilding the economy. "Collective wellbeing," WeAll says in its policy guide,[23] "is the ultimate indicator of progress, whether or not that involves economic growth … meaningful democratic engagement [is needed] to identify and understand what matters for current and future collective wellbeing."

These collaborative initiatives to establish new narratives have many contributors; one was built through "creative hacks" involving dozens of innovators. Yet fully engaging grassroots-led organizations, movements and racial equity leaders has proven challenging, according to both those leading the efforts and those who feel excluded. Grassroots groups say the emerging well-being frames don't represent them, they name equity but don't center it, and they feel academic in ways that obscure their individual priorities.

One advocate working on youth issues in England expressed frustration at the term well-being; to them it meant the self-care and breathing exercises offered to young people to manage their anger, a weak substitute for dismantling the systemic and racial oppression actually causing their

anger. "For people of color," they said, "even asking the question 'what do I need now and to create a meaningful future?' requires a sense of agency that's inherently denied in a racist society." The narrative, they said, must go beyond well-being: "We will know we are making progress when individual people are able to live with the full dignity of themselves as human beings."

Several grassroots groups are carving out their own economy-plus narrative, but in a deliberately separate way. Decolonising Economics,[24] for example, "is working to build a solidarity economy movement that is rooted in racial justice principles … emerging from a frustration with the white dominant analysis and practice of the U.K.'s 'new economy' movement."

In addition to economy-plus, two other well-being narrative themes emerged across the social media scan:

- "A successful government takes responsibility for enabling dignity and good lives for all people." Traditionally a left-wing narrative, this became somewhat more mainstream during the pandemic, but it remains politicized. Themes include self-determination, civic engagement and interconnection.
- "Success is meeting human needs within planetary boundaries." This is strongest within environmental circles but does reach into the mainstream as awareness of climate change continues to build.

There appears to be public interest in well-being narratives and approaches, with spikes in online activity around reports on well-being indicators[25] and a May 2020 YouGov poll[26] showing that 80 percent of Britons believe the U.K. should prioritize health and well-being over economic growth during the pandemic (60 percent prioritize this post-pandemic, too). In addition, news and social media spiked around release of a Cardiff University poll[27] showing that 23 percent of respondents believe that climate change will be the most important issue facing the U.K. in the next 20 years, while only 10 percent believe that it will be the economic situation.

But the impact of well-being approaches, measures and policies to address this demand can be elusive; one local leader shared that it's challenging to gain traction for a well-being narrative when he can't yet point to how efforts to date have improved real lives in his city.

REFLECTIONS

- How can well-being narratives illuminate connection and interdependence among people's individual and collective well-being?
- How might a well-being narrative authentically include social justice organizations, reparation and healing, multi-generational approaches and other priorities–without co-opting or extracting?

WELL-BEING NARRATIVES IN MEXICO

Well-being appears in Mexico's National Development Plan (e.g., universal pension, well-being minimum wage), and subjective well-being has been measured since 2012. But debate remains about what well-being means and austerity persists. The limited well-being approach that has permeated in Mexico is primarily top-down, leaving little room for diverse voices to express their perspectives on what holistic well-being should look like.

Dominant narratives on well-being are grounded in the meritocratic ideal of "*querer es poder*" ("if you want it you can do it"), linked to an individualistic approach to success. This is accompanied by a moral or even theological philosophy that integrates fraternity, the love for fellow beings and happiness. The lack of trust caused by corruption, inequities, violence, impunity and lack of safety undermines the development of ideas like collectivism, solidarity and interconnectedness. "A lack of policies that seek to build agency and citizenship creates a tendency to see assistencialism[28] as the only way out for victims (of violence and human rights violations)," said the executive director of a civil society organization.

These elements are evident in the dominant narratives. For example, the urgency of rebuilding the economy after COVID-19 wins out over calls for reshaping the system. The need to have jobs—no matter what they are or how people fare in them—puts aside the urgency for an economy that prioritizes equity and a regenerative economy. In that sense, the prevailing narratives are that people need to adjust to their circumstances and leave their rights and well-being aside for the sake of a job, and that extractivism or deforestation is valued over environmental justice for the sake of economic growth. Those who promote these narratives argue that to think about happiness comes at the expense of growth and it is a justification to leave people in poverty. Some examples of these narratives are:

- "Strong GDP will deliver social progress and well-being."
- "Prioritizing happiness and well-being instead of GDP normalizes poverty."
- "Mexico must be a paradise for investment."

Other narratives point to a more holistic approach to well-being, but these tend to circulate mostly among elites:

- "Insecurity makes Mexicans unhappy."
- "COVID-19 has made our interdependence more evident; we need to show empathy and resilience."
- "Why is austerity having a more negative impact on environmental policies?"

The narrative of social justice in Mexico has been very focused on access to social security and public health. That narrative expanded slightly through measuring poverty and inequities with a human rights, multidimensional and nondiscriminatory perspective, and also measuring subjective well-being. The current government, driven by the president and his cabinet, has used the "economy for well-being" tag to reframe social policy, in particular the labor policy and social transfers (i.e., "well-being minimum wage" and "well-being scholarships"). Nonetheless, these have had little impact on the development of an engaging well-being narrative or an approach to policymaking.

As a result, one of the more prominent narratives is "working conditions must be improved for everyone," an idea with traction among a broad set of actors, including communities, activists, government and opposition, and academia. Similarly, initiatives from the private sector[29] remain focused on wages and social security. These narratives shift a step closer to well-being than the persistent notion that "having a job is already good enough," but still sit solidly in the economy-plus side of the narrative spectrum.

Closer to well-being is the narrative that "minorities should have a voice and involvement in all areas of society," present in almost all groups across the social media scan, from communities and mainstream media, to government and opposition parties. And advancing even further toward well-being is the Zapatista movement, which places the "centrality of life" and the defense of the environment at the core of strategies to connect to other movements around the world, with a decolonizing perspective. This narrative, however, is still located at a grassroots level with little to no engagement on social or mainstream media or in policy-level dialogues.

REFLECTIONS

- How can more diverse voices help shift public discourse and narratives to shape a holistic well-being approach? How can we ensure that discussing and/or experiencing well-being is not a privilege for the elite?
- How can we tap into values like safety, love and fraternity to broaden notions of well-being?
- What framing can prevent a political use of the term "well-being" to romanticize poverty and reinforce stereotypes, while limiting the agency of citizens to push for their rights, in the name of subjective concepts like happiness or bienestar (well-being in Spanish)?

WELL-BEING NARRATIVES IN NEW ZEALAND

New Zealand famously adopted a well-being budget in 2019, "making decisions that aren't just about growth for growth's sake, but how are our people faring?" in Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's words.[30] As a result, the country increased funding for mental health and early childhood education, and made it through COVID-19 with less than 50 deaths (as of May 2021). The main measurement and planning tool is the Treasury's Living Standards Framework (LSF)[31] built around four interlinked capitals: financial/physical, natural, human and social.

Increasingly, public discourse is placing well-being, collective good and fairness at the center. "There seems to be a consensus at all levels that GDP is not enough to measure what is worthy for people and communities," said a Regional Council member.

The well-being-related narratives with most traction in the public conversation are related to universal health care, including mental health, in the country's National Health Strategy. The Māoris' demands to stop institutional racism in the health system, increased concern about depression among youth, and calls to address domestic violence before and during COVID-19 have contributed to the salience of this health equity-centered narrative. Emerging framing coming from the government (particularly the prime minister) also emphasizes the culture of kindness (sparked by terrorist attacks against two mosques in 2019).

However, despite national leadership to advance a well-being approach, evidence suggests that even before COVID-19 public conversations already reflected concerns about the slowing economy and business confidence in the country. From September 2019 to December 2020, dialogue about unemployment and recession were as prominent as health and mental health, illustrating several interviewees' concerns about backlash toward a well-being approach during challenging economic times. As the country began to recover from COVID-19, narratives centered on employment and economic recovery over community, environmental health and opportunities to reshape the system. This suggests that the country's well-being narrative is mostly "economy-plus," an economy that has to work for everyone.

Outside this dominant frame, some interesting well-being narratives are developing:

- Some policymakers from regional councils like Waikato have been advancing well-being narratives from a local and experience-based approach. This work has gathered learnings to inform national and international practices.
- Organizations from the private sector, like Aotearoa Circle, have approached natural resources policy through the lens of "natural capital," included in the LSF, and a narrative of "sustainable prosperity" that puts pressure on national authorities, but also reinforces a trade-offs frame. As one interviewee said: "We have generated financial capital at the expense of natural capital."
- Grassroots organizations and movements are using community-based processes to envision what well-being could look like. Themes of trust-building and decolonization appear in these efforts, along with the belief that the well-being label might not be enough if it is not tied to interconnectedness and an intergenerational focus. Mana enhancing is a concept that comes from Māoridom and appeals to the source of personal and collective strength, pride and identity. This concept, framed like the ability to collaborate—as opposed to a still very entrenched value of competition—is at the core of this community-based narrative that has been ongoing for 10 years and is now seeing fruitful influence in policymaking.

The Treaty of Waitangi is key to understanding the emergence of well-being narratives in New Zealand. "The narratives we have taken to the national level are the recognition that Māori are First Peoples and never ceded their sovereignty," said a Māori leader. In addition, the perspective of oneness of people and nature has strong implications for environmental and social justice. "If the river or the mountains and the land are unwell, then we are unwell," said a Māori leader. "When we place value on the piece of land where your parents and great-great-grandparents were born it doesn't make sense. We need to change practices, care for the environment."

REFLECTIONS

- Can scarcity and crisis be an opportunity to trigger notions of solidarity, interconnectedness and intergenerational approaches in order to talk about a bold shift in the system?
- How does a culture of kindness change what we consider and how we design policy?
- How can sovereignty and control over natural resources be addressed in a well-being narrative?

APPENDIX ENDNOTES

15. Nic Marks and Sam Thompson, New Economics Foundation, "Measuring wellbeing in policy: Issues and application," Oct. 21, 2008, accessed July 22, 2021. **https://neweconomics.org/2008/10/measuring-wellbeing-policy**.

16. An update of Wellbeing Work across Whitehall, June 2013. **https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/224910/Wellbeing_Policy_and_Analysis_FINAL.PDF**.

17. All-Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics, "Wellbeing in four policy areas," September 2014, accessed July 22, 2021. **https://wellbeingeconomics.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/appg-report-2014.pdf**.

18. Positive Money, **https://positivemoney.org**.

19. Imperative 21, **https://www.imperative21.co**.

20. "A Messaging Guide for a Well-Being Economy," New Economy Organisers Alliance, Wellbeing Economy Alliance, Public Interest Research Centre and Positive Money, accessed April 29, 2021. **http://positivemoney.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Communicating-a-Wellbeing-Economy-_-A-Guide_pdf.pdf**.

21. "Framing the Economy: How to win the case for a better system." New Economy Organisers Alliance, New Economics Foundation, FrameWorks Institute and Public Interest Research Centre, accessed April 29, 2021. **https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/Framing-the-Economy-NEON-NEF-FrameWorks-PIRC.pdf**.

22. "Stories for Life: How might our stories help design an Economy in Service to Life?" Friday Future Love, Green Economy Coalition, Wellbeing Economy Alliance and the Spaceship Earth, accessed April 29, 2021. **https://stories.life**.

23. "Wellbeing Economy Policy Design Guide," Wellbeing Economy Alliance, accessed June 6, 2021. **https://wellbeingeconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/Wellbeing-Economy-Policy-Design-Guide_Mar12_FINAL.pdf**.

24. **https://decolonisingeconomics.org**.

25. "Health Equity in England: the Marmot Report 10 Years On," U.K. Health Foundation, February 2020, accessed June 6, 2021. **https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/the-marmot-review-10-years-on**.

26. Fiona Harvey, "Britons want quality of life indicators to take priority over the economy," *The Guardian*, May 10, 2020, acccessed June 6, 2021. **https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/the-marmot-review-10-years-on**.

27. Sean Morrison, "Climate Change Rivalling Brexit for most important issue facing UK over next 20 years, study shows," *Evening Standard*, March 3, 2020, accessed June 6, 2021. **https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/climate-change-rivals-brexit-as-top-concern-for-people-in-uk-study-a4376701.html**.

28. Assistencialism is a term defined by Paulo Freire, pedagogist and education theorist, in his book *Education for Critical Conscience* as "a term used to describe social or political policies in which the end user is treated as a "passive object, unable to participate in its own recuperation process."

29. **https://empresasporelbienestar.org**.

30. "New Zealand Has Unveiled its First Well-Being Budget," World Economic Forum, May 30, 2019, accessed May 21, 2021. **https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/05/new-zealand-is-publishing-its-first-well-being-budget/**.

31. **https://www.treasury.govt.nz/information-and-services/nz-economy/higher-living-standards/our-living-standards-framework**.