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Operationalizing inclusive growth: Can malleable ideas survive metricized governance?

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Abstract

Advocates of inclusive growth claim it provides policymakers with a means of combining economic success with social inclusivity, making it highly attractive across a wide range of settings. Here, we explore how three UK policy organizations (a devolved national government, a city region combined authority, and a local council) are pursuing inclusive growth goals. Drawing on 51 semistructured interviews, documentary analysis and policy ethnography, we argue that inclusive growth is a classic “chameleonic idea,” strategically imbued with malleable qualities that serve to obscure substantive, unresolved tensions. These characteristics are helpful in achieving alliances, both within policy organizations and between these organizations and their multiple stakeholders. However, these same qualities make inclusive growth challenging to operationalize, especially in governance settings dominated by metrics. The process of representing a malleable idea via a set of metricized indicators involves simplification and stabilization, both of which risk disrupting the fragile coalitions that malleability enables.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Inclusive growth, which involves redesigning the economy in pursuit of fairer outcomes (rather than trying to address unequal growth later—RSA, 2017; Raworth, 2017), has advocates across international, national and local spheres of

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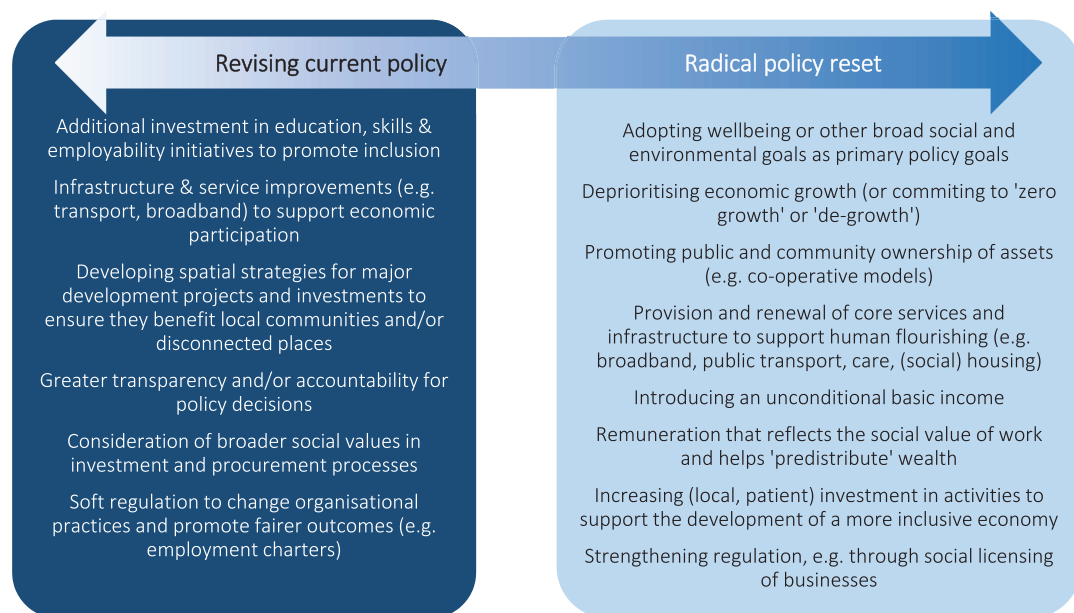
policymaking (RSA, 2017; Samans et al., 2015). This enthusiasm is understandable in the context of claims that achieving inclusive growth will: bring widespread prosperity while tackling economic exclusion (Samans et al., 2015); and help reduce inequalities within and between different places (RSA, 2017). However, it is also a deeply contested and fuzzy idea, with contrasting views not only about how to achieve inclusive growth goals but also about what, precisely, these goals might be (Lee, 2018). While some advocates have emphasized the potential to achieve stronger, more resilient economic *growth* through the inclusion of more people (Samans et al., 2015), others have advocated more radical visions of inclusive (or wellbeing) economies, including versions that de-prioritize economic growth and focus, instead, on achieving fairer and more sustainable ways of living (e.g., Trebeck & Williams, 2019). A core rationale for the move away from growth as the central marker of economic success relates to the need to address environmental degradation and inequalities (Burch & McInroy, 2018; Spash, 2020), combined with a belief that economies can be designed to secure fairer, more sustainable outcomes without economic growth (e.g., Raworth, 2017; Trebeck & Williams, 2019).

The contestations around the role of economic growth mean some prefer to use related terms and concepts, such as wellbeing economy (Hough-Stewart et al., 2019), foundational economy (Bentham et al., 2013; The Foundational Economy Collective, 2020), community wealth building (CLES, 2019), and doughnut economics (Raworth, 2017). Although there are overlaps between these ideas (see, e.g., The Foundational Economy Collective (2020)), there are different views regarding whether the shift to a more inclusive approach can be achieved within the current system (in which economic growth is highly valued) or whether substantive change is required.

The aim of this paper is to examine how inclusive growth type ideas are being conceptualized and operationalized by policy actors working in the UK. We argue that inclusive growth policy agendas represent the classic policy situation that Fowler (2021) has recently described: an ambiguous policy idea gains traction by helping to produce consensus, those charged with implementation are then responsible for making decisions that shape the evolution of the idea in practice. However, we argue that the strongly metricized governance context of UK policy organizations (Hood & Piotrowska, 2021) makes the task of operationalizing inclusive growth particularly challenging. Our empirical data center on this process of operationalization within three policy organizations working at different levels of the UK policy landscape: the Scottish Government (SG, a devolved national government), the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA, a regional authority), and Sheffield City Council (SCC, a local authority). Although each has distinct populations, geographies and policy powers, all have signaled a desire to pursue “inclusive growth/economy” ideas (e.g., Greater Manchester Combined Authority, 2017; Scottish Government, 2015; Sheffield City Partnership, 2018).

Here, reflecting what we found in policy settings, we use the term “inclusive growth” expansively, to denote a broad family of ideas associated with attempts to change current approaches to economic policy in order to tackle inequalities. This partly reflects the pragmatic and evolving way that policymakers have been engaging with these ideas, as we discuss later. The common thread connecting these ideas is the proposition that longstanding inequalities, whether between people or across places, are not inevitable and can be reduced through changes to the way economic policy is approached. The idea is to move from a “grow now, redistribute later” approach to instead promoting closer alignment between social and economic policymaking goals, strategies and mechanisms (RSA, 2017, pp. 8–9). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, these ideas are being pitched as means of achieving economic recovery that involves “building back better” (e.g., Crisp & Waite, 2020).

However, beyond these broad threads, there are important variations within the literature regarding the specificities of inclusive growth approaches (i.e., there exists an external pool of ideas to inform potential policy approaches—see Figure 1). While a full review of these variations is beyond the scope of this paper, we highlight some of the crucial differences and tensions via illustrative examples (see also Lupton & Hughes, 2016). First, although there is a common concern with tackling social and economic inequalities, different kinds of inequality have been emphasized by different authors. This ranges from regional disparities in income and productivity, labor market exclusion and unequal access to “good jobs” and skills development (RSA, 2017), to a broader concern with the fairer distribution of income, wealth and resources, between or within places or different population groups and



Informed by: Hough-Stewart et al. (2019); OECD (2015); Lupton et al. (2019); Foundational Economy Collective (2020); Guinan et al. (2021); CLES (2021).

FIGURE 1 From policy revision to policy reset: a spectrum of inclusive growth policy ideas. Informed by: Hough-Stewart et al. (2019), OECD (2015), Lupton et al. (2019), The Foundational Economy Collective (2020), Guinan et al. (2021), and CLES (2021). [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/padm.12916)]

generations (CLES, 2021; Hough-Stewart et al., 2019; Lupton et al., 2022; RSA, 2017). Second, as Figure 1 illustrates, there exists a wide spectrum of ideas when it comes to operationalizing an inclusive growth policy agenda, from revising current approaches to much more radical policy shifts. Third, there are variations in the extent to which ideas in this space seek to address climate change and promote environmental sustainability. Many of those who link ideas about economic inclusivity to ideas about tackling climate change argue that growth must be deprioritized for environmental, sustainability reasons (Hough-Stewart et al., 2019; Raworth, 2017), positioning their accounts firmly toward the right-hand side of Figure 1.

The extent of policy change implied by a commitment to inclusive growth is thus unclear. On the left-hand side of Figure 1, we see examples of policy changes that sit more comfortably within current economic structures, or which are already part of current agendas, albeit with scope to become more mainstream. On the right-hand side, we see policy ideas about inclusive growth that involve much more radical and substantive policy change, including greater redistribution of wealth and control, and deprioritizing economic growth as a policy goal. Achieving these more substantive policy changes is notoriously challenging, with many popular theories in policy studies focusing on understanding and explaining policy inertia (e.g., Immergut, 1998). Yet, policy does change and, at least occasionally, this change is genuinely substantive (Hall, 1993). Moreover, crises have been depicted as “critical junctures” that can stimulate policy change (Hogan & Doyle, 2007) so it seems plausible that the current COVID-19 pandemic, the ensuing economic fallout (Handscorn et al., 2020), and the exacerbation of inequalities (Bambra et al., 2021), may coalesce to provide an opportunity for substantive policy change. Indeed, multiple policy reports have recently positioned the current pandemic as such a moment in the United Kingdom and have promoted inclusive growth type ideas as central to achieving this shift (e.g., Independent Inequalities Commission, 2021; Walsh et al., 2020).

Within this context, our analysis suggests that inclusive growth ideas are retaining significant policy traction. We suggest this is partly because their “chameleonic” (Smith, 2013) nature functions strategically, enabling policy

organizations to develop supportive alliances across internal policy silos and, externally, with multiple stakeholders. Yet, our data also suggest that operationalizing such an ambiguous goal (which lacks an agreed set of policy solutions or dedicated team(s) responsible for delivery) is challenging, especially in highly metricized policy contexts. We conclude by considering whether systems modeling offers a way forward.

2 | METHODS

This paper draws on a larger program of research in which academics and policy organizations are coproducing evidence to explicitly take account of complex dynamics and interdependences between health, social, and economic priorities in order to reduce health inequalities. Here, we are drawing on: (1) analysis of six policy documents and three political manifestos (November 2019–June 2021); (2) ethnographic observations and informal conversations with staff working for each policy organization (October 2019–June 2022); and (3) 51 semistructured interviews with individuals whose roles inform, or involve operationalizing, organizational approaches to inclusive growth (October 2019–December 2020). Interviewees were drawn from across a range of policy areas including health, transport, planning and economic development. The *Supporting Information* describes each approach to data collection in detail, and sets out our approach to research ethics and study limitations.

We employed a similar coding framework to analyze the policy documents, political manifestos and the interviews, informed by Bacchi's (2009) "What is the problem represented to be?" approach, which asks six key questions in order to understand the way in which policies frame a particular "problem." This approach offers insights into the intentions of a policy (i.e., what it is trying to change) alongside the rationales and assumptions that are implicit within policy solutions (Bacchi, 2009). We supplemented this framework by employing Critical Frame Analysis (Verloo, 2016), which focuses attention on "solutions to policy problems." Finally, we incorporated inductive coding, developing additional codes as we identified new themes. The lead researcher coded all policy documents and interview transcripts using this thematic framework in NVivo12. A second researcher coded the political manifestos. Two researchers cross-checked a sample of coded documents and transcripts for consistency. Throughout this process, the team held five meetings to address discrepancies and discuss emerging themes in relation to existing literature. We did not code our ethnographic notes but had regular meetings to reflect on these insights, which informed our analysis and evolving understanding of the rapidly changing policy context.

There are some limitations to our methods which, combined with contextual changes, are important to acknowledge. The interviews inevitably capture views at specific time-points and all three policy organizations have experienced significant social, economic, and political changes in the past 3 years. Although our ethnographic data offer insights into what has happened "behind the scenes" since the interviews, in the context of working from home, these insights have been more limited than we would have hoped. During our data analysis, elections took place (May 2021) that impacted all three organizations and resulted in political changes to the SG (Green Party and SNP now have a shared policy program) and SCC (Green Party and Labor have a cooperation agreement). Although our analysis predominantly focuses on the period before these elections, we supplemented this via analysis of political manifestos to ascertain whether and how successful parties and candidates were employing inclusive economy ideas.

3 | POLICY CONTEXT

The three policy organizations share a concern with addressing the significant economic and health inequalities that exist in their communities (Health and Wellbeing Board, 2019; Scottish Government, 2021b; Sheffield Joint Health and Wellbeing Partnership, 2019; UCL Institute of Health Equity, 2021) but vary in terms of population size,

organizational history, levers of power and political leadership. Table 1 provides an overview of population size and key measures of the health inequalities and poverty that each organization is contending with, while the rest of this section provides a brief outline of the organizational and policy context.

While SCC is a long-standing local council, the GMCA and SG were established more recently (2011 and 1999, respectively). The SG is a devolved national government—the ongoing process of devolution (Keating, 2010) means that there has been a change in the powers available. Currently, the SG is able to pass legislation related to health and social services, the economy, housing, the environment, and local government. More recently, and importantly for inclusive growth, some aspects of social security and taxation have also been devolved. GMCA was created in 2011, formalizing a longstanding commitment to policy coordination between the 10 local authorities in the area, including around economic development. In 2014, the so-called “Devo Manc” deal signed by then Chancellor George Osborne committed to devolving powers from Whitehall to GMCA (Kenealy, 2016). Areas of responsibility include transport, planning, housing and policing. SCC is a much older organization but has only been responsible for public health since 2012, alongside housing, transport, adult education, children and families, and local business strategy. While the scope of SCC’s powers is largely limited to the local authority area, the organization also has influence at the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority, established in 2014 (formally Sheffield City Region Combined Authority).

4 | FINDINGS

4.1 | A desire for fundamental change without a (useable) roadmap

We identified a consensus across all three organizations that low productivity and high inequalities were the key problems inclusive growth should address. These two problems were viewed as inextricably linked, with interviewees and policy documents noting that inequalities (particularly health inequalities) contribute to low productivity which, in turn, impacts on overall economic performance, as the following extracts illustrate:

TABLE 1 Key indicators of health, poverty, and inequality in three policy organizations

Policy organization	Population	Healthy life expectancy (years)	Inequality in healthy life expectancy	Poverty rate
SG	5,466,000 ^a	61.9 (F); 61.7 (M) ^b	21.5 (F); 25.1 (M) ^c	19% ^d
GMCA	2,780,000 ^e	60.8 (F); 61.7 (M) ^f	25.8 (F); 27.6 (M) ^g	19.4% ^h
SCC	589,214 ⁱ	60.3 (F); 60.8 (M) ^j	24.8 (F); 21.9 (M) ^k	20% ^l

^a<https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files//statistics/population-estimates/mid-20/mid-year-pop-est-20-report.pdf>.

^b<https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files//statistics/healthy-life-expectancy/17-19/healthy-life-expectancy-17-19-report.pdf>.

^c<https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files//statistics/healthy-life-expectancy/17-19/healthy-life-expectancy-17-19-report.pdf>.

^d<https://data.gov.scot/poverty/>.

^ehttps://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/1580/key_facts_2017final.pdf.

^fhttps://www.gmtableau.nhs.uk/t/GMCA/views/GMSPriorityNine-May2021/Priority9Dashboard?:origin=card_share_link&:embed=y&:isGuestRedirectFromVizportal=y.

^gMSOA-level estimates (Greater Manchester Combined Authority, personal communication, 14 January 2022).

^h<https://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/mui/igau/growthmonitor/GM-MSOA-poverty-briefing-note-2017.pdf>.

ⁱ<https://sheffieldcc.maps.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=b02d84b6f61b471e81615ef95642c20a>.

^j<https://www.sheffieldccg.nhs.uk/Downloads/AboutUS/CCGGoverningBodyPapers/2016/6October2016GBP/Item22kDirectorofPublicHealthreport.pdf>.

^k<https://www.sheffieldccg.nhs.uk/Downloads/AboutUS/CCGGoverningBodyPapers/2016/6October2016GBP/Item22kDirectorofPublicHealthreport.pdf>.

^l<https://democracy.sheffield.gov.uk/documents/s17338/TacklingPovertyStrategy2.pdf>.

'[H]ealth inequalities and poor health outcomes reduce people's economic opportunities and have a negative impact on the country's overall economic performance.' (Scottish Government, 2015: p. 24).

'[P]oor health in some Greater Manchester communities, creating a barrier to work and to progression in work, provides an important explanation for why overall growth has been slow in the last decade.' (Independent Prosperity Review, 2019: p. 17).

Although low productivity is shaped by multiple factors, including local labor markets, many interviewees pointed to broader, "traditional" economic policies and practices as the causes of the problems and argued that a fundamental policy shift was required. However, there were no examples of how this would be operationalized in concrete terms, nor who would be responsible for the delivery. In the following extract, for example, the interviewee favorably contrasts an inclusive growth approach to "trickle down" economic approaches, while remaining non-specific about the nature of the changes required:

"[A] traditional approach to improving economy has been 'oh it'll trickle down' and actually there would be an assumption at every level [now] that [...] that won't automatically trickle down. You would have to actually shape what that industry and what that city and everything looks like." (Interviewee 8, Oct 2019, Sheffield).

The idea that the "nature and structure of the economy" (Interviewee 21, Nov 2019, Greater Manchester) need to change was widespread in all three organizations. A frequent concern was that an earlier "growth at any cost" approach, especially in response to the 2007–2008 economic crash, had contributed to current challenges:

"We've certainly been through a period of time in the last 10 years where, following the crash, the economic crash in 2007-08, it felt like everything was just... growth at any cost, almost. It felt like there was a desire to just get back to growing and making sure the GDP was growing, making sure jobs were growing. But I think the understanding of where people fit, the role of people in that and how people should benefit, where people were at the centre of it [...] seemed to get lost a little bit..." (Interviewee 10, Dec 2019, Sheffield).

The failure of the benefits of economic growth to reach those most in need, and the socioeconomic and spatial inequalities that resulted from this, was a common concern within policy documents in interviews. Interviewees consistently positioned inclusive growth approaches as a way to "[close] that economic gap between the haves and the have nots in order to create a fairer society" (Interviewee 35, Jan 2020, Scotland), and focused on the need for a reduction in inequalities "both spatially and across population groups" (Interviewee 19, Nov 2019, Manchester). However, it was not always clear whether the key concern was to reduce inequalities *within* or *between* places (e.g., within Greater Manchester or between Greater Manchester and the rest of England). Additionally, as the COVID-19 pandemic drew public attention to the intersecting disadvantages experienced by Black, Asian and ethnic minority communities (Bambra et al., 2021), our ethnographic notes record a growing interest in understanding, and reducing, ethnic inequalities. Hence, precisely which inequalities inclusive growth plans were intended to address was not always consistent and appeared to shift in response to wider organizational and societal concerns.

In sum, many interviewees implied there was a need for substantive, even radical, policy change to address deep-rooted, intersecting inequalities across and within the population, implying that policy activities would be focusing toward the right-hand side of Figure 1. Yet, it seemed much less clear *who* was responsible for achieving these changes or *how* inclusive growth goals were to be achieved through specific policy design and implementation. Complicating matters, inclusive growth was repeatedly described as all-encompassing:

“So I think inclusive growth cuts across everything really.” (Interviewee 25, Nov 2019, Manchester).

“I think you would struggle to find an area that says our policy isn't about inclusive growth.” (Interviewee 26, Jan 2020, Scotland).

In effect, there appeared to be few, if any, areas of policy beyond the scope of inclusive growth. Rather, it was framed as an overarching goal to which a host of other social and economic policies would contribute:

“[T]ackling poverty, improving standards of neighbourhoods and good quality homes, good quality jobs, good quality education system and skills and training which match the needs of the economy [...] and of course tackling things like major health challenges, health inequalities, air pollution, that type of thing. They all feel like facets of something that would be part of an economic model that is about an inclusive economy.” (Interviewee 10, Dec 2019, Sheffield).

However, none of the organizations yet seemed to have settled on exactly what each of these policy areas needed to be doing to help achieve inclusive growth ambitions. Given the spectrum of policy ideas put forward within the wider literature (see Figure 1), our data indicated that all three organizations were finding it relatively easy to achieve internal buy-in to inclusive growth as a policy goal. However, from analysis of documents and interviews, we could not identify any specific policy actions viewed as core to achieving inclusive growth. Moreover, efforts within a larger project (of which we are part) to coproduce inclusive growth systems maps with policy organizations ([reference removed for anonymity during review]) initially resulted in maps that were so complex they were deemed hard to interpret, let alone use. In sum, despite evident organizational commitment to achieving inclusive growth goals, all three organizations were struggling to develop a clear “map” for achieving these ambitions. This left some interviewees asking questions about practical ways forward:

“what are we actually going to do about it? So we can all agree at a high level that we want the economy to be more inclusive, but practically what can we do to achieve that?” (Interviewee 25, Nov 2019, Manchester).

This was not necessarily specific to the policy organizations. Rather, as highlighted in the following excerpt, the challenge of identifying actionable ways forward to achieve inclusive growth is a challenge internationally.

“[W]hat I see from what's happening in other parts of government and not just in the UK but internationally, even the OECD, we're all really struggling at that international level [...] I think we're really good at the analysis and the evidence and articulating [...] what the problem is and we might still not have a good definition, but we all know roughly what it means, but it's that policy and that impact and that action space that I think there's a lot less success in...” (Interviewee 26, Jan 2020, Scotland).

While such lack of clarity may be a reflection of early thinking and conceptualization of inclusive growth, our ethnographic data suggest this uncertainty appeared to invite interest in alternative ideas. During our study period, we identified growing interest in the idea of “wellbeing economies” in the SG and GMCA. Yet, rather than a wholesale shift away from inclusive growth toward wellbeing economies, our data suggest there is a layering of ideas, resulting in an uneasy coexistence and even greater malleability (see Table 2).

4.2 | Soft power as a route to achieving change (within a traditional growth paradigm)

Partly as a consequence of a lack of institutional policy power, routes to achieving inclusive growth ambitions often involved “soft power” that is, incentivizing and facilitating other actors to change. Both our

TABLE 2 The consistent ambiguity of inclusive growth terms

Preferred organizational term/ definition	Illustrative interview extracts	Illustrative policy extracts
In SCC, our data suggest “inclusive economy” (rather than “inclusive growth”) was the preferred term but this was not defined consistently and other terms were in use.	<p>“<i>inclusive economy to me speaks to more things like equality of access, equality of benefit, equality of inclusion in a democratic sense and inclusion of understanding of the different parts of the system.</i>” Interviewee 15, Dec 2019, Sheffield</p> <p>“<i>someone else's understanding of inclusive growth might be more what I mentioned an inclusive economy is</i>” Interviewee 5, Oct 2019, Sheffield</p>	The Inclusive Economy Framework (Sheffield City Partnership, 2018) uses terms “inclusive growth” and “inclusive economy” interchangeably. The following extract shows “inclusive growth” being used to describe what other aspects of the document refer to as “inclusive economy”: “Sheffield City Partnership Board, and all those working with us, are seeking a way of ensuring that sustainable and inclusive growth can benefit the city as a whole.” (Sheffield City Partnership, 2018: p.5)
There are no specific GMCA inclusive growth policy documents/strategies (despite organizational agreement it is a policy goal) and interviewees reported there was no agreed definition.	“ <i>I don't think we have a common definition and understanding of what inclusive growth means and how we will achieve that.</i> ” Interviewee 24, Nov 2019, Manchester	Both “inclusive growth” and “inclusive economy” are used to describe the desired outcome of a range of policies and approaches within the Local Industrial Strategy (HM Government, 2019) and Greater Manchester Strategy (GMCA, 2017) but no GMCA document attempts to define these outcomes.
Across SG, there was a consistent preference for the term inclusive growth in the first round of interviews and a consistent (albeit broad) definition. In the second round of interviews, the focus was shifting to “wellbeing economy,” (often used similarly to inclusive growth).	<p>“<i>I think it's about how we look to make economic growth something that is not just one number; it's how we spread it across the country both regionally and how it impacts in individual people.</i>” Interviewee 30, Jan 2020, Scotland</p> <p>“<i>we're moving towards wellbeing economy, I would say now, but inclusive growth would probably be, or maybe inclusive economic growth is maybe a play on that...I think they're quite interchangeable.</i>” Interviewee 37, Jan 2020, Scotland</p>	<p>In 2019, the Scottish Government defined inclusive growth as: “[G]rowth that combines increased prosperity with greater equity; that creates opportunities for all and distributes the dividends of increased prosperity fairly.” (Scottish Centre for Regional Inclusive Growth, 2019: p. 4)</p> <p>By 2020, the terminology seemed to have shifted to “wellbeing economy,” a similar vision but with clearer references to sustainability: “a society that is thriving across economic, social and environmental dimensions and that delivers sustainable and inclusive growth for the people of Scotland” (Scottish Government, 2020)</p>

ethnography and interview data make clear that policy organizations often see themselves as leaders and influencers, rather than decision-makers or agents of change. This is further reflected in all of the policy documents and, in the case of GMCA and SCC, is evident in decisions to coauthor documents laying out region-wide (GMCA) and city-wide (Sheffield) inclusive growth type ambitions (HM Government, 2019; Sheffield City Partnership, 2018).

In all three organizations, “anchor institutions” are emerging as a focus for “soft power.” These are organizations understood as influential due to their size, status and purchasing power (e.g., local NHS bodies and universities):

“[T]here’s the influencing and leadership role as well, around making sure that this is something that’s then mirrored in other organisations [...] like how we champion real living wage and those sorts of initiatives as well and then again that influence with other organisations in the city to try and, in a sense, close some of those inequality gaps.” (Interviewee 11, Dec 2019, Sheffield).

A key form of soft power involved encouraging “good” employment. In Scotland and Sheffield, this meant using spending power (notably via procurement) to encourage more inclusive approaches to employment:

“[S]o that’s about how we use our spending power as a government to diversify the workplace and in particular tackle the gender pay gap, improve investment in skills and training, tackle the zero hours contracts, improve voice in the workplace, so sort of union recognition.” (Interviewee 28, Jan 2020, Scotland).

“[A]nother example’s procurement. So using our clout as a really big procurer [...] And using that to, whether it’s cleaning contracts or facilities management or whatever, making sure that they are employing people fairly and paying people a good wage.” (Interviewee 9, Dec 2019, Sheffield).

In SCC, an interviewee used a specific example of a “big inward investment” that had created “something like 1,600 jobs”:

“[W]e were able to work with them, because they wanted a little bit of public support, that was on condition that they really did invest in local labour and they’re a living wage employer. They’ve taken whatever percent from the immediate local community. They’ve worked with our employment team to take long-term unemployed, people with difficulties.” (Interviewee 12, Dec 2019, Sheffield).

GMCA undertakes less direct purchasing (therefore procurement is a less viable form of soft power) but the development of a *Good Employment Charter* was presented as another example of soft power, aiming to encourage employers to improve employment practices and increase productivity:

“[I]t’s about increasing productivity and it’s about helping employers to unlock some of the potential productivity that they haven’t accessed, but it’s also about improving standards of work, improving quality of life, that kind of thing.” (Interviewee 17, Nov 2019, Manchester).

The above account is illustrative of the consistent way in which, despite critiques of traditional economic approaches (as outlined in Section 4.1), traditional measures of economic success (i.e., productivity) have been maintained and simply supplemented with efforts to improve broader social outcomes, such as the quality of work and life. Likewise, the following extract from the 2021 SG’s Cooperation Agreement with the Scottish Green Party implies a similar reluctance to let go of traditional markers of economic success (the Scottish Green Party had campaigned on a manifesto urging a move away from “endless economic growth”—Scottish Green Party, 2021):

‘While we share an ambition that Scotland should be a wellbeing economy that measures its success by reference to environmental and social objectives as well as economic objectives, **the role of Gross Domestic Product measurements, and economic principles related to concepts of sustainable growth and inclusive growth**, are excluded from this agreement.’ (Point 5, Annex, Scottish Government, 2021a – bold font in original).

Hence, although interviewees' accounts of the problems that inclusive growth is intended to address implied a need for radical change, the limited mechanisms identified for achieving inclusive growth largely cluster at the left-hand side of Figure 1. This suggests a hope, for at least some in policy, that it will be possible to achieve ambitious social and economic outcomes via soft power and without disrupting traditional markers of economic success. However, this view was not consistently held and some participants noted that traditional economic growth may not be: (i) compatible with tackling inequalities or climate change; or (ii) realistic in the context of the economic disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit (a point we return to in Section 4.4).

4.3 | The strategic value of ambiguity

Given the perceived lack of direct policy power and resource, attracting sufficient support for inclusive growth ambitions was positioned as crucial for all three organizations. In this context, our data suggest the ambiguous nature of “inclusive growth” is strategically useful since it can help create alliances. Overall, we identified five types of alliance that seemed important to the organizations we were studying: (i) public support (from local communities, especially voters); (ii) cross-government alliances (e.g., between organizational teams working on health, employment/labor market and the economy); (iii) ideational alliances (e.g., researchers, think tanks, international organizations working to promote and shape inclusive growth ideas); (iv) alliances to achieve change (potential implementers such as large, local employers); and (v) resourcing alliances (notably the UK Government). This section demonstrates the consistent ambiguity surrounding inclusive growth ideas in each policy organization (Table 2) and goes on to illustrate the importance of ambiguity for maintaining all five alliance types.

Despite organizational differences within Table 2, interviewees within all three organizations identified definitional overlaps and suggested key terms were interchangeable. Complicating matters further, some interviewees presented inclusive economy as an outcome of inclusive growth policies and, in one case, a set of values:

“I can see the link with inclusive economy. Because if you're going to have inclusive growth then you need to have an inclusive economy or one will deliver the other kind of thing.” (Interviewee 36, Jan 2020, Scotland).

“It [inclusive growth] is a judgment about the purpose of public policy and public services. It's a view about what we should be aiming at, which is political. And you know, difficult to almost. It's a values thing, I think.” (Interviewee 18, Nov 2019, Manchester).

Many interviewees presented this ambiguity as an asset. For example, one described inclusive growth as a “*feel good term*” which was “*low on specifics*”, noting that this “*might be part of its value*” (Interviewee 21, Nov 2019, Manchester). Expanding on this, the interviewee suggested that the term could be strategically adapted to appeal to “*a number of different audiences and without being actually very clear about what that does mean in terms of policy.*” Like others, this interviewee emphasized the strategic value of this malleability for bringing different types of policy audiences together. More unusually, this interviewee also suggested it could be useful in appealing to a range of social groups and, therefore, might help generate public support (in contrast, other interviewees seemed uncertain about the public appeal of the term inclusive growth).

Elsewhere in our data, interviewees referred to the value of inclusive growth/wellbeing economy for supporting links and conversations between different areas of policy (this seemed especially important for interviewees in the SG, perhaps reflecting the larger organizational scale). For example:

“The other aspect to why I like the wellbeing economy term is that I think there's an opportunity for me within my role and my colleagues' role within health to hijack that term. [Interviewee provides specific

example of this in practice.] So [...] it's a pleasure to see other colleagues across different non-health areas using the term, because it means that I can easily get access to an open door to try to influence their policies and interventions around this space.” (Interviewee 33, Dec 2020, Scotland).

Some interviewees also suggested there was a need to maintain and develop ideational alliances around inclusive growth—to appeal to (and perhaps avoid too much criticism from) academics and advocates pushing for inclusive growth type policies:

“There's things like inclusive growth units at the university been around for quite some time. There have been some very vocal, think tank is probably the wrong word, but organisations like the Centre for Local Economic Studies [CLES] have been really pushing. So there's been external academic [and] think tank impetus in this area.” (Interviewee 19, Nov 2019, Manchester).

What is notable about the range of organizations referenced by interviewees (across all three policy organizations) is that they cut across the spectrum of approaches to inclusive growth in Figure 1. For example, one think-tank cited by all three policy organizations was described as “*at the more radical end*” of the spectrum of Figure 1 but was positioned as useful in “*pushing the debate along quite considerably*” (Interviewee 6, Oct 2019, Sheffield). Traditional economic bodies, such as the OECD and World Bank, were also cited as influential actors. Such ideational alliances were positioned as strategically useful for lending credibility and support to inclusive growth policy work:

“So I do think the credibility has come from that (academic research unit)... generally the experts and academics have started... there's been things like the RSA Commission, there's been a lot of movement around that agenda, and it's been building up and building up...there's been a bit of a swell of people who support inclusive growth, which is helpful.” (Interviewee 22, Nov 2019, Manchester).

Perhaps reflecting this, both the SG and GMCA published a series of commissioned reports during our study period, in which some of these external actors were brought together to develop advisory reports on tackling inequalities and achieving economic recovery (Advisory Group on Economic Recovery, 2020; Independent Inequalities Commission, 2021; UCL Institute of Health Equity, 2021). Additionally, in July 2020, the SG appointed Neil McInroy as an official Community Wealth Building Adviser (McInroy formerly worked for the think tank CLES and both McInroy and CLES had been mentioned by interviewees, across policy organizations, as key external proponents of inclusive growth type ideas).

Similarly, our data suggest the ambiguity of inclusive growth can be useful in harnessing the “soft power” described in Section 4.2, enabling policy actors to frame inclusive growth in ways that seem most likely to appeal to those they are hoping will implement change. This is evident in the following extract:

“I would always defend business's right to go out and recruit the best people that they can [...] and when you talk to them about some of their biggest risks, it's attrition. And actually investing in skills and training so that you mould the future workforce that you're looking for, a lot of employers are really, really switched onto [...] The best outcomes are when actually they want to do it. And I think there is more of that going on than perhaps some people would think, but I can't compel them to and I wouldn't really want to try starting too much because I'm not sure that's our role.” (Interviewee 12, Dec 2019, Sheffield).

The SG and GMCA also need to work with the range of political parties that make up local authorities. As such, there is a political dimension within implementation alliances, which make the chameleonic nature of inclusive growth especially useful.

Finally, our data suggest that the ambiguity of inclusive growth enabled policy organizations to leverage much needed resources for this work (a point also made by Waite & Roy, 2022, in their analysis of local level efforts to operationalize inclusive growth in Scotland). Interviewees in both SCC and GMCA cited the Local Industrial Strategies (LIS) as important documents that have to be agreed with the UK Government to access local growth funding. One interviewee, closely involved in the LIS development, reflected that GMCA “*fought quite hard over the language and the wording and what went in*” in an effort to appeal to the UK Government's growth focused agenda, while reducing a perceived risk that the strategy would become “*more focused on growth, and just growth*” (Interviewee 22, 2019, Manchester). Similar comments are evident in the Scottish data in relation to City Region Deals, which were positioned by several interviewees as a policy mechanism and source of investment for achieving inclusive growth but which needed to be agreed with the UK Government (see also Waite & Roy, 2022). Once again, our data suggest that the ambiguity of inclusive growth proved strategically useful, providing devolved powers with space to shape their own policy goals while signaling alignment to the UK Government's agenda and attract funding.

4.4 | Unresolved tensions pose a threat

The previous section makes clear that the malleable, chameleonic qualities of inclusive growth are strategically useful to all three policy organizations. Yet, our data also suggest that the very same qualities bring significant challenges, notably constant, underlying tensions that threaten to disrupt fragile alliances. In SCC, one of the core tensions—the importance (or not) of economic growth—was explicitly identified and discussed. Some interviewees here argued that growth is not central to an inclusive economy, and that it might not possible, or desirable, to achieve at local council level anyway. This seemed to have informed a terminological preference for “inclusive economy”:

“Sometimes growth is seen as a bit of a, not a dirty word, but it's potentially got negative connotations unless it's framed in a way that it's understood that everyone's benefiting as a result of the growth... So I think we're talking more about an inclusive economy where growth is important as a means to have a more prosperous economy and society where more people benefit.” (Interviewee 7, Oct 2019, Sheffield).

Nevertheless, our data suggest a reluctance to be too overt about signaling a shift away from a primary focus on economic growth, with one interviewee noting ongoing political differences on this issue and another describing it as ‘*an entirely unsettled question*’ (prior to the May 2021 elections):

“The growth thing's a bit contested isn't it? [...] I think you'll find different commentators sort of saying actually is growth what we're after here. And I'm not sure that's, well it's not settled, it's an entirely unsettled question, I think. In fact it probably has become less settled than it was. I think if we'd been having this conversation 10, 15 years ago we would have been talking almost exclusively about traditional economic growth. I think the debate is changing quite a bit. For me the more important word is the inclusive one, in many ways.” (Interviewee 6, Oct 2019, Sheffield).

More recently, the economic impact of COVID-19 and substantial cuts to SCC's budget raise further questions about whether economic growth is possible:

“Greg Fell [Director of Public Health] offered what he said was a ‘blunt and honest’ view from a local authority and highlighted the significant budget constraints faced by Sheffield City Council which places limitations on the extent of economic growth that can be expected.” (Adapted from ethnographic notes of Health Foundation presentation, November 2021).

Tensions around economic growth were less evident within GMCA and the SG but did emerge when interviewees talked about engaging with some of the broader ideational alliances deemed vital for maintaining the credibility of inclusive growth policies. For example, our ethnographic observations picked-up on tensions around the commitment to economic growth when staff from policy organizations were engaging with a widely recognized external actor who was promoting the idea that growth ought to be deprioritized.

The potential for disintegrating coalitions of support seemed most acute in relation to tensions about income and/or wealth redistribution. For example one interviewee suggested that a key indicator of successful inclusive growth policies would be a reduction in pay differentials, but suggested that such a change to the “*status quo*” would be met with “*resistance, [...] particularly if that was a result of pay packets at the top being forced down*” (Interviewee 2, Oct 2019, Sheffield). Other interviewees expressed similar concerns, indicating that there was a lack of political appetite for policy changes to achieve meaningful income distribution. Hence, for at least some interviewees, policy actions listed in the right-hand side of Figure 1 were deemed risky to the fragile alliances regarded as necessary to achieve action. Therefore, policy attention fell to changes on the left-hand side of Figure 1, where achieving and sustaining widespread buy-in seemed more feasible. More recently, in the face of the economic crisis triggered by COVID-19 and Brexit, individuals in all three policy organizations have expressed concern that there may be pressure to return to a “growth at all costs” approach to economic policy.

4.5 | Malleability and metrics collide

In recent decades, quantification has emerged as a key technology of governance—a trend Hoggett (1996, p. 22) calls “measurement-fever,” with some observers arguing that measurement, like malleability, can be a tool for depoliticization (Lingard, 2011). This quantification trend was strongly evident in our data: our ethnographic notes are full of references to conversations and meetings around metrics, indicators and data dashboards, with one GMCA interviewee reflecting that “*data dashboards have become the new bible*” (interviewee 12, Nov 2020 Manchester).

In this context, it is unsurprising that all three organizations were exploring data and computer simulations to help advance their inclusive growth ambitions. Indeed, part of the rationale for their engagement with the larger research project of which we are part was to strengthen their capacity for systems modeling for inclusive growth, helping identify “win-wins” and inform decisions about potential trade-offs (e.g., between job quality and quantity). This required the three policy organizations to agree a set of indicators as a necessary precursor for modeling and monitoring. Decisions to focus on certain metrics (not others) potentially play a crucial role in operationalizing inclusive growth ideas since indicators are used to help identify promising options as well as tracking progress. This required a process of simplification and stabilization to translate the chameleonic idea of inclusive growth into a manageable indicator set. While the metrics-focused context of key policy processes means that operationalizing inclusive growth would likely always have required such translation work, this task was complicated by the fact that (to engage with the research project) the three organizations had to agree on a shared set of indicators to prioritize.

For all three organizations, we encountered pragmatic concerns around data availability, as well as a desire for data that were longitudinal (important for policy confidence in tracking progress over time) and granular (necessary to model distributional effects) (for a full description of the development of a shared indicator set see: Lupton et al., 2022). We identified a core tension between a desire to be ambitious (reflecting participants' accounts of the scale of the problems inclusive growth aims to address) and pressure to ensure that inclusive growth metrics would be useful and credible. Here, participants suggested that the closer the fit between inclusive growth indicators and existing policy indicators (e.g., the SG National Performance Framework, the GMCA organizational data dashboards, and indicators from the GMCA Marmot Review (UCL Institute of Health Equity, 2021)), the more likely it was that they would achieve policy traction.

Two key tensions we identified during work to agree on inclusive growth indicators related to debates within the inclusive growth literature (see Section 1) and to the varying organizational definitions of inclusive growth and wellbeing economy (Table 2). First, whether to incorporate traditional indicators of economic growth that do not

contain information about inclusivity (e.g., Gross Domestic Product or Gross Value Added per job). Second, whether to include indicators relating to environmental sustainability. There were no easy ways to manage these tensions and multiple iterations of indicator sets were drafted and discussed during a 6-month consultation period, with informal discussions continuing beyond this. Early iterations of the indicators that addressed pragmatic issues, such as data availability and achieving a manageable set of indicators, resulted in disappointment from some participants in SCC, who felt the indicators did not seem “radical enough” (ethnographic notes, March 26, 2021). Our interpretation of these concerns is that, by focusing on indicators that mapped to existing data and indicators, the inclusive growth indicators were deemed less able to capture and incentivize the sought-after innovation within economic policy. This concern, noted by several participants, mirrors earlier accounts of the way historical policy efforts to reduce inequalities were pulled “downstream” by the choice of metrics (Blackman et al., 2009).

The way in which metrics also serve to stabilize evolving policy ideas was sometimes actively resisted. In Scotland, for example, the following interviewee described plans to allow different local areas to employ different inclusive growth indicators, which would trade-off local specificity against cross-area comparability:

“we've always said when you're looking at inclusive growth in a specific context that area has to decide what else it wants to add in, because different areas will have a better idea of what matters to them in terms of inclusive growth.” (Interviewee 23, January 2020, Scotland).

At the national level, as the focus in Scotland shifted from inclusive growth to wellbeing economy, there was evident dissatisfaction that the final set of indicators did not reflect the growing interest in environmental sustainability.

Additionally, we identified some concern that employing these inclusive growth indicators in modeling would privilege one vision of inclusive growth over others, posing risks for some alliances discussed in Section 4.3. In ethnographic data, for example, we identified some concern that large employers and/or anchor institutions might not be comfortable with chosen metrics. An interviewee from SCC also noted the potential for trade-offs between different communities to become more visible, which might prove politically risky in a context of “*really extreme inequalities*” within the city (Interviewee 5, Oct 2020, Sheffield).

Despite these difficulties, at the time of writing, all three policy organizations had agreed a common set of indicators and were progressing with efforts to develop systems modeling for inclusive growth. The evident hope seems to be that the complex and dynamic nature of this new approach to modeling will allow for an approach to inclusive growth that combines the persuasive power of metrics with the strategic value of malleable ideas.

5 | CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Various definitions of inclusive growth gloss over the potential trade-off between tackling inequality and achieving growth (Lee, 2018), with some accounts suggesting that economic growth will support improved health, environmental and social outcomes (and vice versa) (RSA, 2017). The idea that trade-offs can be avoided is highly seductive; few would openly argue against a policy goal of simultaneously achieving economic success, greater social equality and more sustainable environmental outcomes. It is therefore unsurprising that inclusive growth has gained significant policy traction. Yet, these “win-win” promises belie the choices that policy organizations *must* make in deciding how to achieve this goal and how to track and assess their progress along the way.

Our analysis suggests that, in policy settings, the malleability and fuzziness of inclusive growth type ideas is strategically useful as it helps expand policy appeal in ways that facilitate supportive alliances. In effect, “inclusive growth” is employed as a chameleonic idea, with malleability is core to its success (Godzieswski, 2020; Smith, 2013); it can transform between actors and across contexts, and flex with broader organizational and societal changes (e.g., shifting axes of priority inequalities). Ideas that might be regarded as “radical” by some are able to travel into policy because they also incorporate dimensions that fit with existing policy trajectories; these different dimensions

can be strategically (de)prioritized, depending on the audience. As such, these ideas can attract widespread support by appearing to enable consensus (Smith, 2013).

Yet, coalition building in itself does not achieve policy change and our analysis suggests the very qualities that have enabled inclusive growth to attract policy support leave policymakers facing major operational challenges (just as Fowler, 2021, attests). In response, our analysis suggests approaches that depoliticize inclusive growth (e.g., avoiding fixing policy plans via clear road maps and focusing on “soft power” levers) are attractive. However, while Lingard (2011) has argued that metrics too can be a tool for de-politicization, our analysis suggests that attempts to agree on indicators to track and appraise inclusive growth goals diminished the malleability of the idea. As such, this process functioned to re-politicize key dimensions as decisions about indicators served to institutionalize a particular vision of inclusive growth, risking the supportive alliances that chameleonic ideas help attract.

Having settled on a set of inclusive growth indicators, future research might usefully examine whether/how this helps or hinders policy work to operationalize inclusive growth ideas. Working with academic researchers, these three policy organizations are currently developing data infrastructures to enable systems decision-support modeling to support inclusive growth decision-making. In contrast to more commonly used policy modeling, the aim is to allow for greater complexity and dynamism, taking account of spatial and temporal dynamics and interdependencies between actions and outcomes in different parts of the policy system. The ways in which systems modeling is used, and the subsequent decisions made, will necessarily be informed by the resource limitations facing each policy organization (which grew more significant during the research period) and by the policy levers each organization can effect. Most optimistically, this new approach to modeling could help bridge policy silos by taking account of the priorities of different policy sectors and identifying suites of policies that can exploit synergies and minimize trade-offs. Least optimistically, these efforts could prove so contentious they fracture the alliances that have developed. Between these two options, lie a wide range of possibilities and, given the contrasting organizational and policy contexts with which the three organizations are contending, it would be surprising if each navigated the same path.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest associated with this work.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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