

Proposals for sustainable welfare policies

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Introduction

Policy making communities currently face multiple interlocking crises such as the climate emergency, increasing inequality within countries and heightened social conflicts. In this context, calls for policies that address the social-ecological nexus are becoming more widespread (for example, [Snell et al, 2023](#)). In this chapter, the social-ecological nexus refers to the idea that social and ecological issues are intrinsically interlinked and therefore need to be addressed in a more coordinated fashion. A critical question for the literature on social-ecological policies is whether tackling ecological and social issues in conjunction is compatible with pursuing economic growth. Within the social-ecological policy literature, the sustainable welfare perspective adopts a *post-growth*¹ position ([Hirvilammi, 2020](#); [Koch, 2022](#); [Büchs et al, 2024](#)) because there is currently no empirical evidence that economic growth can be decoupled from environmental impacts in absolute terms, at the global level and at a speed that is required for meeting climate and other ecological targets (for example, [Haberl et al, 2020](#)). Sustainable welfare therefore promotes social policy systems that prioritise the satisfaction of human needs within planetary boundaries over economic growth ([Koch, 2022](#); [Büchs et al, 2024](#)).

This chapter presents some of the key policy proposals that have been made to promote sustainable welfare. These include: the prioritisation of social and ecological goals over economic growth and profit maximisation; decoupling of work and welfare, for instance through Universal Basic Services (UBS) and Universal Basic Income (UBI), working time reduction and the reduction of social inequalities. A major challenge that sustainable welfare policies face is the current mutual dependency between welfare states and economic growth ([Bailey, 2015](#); [Büchs, 2021b](#); [Corlet Walker et al, 2021](#)): on the one hand, welfare states depend on economic growth to keep employment stable and to raise sufficient revenues for social expenditures ([Corlet Walker et al, 2021](#); [Koch, 2022](#)); on the other hand, current welfare states are designed to promote economic growth, for instance by improving ‘human capital’

through education and by ‘activating’ the workforce to increase employment (Cerny, 2010; Hassel and Palier, 2020). This chapter will discuss the capacity of these policies to contribute to greater independence between welfare states and economic growth. The final section will address some of the key challenges that present themselves in adopting and implementing sustainable welfare policies. The chapter is based on a review of the existing literature on sustainable welfare and eco-social policy.

Sustainable welfare policy proposals

Prioritisation of ecological and social objectives

Following the concept of the ‘just and safe space for humanity’ (Raworth, 2017), sustainable welfare proponents call for a prioritisation of social and ecological objectives over economic growth in the design of all policies. Welfare systems would therefore be reoriented from a focus on supporting economic growth to ensuring that they support a decrease of material and energy throughput to the economy, as well as achieving a fairer distribution of resources and needs satisfaction for everyone. At the same time, policy makers would support businesses to prioritise social and ecological objectives over profit maximisation. Proposals for alternative institutional frameworks that could support the operation of businesses in this way are starting to emerge (for example, Foundational Economy Collective et al, 2018). Prioritising social and ecological objectives in policy making and business operations is thought to increase the growth-independence of welfare states because resources would more directly be channelled into achieving social and ecological goals (Büchs et al, 2024).

Many scholars in this field argue that the prioritisation of social and ecological objectives over economic growth would need to be guided and supported by replacing Gross Domestic Product (GDP) with other indicators (Hoekstra, 2019; Van den Bergh, 2022). GDP has become a globally dominant indicator for measuring economic and social performance, but it was never intended to serve such a broad function by its inventor, Simon Kuznets (O’Neill, 2015). Furthermore, GDP is problematic from an ecological economics and sustainable welfare perspective as it does not subtract the cost of environmental and social problems that growth can contribute to. In fact, GDP often increases in the short term in response to environmental and social issues, for example, when reconstruction measures and healthcare interventions increase in the aftermath of environmental disasters. At the same time, GDP does not include the value of informal activities which contribute positively to people’s well-being or the environment (for example, unpaid care work, walking by foot rather than driving a car and so on). There is no shortage of proposals for alternative indicator frameworks. Instead, the main challenge to adopting a new framework is that this would need to be

agreed internationally and that existing powerful infrastructures such as the United Nations-backed System of National Accounts would need to be replaced (Hoekstra, 2019; Van den Bergh, 2022).

Several initiatives have emerged that support governments, local authorities, businesses and other organisations in prioritising social and ecological objectives over economic growth or profit maximisation. For instance, the Wellbeing Economy Alliance was founded in 2018 and supports a group of Wellbeing Economy Governments (WEGos) which have signed up to prioritise ecological and social objectives in policy making. The WEGos currently consist of New Zealand, Iceland, Finland, Scotland, Wales and Canada. ‘Doughnut economics’ refers to Raworth’s proposal to design economies such that they move into the ‘safe and just space for humanity’ (Raworth, 2017, p 9), which means staying within planetary boundaries (Steffen et al, 2015) while also fulfilling all basic needs and other social objectives. The Doughnut Economics Action Lab² assists local authorities and businesses in adopting ‘doughnut economics’ (Raworth, 2017) evaluation and policy planning tools. Numerous local authorities, for instance, Amsterdam, Brussels, Barcelona, Grenoble and Cornwall, have created ‘doughnut portraits’ which evaluate social and ecological performance at the city or local authority level along local and global dimensions. This evaluation serves as a first step towards planning for improving social and ecological outcomes.

Research on the characteristics, functioning and outcomes of WEGos, doughnut economics or similar initiatives is only starting to emerge. However, first assessments indicate that these initiatives do not yet fully align with sustainable welfare criteria. For instance, Mason and Büchs (2023) find that while most WEGos seek to complement GDP with alternative indicators, none of them have abandoned GDP as a measure. While WEGos have also pledged to put more resources into improving social and ecological outcomes, they have not stopped pursuing economic growth. Other recent evaluations of WEGos come to similar conclusions (Hayden and Dasilva, 2022; McCartney et al, 2023). Comprehensive evaluations of doughnut economics initiatives are lacking so far and require further research (but see Wahlund and Hansen, 2022; Khmara and Kronenberg, 2023).

Reducing inequality

There are several reasons why the reduction of inequality is one of the key components of sustainable welfare policies. The first is that inequality might increase without intervention in a post-growth context; the second is that tackling inequality acts as a preventative measure, reducing demand for welfare expenditure in the long term, making welfare states more growth-independent; and the third is that needs satisfaction is easier to accomplish in a more equal society.

Several authors warn that inequality could increase in a post-growth context. Over the last decades, inequality has risen in many countries, including in Europe and the United States (Piketty, 2014; Chancel et al, 2022).³ Piketty (2014) argues that without intervention, capital tends to accumulate and become more concentrated over time, leading to increasing inequality. Low growth rates can contribute to this process: if the rate of return on investment is higher than the economic growth rate, the proceeds of growth mainly benefit capital owners (Piketty, 2014). This pattern has occurred in many countries affected by rising inequality and could thus present a problem in a post-growth economy with zero or negative growth rates. However, the post-growth literature has consistently emphasised that redistribution and the achievement of social objectives would need to lie at the heart of post-growth strategies (Büchs et al, 2024). Post-growth economies would therefore fundamentally differ from economic crises in the existing growth-focused context, which are often associated with rising unemployment and austerity policies. Modelling by Jackson and Victor (2016) has demonstrated that income inequality can be stabilised or even reduced in the absence of growth if the substitutability of labour with capital is low. Progressive taxation can make an additional contribution to greater income equality in the context of low substitutability of labour with capital (Jackson and Victor, 2016).

Research has also shown that inequality often aggravates numerous social issues, including mortality rates, mental health problems, crime rates and so on (Pickett and Wilkinson, 2015). Inequality thus increases the demand for social expenditures to address these social issues. Tackling inequality therefore serves as a preventative measure as it reduces issues caused or worsened by inequality.

Finally, needs satisfaction for all is easier to achieve in more equal societies. In highly unequal societies, a high proportion of resources (energy, materials, financial resources) is allocated to serve the satisfaction of wants or desires that are above sufficiency levels. In a post-growth context, in which the throughput of energy and material resources is limited, such luxury consumption hijacks critical resources required for the satisfaction of basic needs of the majority (see Chapter 1).

Pre- and re-distributive policies that have been proposed in the sustainable welfare literature to reduce inequality include progressive income and wealth taxes; a more equal distribution of wages, salaries and assets; as well as ‘consumption corridor’ approaches which would set minimum and maximum incomes and/or consumption levels (Buch-Hansen and Koch, 2019; Fuchs, 2020; Gough, 2020). Some inequality-reducing policies could also contribute to making welfare states more independent from growth. For instance, taxes on wealth – such as on financial assets, property, land, inheritance, natural resources and so on – are thought to make state revenues less dependent on growth because these assets are stocks, not flows, unlike

income or consumption, which fluctuate more strongly with economic cycles (Büchs et al, 2024). And as previously mentioned, reducing the demand for social expenditure through preventative policies, of which the reduction of inequality is one important approach, can also make welfare states more resilient in a post-growth context.

Decoupling of work and welfare

Many scholars within the sustainable welfare literature have proposed policies that decouple welfare from work (Koch, 2022; Büchs et al, 2024). Decoupling welfare from work is regarded as important dependent on labour market participation, often in conjunction with ‘welfare-to-work’ and ‘activation’ policies (Serrano Pascual and Magnusson, 2007). However, current economic systems exhibit growth dependency in that keeping employment levels stable in a context of technological labour-saving developments requires continuous economic growth (Antal, 2014). Policies that focus on ensuring that everyone’s basic needs are met, independent of labour market participation, can therefore facilitate growth-independence of welfare states. Examples of policies that have been discussed in this context include UBS and UBI or income guarantees (Gough, 2019; Coote and Percy, 2020; Büchs, 2021a). UBS would offer publicly or collectively provided basic services such as health and social care, education and housing – as well as policies that contribute to people’s basic needs for home energy, transport and internet access – to everyone free of charge based on need. UBI would pay everyone in society a regular cash income to support needs satisfaction. If financed through redistributive income and/or wealth taxes, wealthy people would lose in net terms while less wealthy people gain. By supporting needs satisfaction through in-kind and cash income, unconditional on labour market participation, UBS and UBI have in common that they can contribute to a *decommodification* of labour. Greater independence from the labour market would also free up time that people can spend on other socially or ecologically beneficial activities, such as nurturing relationships, care, cultural and ecological conservation work or democratic participation, as well as energy-saving but time-intensive ‘slow’ travel and food practices.

UBS and UBI both have specific advantages and disadvantages. For instance, UBS directly caters for people’s needs by providing basic goods and services while UBI provides cash. Needs satisfaction under UBI is thus dependent on market provision of the required goods and services at the right quality and cost, something that cannot be taken for granted (Coote and Percy, 2020; Büchs, 2021a). Another advantage of UBS is that public or collective providers can directly design the provision of these goods and services in an environmentally friendly way. How environmentally friendly the provision through UBI and markets is depends on the quality of

environmental regulations (Coote and Percy, 2020; Büchs, 2021a). However, a criticism of UBS is that it relies on public/collective definitions of needs and needs satisfiers. Critics are concerned that this could make UBS a ‘top-down’ or ‘paternalistic’ approach (Coote and Percy, 2020). UBS proponents have therefore stressed that democratic decision-making processes, user input and strong accountability mechanisms need to be embedded in the provision of UBS (Coote and Percy, 2020; Büchs, 2021a). In view of the different advantages and disadvantages associated with UBS and UBI, it has been argued that they could be combined if embedded in wider regulatory and institutional frameworks that limit their respective disadvantages (Büchs, 2021a). If combined with UBS, UBI would need to be ‘partial’ to contain cost, that is UBI would only contribute part of the resources required for subsistence, with the other part provided by UBS. In such a situation, UBI could cover needs that are difficult to address through UBS, for instance, where provision needs to be more diverse and responsive to personal circumstances such as food, clothing and other consumer items.

Working time reduction

Working time reduction and redistribution of work are other much-discussed proposals in the ecological economics and sustainable welfare literatures (Schor, 2005; Victor and Rosenbluth, 2007; Fitzgerald et al, 2018). Without intervention, unemployment is likely to increase in post-growth economies if labour-saving technologies continue to expand. Working time reduction would address this issue by generating additional jobs and redistributing work. One controversial issue is whether working time reduction should be implemented with or without income loss in line with reduced hours. A disadvantage of reducing income equivalent to the reduction in hours is that low-earning workers may not be able to afford such a reduction in pay and that such a reduction would compromise their needs satisfaction. However, reducing hours while retaining previous levels of pay would reduce the capacity for employers to free up jobs for other people. Whether or not pay will be reduced in line with the reduction of hours worked is also likely to influence the environmental impacts of working time reduction. The environmental impacts of working time reduction are affected by several factors, including the total hours of work in society and levels of productivity, which together determine the amount of goods and services produced. In addition, environmental impacts of working time reduction depend on what people would do with additional leisure time. If that time is spent on carbon-intensive activities such as high-carbon travel or other consumption, environmental impacts might actually increase. However, if people use additional leisure time for environmentally friendly but more time-consuming activities – such as travelling by foot, bicycle or public

transport, spending time with friends and family, caring for someone and so on – working time reduction is more likely to have positive environmental and social outcomes. It should be mentioned that some authors in the field advocate a reduction of productivity in the economy, which could increase the amount of work needed (for example, [Mair et al, 2020](#)). Here, the argument is that low-productivity work tends to be more environmentally friendly (for example, manual tasks or service sector activities require fewer energy inputs) and that it can be more fulfilling and conducive to people's health and well-being (for example, work in the health and social care, education and cultural sectors). Whether working time or productivity reduction would become more important in a post-growth context will also depend on how post-growth would impact on technological developments. However, in either scenario, sustainable welfare policies would aim to distribute work fairly and in a way that minimises unemployment and organise it such that it is as fulfilling and fairly paid as possible.

Discussion: challenges to sustainable welfare policies

Introducing sustainable welfare policies faces many challenges. Sustainable welfare approaches that advocate the prioritisation of social and ecological objectives over economic growth and profit maximisation in policy making and businesses challenge the very basis of welfare capitalism. Capitalism inherently relies on and generates economic growth because it forces capital owners to continually accumulate and then reinvest profits to reduce production costs and expand market shares to survive in the competitive market environment ([Harvey, 2017](#)). Prioritising social and ecological objectives in decision making in the public and private sphere therefore constitutes a fundamentally different logic to running the economy, one which would require a democratisation of economic decision making.

How the transformation towards sustainable welfare policies embedded in a post-growth economy could take place is not yet well conceptualised and understood ([Knox, 2023](#)). When it comes to thinking about transformation, the post-growth literature has so far mainly focused on the question of which strategies can and should be applied to advance post-growth economies (for example, [Barlow et al, 2022](#)). Following Erik Olin [Wright's \(2010\)](#) typology of 'anti-capitalist strategies', most of the authors contributing to this debate agree that a mix of strategies will be required, consisting of 'symbiotic' (reformist, operating within and through state institutions), 'interstitial' (civil society led, operating outside or beyond state and capitalist institutions), and 'ruptural' (revolutionary) strategies at organisational or local scales ([Barlow et al, 2022](#)). Promoting, adopting and implementing sustainable welfare policies through state institutions would represent 'symbiotic' strategies. The challenge for achieving system-level change is that it requires a transformation

of established power asymmetries and institutional path dependencies (Feola et al, 2021). Buch-Hansen (2018) has identified several ‘prerequisites’ that would need to exist for such transformational change to happen, including multiple ‘deep crises’, an ‘alternative political project’, a ‘comprehensive coalition of social forces’, and ‘broad-based consent’. The presence of ‘deep crises’ is undeniable, and many advances have been made in formulating an alternative political project. What is less clear is whether there is a sufficiently broad ‘coalition of social forces’ and ‘broad-based consent’ among stakeholders and citizens to support such an alternative project.

It is therefore worth examining which actors might support sustainable welfare policies. Even though some governments have signed up in principle to support sustainable welfare principles (for example, the WEGos discussed above), no government currently fully pursues such policies (see, for example, Hayden and Dasilva, 2022; Mason and Büchs, 2023). The situation is similar when it comes to political parties: except for the more radical wings of some green parties, political parties across the spectrum remain focused on pursuing economic growth and hence social and environmental policies that are subordinated to this goal.

Both trade unions and employer organisations are also unlikely to support sustainable welfare approaches. For trade unions, growth-oriented employment policies and social protection systems are a cornerstone of welfare capitalism that they seek to preserve. Trade union positions might vary across sectors, however. For instance, public sector trade unions may be more open to sustainable welfare positions compared to those in private and especially high-carbon sectors.

Research and education are important fields of action in this area too, given that academics play a key role in providing policy advice and education systems shape the training of future policy makers and business leaders. Academic organisations that support sustainable welfare agendas have gained public visibility, such as the European and International Societies for Ecological Economics, and the International ‘Sustainable Welfare and Eco-social Policy Network’. Professional social policy organisations such as the European Network for Social Policy Analysis, increasingly feature conference streams on social-ecological and sustainable welfare topics. Several universities in the world now offer ecological economics courses (which often cover social-ecological and sustainable welfare topics), for example, at the Universities of Leeds, Edinburgh, Vienna, Toulouse, Chile, Mexico and Vermont, to name a few.⁴ However, the impact of these developments on policy making are hard to measure and likely to take time to manifest.

Furthermore, the power of actors sympathetic towards sustainable well-being to influence policy discourses, political decisions and business practices so far remains constrained by the dominant position of ‘mainstream’ actors. Large and powerful international organisations such as the United Nations,

International Labour Organization and World Bank do not publicly or as a whole support more transformational sustainable welfare policies. Since business leaders and the vast majority of economists within political institutions continue to be trained in neo-classical economics, growth-critical and sustainable welfare thinking remains at the margins within these institutions. International and national businesses in the high-carbon industry still act as extremely powerful lobby groups seeking to prevent, or at least water and slow down, government action on climate change (Lamb et al, 2020). Large private conservative media corporations continue to have a significant impact on political and economic discourses worldwide, downplaying the need for climate action, greater equity and social justice.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of sustainable welfare policies. These policies were presented as a special case of social-ecological policies in that they take seriously the assumption that an absolute decoupling of economic growth and environmental impacts will be difficult to achieve at the global level and at the speed required to meet ecological targets. Sustainable welfare policies therefore advocate that welfare states and social policies should be made more independent from economic growth. The policies discussed in this chapter include: the prioritisation of social and ecological goals over economic growth and profit maximisation; decoupling of work and welfare, for instance through UBS and UBI; working time reduction; and a reduction of social inequalities. It was argued that these four policy approaches can contribute to making welfare states more independent from growth, while they also support needs satisfaction for all within ecological limits. Prioritising social and ecological objectives over economic growth and profit maximisation does so explicitly, leading to alternative decision-making processes for allocating financial and other resources to achieving these goals. Decoupling work and welfare would support people's needs satisfaction independent from labour market participation. This could be an important measure since the overall demand for employment might fall in a post-growth context as long as productivity levels through labour-saving technologies increase. Working time reduction makes a similar contribution to needs satisfaction as it helps to redistribute paid work more evenly in this context. At the same time, working time reduction and policies that can help to decouple work and welfare are thought to contribute to more environmentally friendly time use and provisioning. Finally, reducing inequality through re- and pre-distribution is a cornerstone of sustainable welfare policies to make welfare states more growth-resilient by preventing social issues and reducing the demand for social expenditures, and by supporting needs satisfaction for all through a more needs-efficient allocation of resources.

As discussed in the last section, the transformation towards sustainable welfare policies faces significant challenges. It remains to be seen whether continued national and international polycrises will increase pressure for policy makers to search for new solutions, whether broader supportive political coalitions can be built, and whether broad-based public support for sustainable welfare policies can be achieved in the longer term.

Notes

- ¹ In this chapter, I use ‘post-growth’ as an umbrella term which covers several approaches, including degrowth, a-growth, doughnut and well-being economics.
- ² For more details, see <https://doughnuteconomics.org/> [Accessed 14 November 2023].
- ³ Income inequality within countries is at a historic high today, and even though income inequality between countries has slightly decreased since the 2008 financial crisis as low-income countries have been catching up, it is still vastly higher compared to the 1820s when measurements started (Chancel et al, 2022). Wealth inequalities are even more pronounced than income inequalities, and income and wealth at the very top have become more and more concentrated over time (Chancel et al, 2022).
- ⁴ See here the list of courses provided by the International <https://www.isecoeco.org/category/graduate-programs/> and European Society of Ecological Economics <https://ecolecon.eu/ecological-economics-courses-and-programmes/>.

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