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# 6.

## Moving beyond GDP – Policy Implications

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*“The indicators a society chooses to report to itself about itself are surprisingly powerful. They reflect collective values and inform collective decisions. A nation that keeps a watchful eye on its salmon runs or the safety of its streets makes different decisions than does a nation that is only paying attention to its GNP”.*

*Donella Meadows*

### 1996 revisited

In 1996 we wrote a chapter entitled Progress, Values and Public Policy<sup>2</sup>. Thirteen years later we would like to reprint the opening paragraphs of that chapter. This is what we wrote then:

“In Ireland we are living in a time of major paradox. The economy has been growing at an unprecedented rate. The number of people employed is growing rapidly. Articles are being written about the Celtic Tiger and favourable comparisons are being made with the fastest growing economies in the world.... The wealth of the country is growing at such a rate that we are coming close to the EU average and can no longer be considered as one of the poorest countries in the Union.

“Side by side with this, however, sits a quite different reality. The number of people living in poverty has not been reduced significantly as a result of the nation’s growing wealth. The number of people seeking employment remains very high despite endless rhetorical commitment by policy-makers to reducing it

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<sup>2</sup> In *Progress, Values and Public Policy*, edited by Brigid Reynolds and Seán Healy.

substantially. The number of people who are long-term unemployed is higher than it has ever been. There is major concern about the crime level. Drug addiction is rampant. Family breakdown is an increasing part of the context of Irish society. Rural Ireland continues to lose its essential population base and there is widespread criticism of poor infrastructure throughout the country.

“One could go on at length expanding on either of the two preceding paragraphs. And therein lies the paradox. If Ireland is supposed to be doing so well then why are there so many problems? Why is the “*feel good*” factor missing?

“Progress is a concept that has been frequently discussed down the centuries. Indicators have been designed to measure progress. Policies have been developed to facilitate progress. Major investment has gone to support initiatives seen as contributing to progress. Economies, political structures and whole societies have been reordered in the name of progress. Yet what constitutes progress is often presumed to be understood and agreed. Its underpinnings and measurements are often taken as given and rarely questioned.

“In Ireland, we tend to have a clear set of assumptions concerning progress, at least within the policy-making process. Economic growth is seen as primary. In turn this growth is supposed to produce jobs which in turn will produce income which in turn will lead to the end of poverty and the eventual emergence of a good life for all Irish citizens. Consequently, when progress is discussed within the policymaking process in Ireland it tends to focus principally on increasing the country’s GNP (Gross National Product) and reducing its unemployment. These are seen as intrinsically connected. While other issues such as housing or healthcare are often referred to, they are not taken nearly as seriously. Issues such as poverty, income distribution, homelessness and the like are referred to occasionally.

“The ongoing monitoring of issues like GNP is an indication of the seriousness with which it is viewed.... Poverty and income distribution are measured every seven years and the results are not

published for a further two years thus ensuring (a) that the results can be dismissed as out of date when published, and (b) that poverty and income distribution are not given any significant priority in the ongoing day to day process of policy development.

“We are not arguing for the elimination of issues such as growth or employment from discussions of progress. Far from it. However, we are convinced that they are far from adequate as comprehensive measures of progress and the present overemphasis on them produces a distorted picture of how well Ireland is doing. The lack of emphasis on so many other important issues also distorts the policy-making process as it reduces it to too narrow a focus. The USA is a good example of the consequences of such a narrow focus. Its economy has expanded and the number of jobs in the country has grown substantially. However, poverty, homelessness and exclusion have also grown dramatically in the USA over the past decade and a half. A wider focus was required if this result was to be avoided.

“In Ireland, other elements such as housing or healthcare are referred to regularly. They do not, however, play a central role at the core of policy development. The bottom line in policy discussion focuses on economic growth and reducing unemployment. In practice, as distinct from rhetoric, the bottom line is economic growth. When questions are raised about this narrow focus, the response is that GNP is not a perfect measure of progress but it is the best available. However, no serious attempt is made by policy-makers to apply many of the already existing alternative measures and indexes of progress to Ireland. Similarly, no substantial funding is provided to develop alternatives that would be specifically applicable to Ireland. This neglect ensures that no serious challenge is mounted to the status quo.

“... There are a variety of ways to proceed. Various indicators could be combined into an index of progress.... Some might argue that a comprehensive index should not be developed but that some key progress indicators could be identified and monitored while leaving open the question of measuring overall progress. Others, again, might argue that a single dominant indicator should be acceptable and pursued as long as other important indicators are not adversely affected.

“Underlying these questions there are two key issues: (a) the values that underpin any indicator or index, and, (b) the process to be followed in deciding what should, or should not, be included in measurement of progress. We do not, for example, believe that it is acceptable for a society to abrogate its responsibility and leave these choices to technicians (or any other single group in society) however well informed and capable they may be.”

We went on in that chapter to address the two questions of values and process. But we argued that it was important to put these questions within a context. In the remainder of that chapter we looked at the historical developments of a mechanistic perception of progress. We followed this with a section on the development of an economic approach to measuring progress. We then asked how progress should be measured and went on to argue that new indicators and indexes of progress were urgently required. We identified a series of values we believed should underpin the choice of progress indicators. We concluded by making a series of proposals on the way forward.

## **The situation today**

It is a little ironic to return to this topic more than thirteen years later and to come to the same conclusions. There have been some strong improvements in the collection of data especially by the CSO. However, it is clear that the dominant development model, focused on generating economic growth as the primary concern of policy, has failed. Failure to address the questions concerning values and process that were raised meant that the excesses of the Celtic Tiger years were encouraged and the potential for major social gains was dissipated. Ireland’s people are left with a serious debt problem, a major fiscal problem, a bank system into which they are pouring millions to rescue people who took totally unjustified risks and/or acted illegally while accumulating great wealth for themselves. Ireland’s social services are under serious pressure, there are serious questions about getting value for money and the public sector is in need of reform. Ireland’s international reputation leaves a great deal to be desired following its ridiculous failure to act in a prudent manner with a focus on the common good. We take no joy from noting that the arguments we

presented all those years ago on how Ireland's understanding of progress was seriously flawed and would eventually lead to destruction have been vindicated. We are not going to repeat those arguments here. An alternative understanding of, and approach to, measuring progress is required.

In 1982 Fritjof Capra made a point that is equally valid today and we recall it here to ensure it is part of the reflection that is required to design an effective way forward. Capra wrote:

*“Present-day economics is characterised by the fragmentary reductionist approach that typifies most social sciences. Economists generally fail to recognise that the economy is merely one aspect of a whole ecological and social fabric; a living system composed of human beings in continual interaction with one another and with their natural resources, most of which are, in turn, living organisms. The basic error of the social sciences is to divide this fabric into fragments, assumed to be independent and to be dealt with in separate academic departments. Thus political scientists tend to neglect basic economic forces, while economists fail to incorporate social and political realities into their models. These fragmentary approaches are also reflected in government, in the split between*  
*(Capra 1982, p.194/195)*

Please note this comment does not just refer to economists!

Not all economists, however, have gone along with this direction. Again, Capra aptly summarises the situation:

*“The fragmentation and compartmentalisation in economics has been noted and criticised throughout its modern history. But at the same time those critical economists who wish to study economic phenomena as they actually existed, embedded within society and the ecosystem, and who therefore dissented from the narrow economic viewpoint, were virtually forced to place themselves outside of economic ‘science,’ thus saving the economics fraternity from dealing with the issues their critics raised. For example, Max Weber, the nineteenth-century critic of capitalism, is generally regarded as an economic historian; John Kenneth Galbraith and Robert Heilbroner*

*are often thought of as sociologists; and Kenneth Boulding is referred to as a philosopher. Karl Marx, by contrast, refused to be called an economist and saw himself as a social critic, asserting that economists were merely apologists for the existing capitalist order. In fact, the term ‘socialist’ originally merely described those who did not accept the economists’ view of the world. More recently Hazel Henderson has continued this tradition by calling herself a futurist and subtitling one of her books “The End of Economics”.*  
(Capra, 1982, p.195).

The reality, however, is that for the large majority of economists today progress is measured in mechanistic terms e.g. growth of GDP. GDP has been central to economic policy and planning for so long that it is mostly taken as a “given” and goes unquestioned. Progress is measured by policy-makers and planners in terms of growth in this indicator. This development, however, has some major consequences. Writing in 1995 Cobb/Halstead/Rowe had some very interesting observations in this regard with reference to the USA:

*“There have been a number of consequences that few saw clearly at the time (when growth in GDP became the key measure of progress). One was that economists became the ultimate authorities on American public policy. Before the war, economists were rarely quoted in news stories except in some official capacity. Now their opinions were sought and cited as canonical truth. Moreover, as the party that nurtured these economists, the Democrats become adherents of technocratic top-down management that purported to act for the people, even if in ways beyond their ken. But the biggest change was in who “the people” now were. Because the Keynesian approach saw consumption as the driving train of prosperity, Washington collectively looked at the public in these terms as well. They were no longer primarily farmers, workers, business people – that is, producers. Rather, they were consumers, whose spending was a solemn national duty for the purpose of warding off the return of the dreaded Depression. Our young men had marched off to war; now Americans were marching off to the malls that eventually covered the land.*  
*In this atmosphere GNP, the measure and means of policy, rapidly became an end of policy in itself. The nation’s social cohesion and*

*natural habitat, which the GNP excluded, were taken for granted. Each week the host of General Electric Theatre, Ronald Reagan, declared to the nation that “progress is our most important product”. Products were progress, and therefore the GNP was progress too”.*  
(Cobb et al, 1995, p.64).

Traditional indicators of economic progress are now recognised as providing totally inadequate measures of sustainable development. *“National accounts aggregates such as Gross Domestic Product or National Income, no matter how well adjusted to take “green” issues into the reckoning, are designed as measures of economic activity, not as measures of welfare”* (Scott, Nolan and Fahey, 1996). Even as a measure of economic activity, these indicators are called into question:

*“The GDP is simply a gross measure of market activity, of money changing hands. It makes no distinction whatsoever between the desirable and the undesirable, or costs and gains. On top of that, it looks only at the portion of reality that economists choose to acknowledge - the part involved in monetary transactions. The crucial economic functions performed in the household and volunteer sectors go entirely unreckoned. As a result the GDP not only masks the breakdown of the social structure and the natural habitat upon which the economy - and life itself - ultimately depends; worse, it actually portrays such breakdown as economic gain”.*  
(C. Cobb, T. Halstead and J. Rowe, 1995).

Robert McNamara, who was then president of the World Bank, admitted that:

*“Progress measured by a single measuring rod, the GNP, has contributed significantly to exacerbate the inequalities of income distribution”.*  
(Cited by Ivan Illich, Sachs 1992).

This view is shared by Herman Daly and John Cobb. In their extensive critique of GNP as a measure of progress they note that:

*“To use it (GNP) as if it were a significant indicator of economic well-being - much worse of well-being in general - is an egregious instance of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness”*

*(Daly/Cobb, p.84).*

## **Values to guide public policy**

The topic of values energises some while making others uncomfortable. Some academics and analysts like to believe that their work is value neutral. We agree with Daly and Cobb when they say that:

*“One of the central limitations of the academic disciplines in contributing to wisdom is their professed aim of value neutrality. That there is here a large element of self-deception has been pointed out frequently and convincingly. The ideal of value neutrality is itself a value that is generally highly favourable to the status quo. Which economic questions are taken up and in what terms, even within the range allowed by the disciplines, often depends on the interests of the economists or even of someone who has commissioned the study.*

*More objectivity is in fact obtained by bringing values out into the open and discussing them than by denying their formative presence in the disciplines... as long as the disciplines discourage any interest in values on the part of their practitioners, they inevitably discourage the ordering of study to the solution of human problems”.*

*(Daly/Cobb, p.131).*

This view is shared by Fritjof Capra who in his critique of economics says

*“There can be no such thing as a “value-free” social science... Any “value-free” analysis of social phenomena is based on the tacit assumption of the existing value system that is implicit in the selection and interpretation of data...”*

*Economics is defined as the discipline dealing with the production, distribution, and consumption of wealth. It attempts to determine what is valuable at a given time by studying the relative exchange values of goods and services. Economics is therefore the most clearly value-dependent and normative among the social sciences”.*  
(Capra, 1982, p.197).

In our previous work we have identified a series of values we believe should be central to measuring progress and shaping public policy. We repeat them here without developing the arguments for including these as we have done this on many occasions previously. For us the key values should include:

Firstly, the right of every person to:

- Sufficient income to live life with dignity
- Meaningful work
- Appropriate accommodation
- Relevant education
- Essential healthcare
- Cultural respect, and
- Real participation

A second value which should be represented realistically in a new set of progress indicators is that **nature and its resources are for the benefit of all people for all time.**

A third value should be **sustainability – economic, environmental and social.**

A fourth value is that of **Right Relationships – between individuals, institutions and the environment.**

A fifth value is **Equality.**

In highlighting these particular values we are fully cognisant of the need for competitiveness, for financial viability, for getting best value for money and for having an efficient and effective public sector. We are also cognisant of the need to keep appropriate balances between

private sector, public sector and the community and voluntary sector. For us, if the values listed above form the core of our approach to addressing progress then policies can be developed in a balanced and meaningful manner to ensure the emergence of a society where everyone has what is required to live with dignity, where everyone is respected and where society is focused on doing what is necessary to secure the common good. It would require a serious mind-change, a major change in how policy is developed and implemented, changes in how resources are allocated and prioritised and new relationships between sectors and between individuals and institutions. This is what is required if we are to avoid a cyclical return to gross waste, disillusionment and marginalisation of a large minority of people.

## Next Steps

We believe the next steps required are:

1. Recognise the total inadequacy of traditional indicators of economic progress.
2. Recognise that the headline economic indicator, GNP/GDP, and the other closely-aligned indicators, can be destructive because they dull public awareness about the nature of progress and development.
3. Recognise that economic development, social development and environmental development are simply three aspects of the same reality - they are complementary and none has priority over the other two.
4. Get agreement on sustainable development indicators, covering economic, environmental and social sustainability. Much work has been done on this issue, in Ireland and beyond, as is clear from earlier chapters in this book.

5. Ensure the seven basic human rights referred to in the previous section are systematically promoted in all policy-making arenas i.e. ensuring that every person has
  - a. Sufficient income to live life with dignity
  - b. Meaningful work
  - c. Appropriate accommodation
  - d. Relevant education
  - e. Essential healthcare
  - f. Cultural respect, and
  - g. Real participation
6. Put a higher value on the common good through ensuring a more equal provision of services, a greater sharing of responsibilities and a greater sense of solidarity.
7. Put the indicators identified under 3, 4 and 5 above at the heart of policy development.
8. Involve a wide range of groupings in choosing meaningful indicators and in deciding how these should be applied. It should not be acceptable that only professional elites or powerful institutes have the right to decide what constitutes progress or development.
9. Incorporate these meaningful new indicators of progress into core policy-making and planning processes at local, national and international levels to reflect, among others, the values already identified in this chapter. Progress should be measured on the basis of these indicators.
10. Develop ‘shadow’ national accounts immediately which include the value of items such as unpaid work and the cost of activities such as the use of declining natural resources.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that the current dominant indicators of progress are very inadequate. New indicators or indexes are urgently needed to measure the real progress of society,

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Key questions need to be addressed. These concern:

- (a) the values underlying the various indicators to be included in any new index, and
- (b) the process of choosing what indicators should be included in such an index.

Vision guides policy decisions. The topics placed on the agenda, the perspective taken, the decisions made are all guided by a vision of where society should be focused. We believe that Ireland should be a just society i.e. a society which is inclusive of all its members, a society where human rights are respected, human dignity is protected, human development is facilitated and the environment is respected and protected. That vision should be at the heart of policy development and decision-making. This will not be easy to achieve but failure to do so will mean that we will condemn ourselves and coming generations to repeating the mistakes of the current generation. Irish people deserve better. The choice will be made by the present generation.

*“The future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to give coming generations reasons for living and hoping.”*

*- Church in the Modern World, Vatican II*

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