

There are better ways to measure progress

Progress which is principally seen in terms of economic growth is inadequate

The following article appeared in the **Rite & Reason** section of the op-ed page of the Irish Times on October 16th, 2006. It is based on the opening chapter of the second edition of *Social Policy in Ireland: Principles, Practice and Problems*. That chapter, by Sean Healy and Brigid Reynolds, is entitled: *Progress and Public Policy: The Need for a New Paradigm*. The book is edited by Sean Healy, Brigid Reynolds and Micheál Collins and is published by The Liffey Press. An order form for the book is available on the CORI Justice website at www.cori.ie/justice.

We live in a world which promotes constant progress.

Wealth, employment and production are growing steadily. The conventional economic wisdom argues that continuing on this path for the foreseeable future will produce a world where everyone has a stake and where the good life can be accessed by all. This is seen as progress.

This conventional economic vision of the future is unattainable. Environmental degradation, encroaching deserts, unemployment, starvation, widening gaps between rich and poor, exclusion from participation in either decision-making or development of society, these are the global realities confronting decision-makers today.

Economic globalisation and environmental stress are accompanied by social inequality, endemic deprivation, social unrest and violence. Millions of people in the richer parts of the world recognise these problems and are seriously concerned about them

The source of many problems lies in the development paradigm being followed and in its view of progress.

Physicist Fritjof Capra defined a paradigm as "a constellation of concepts, values, perceptions, and practices shared by a community, which forms a particular vision of reality that is the basis of the way the community organises itself".

A paradigm contains core beliefs and assumptions.

The dominant paradigm underpinning public policy-making today is mechanistic.

It has had many positive effects and opened up great new possibilities ranging from the development of technology to the emergence of liberal democracy. However it also has had dramatic limitations which were unseen by the thinkers and policy-makers who adopted it with enthusiasm.

These limitations are especially obvious to people encountering current global problems.

The ecological crisis, the emphasis on hierarchy, addressing the issue of difference through conflict and confrontation, defining work in a very narrow way, these are simply a few, very varied effects which flow from adoption of this mechanistic paradigm.

One of its key outcomes however, is in its impact on the understanding of progress.

Progress was long seen principally in terms of economic growth. Gross domestic product became the measurement used by policy-makers. It was assumed that everything people needed or wanted would follow once economic growth was sustained. Ireland is the classic example of why this model is inadequate.

While Ireland's economy has grown dramatically and we are close to full employment, there are many who have benefited little and people's sense of wellbeing is not at the level that might have been expected.

The paradigm underpinning decision-making and the measurement of progress in the social policy area is not adequate to the present situation.

Alternatives are required. Together with Brigid Reynolds this author has long argued that the shift of paradigms requires not only a change in our way of thinking but also of our values.

What should be the fundamental paradigm to replace the present mechanistic one? We argue it is right relationships. Developments in 'new physics' give huge support and credibility to the centrality of relationships in the universe.

Approaches to understanding human existence in the social and psychological sciences see it as made up of a series of relationships. These relationships can be divided into four categories which correspond to different levels of human existence:

- relationship with self and God (interior life). By getting in touch with self and the transcendent we grow and become more human;
- relationship with people (family and social life). Our humanity is developed and enriched through our relationships with people;
- relationship with institutions (public life). If institutional structures and relationships are right human development is facilitated by social institutions and structures;
- relationship with the environment (cosmic life). Each of us is related to all the generations that have gone before us and to the generations that will follow us. Also we have a relationship with all other people living at this time and with the environment.

We grow as persons through these four sets of relationships.

A just society is one that is structured in such a way as to promote these right relationships so that human rights are respected, human dignity is protected, human development is facilitated and the environment is respected and protected.

This should be the basis on which we measure progress.

We cannot claim that right relationships are the norm in a world where immense wealth and power exist alongside widespread poverty and severe deprivation. Nation states have been failing to provide an enabling environment for addressing these contrasts and securing fairness and well-being for all.

In Ireland, the adoption of the new national agreement's approach to social policy is a step in the direction towards addressing these issues. So too is the publication by the CSO of the *Measuring Ireland's Progress* series.

Much, however, remains to be done.

A public debate is urgently needed around the issues of progress, paradigms and policy.

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