

Debunking Development Industry: Policy Framework for Wellbeing Economy

Annabhula J C Bose

Economics Professor (Retd.), Shri Ram College of Commerce, Delhi (bose.ajc@gmail.com).

Abstract

Policies and practices required to take on global inequality, poverty and climate emergency are derived from a 500-year history ignored by the development industry concerned about the global North-South divide. This historical cognisance also leads to a unified policy design for the entire world in terms of degrowth/post-growth policy framework for universally establishing wellbeing economy for people and planet. A grounded metastory, thus, truly emerges about an authentic hope about how the world can change for the better out of a certain doom due to how the world has been working since long.

Keywords

Global inequality, Poverty, Climate emergency, Unified history, Policies and practices, Wellbeing economy

Introduction

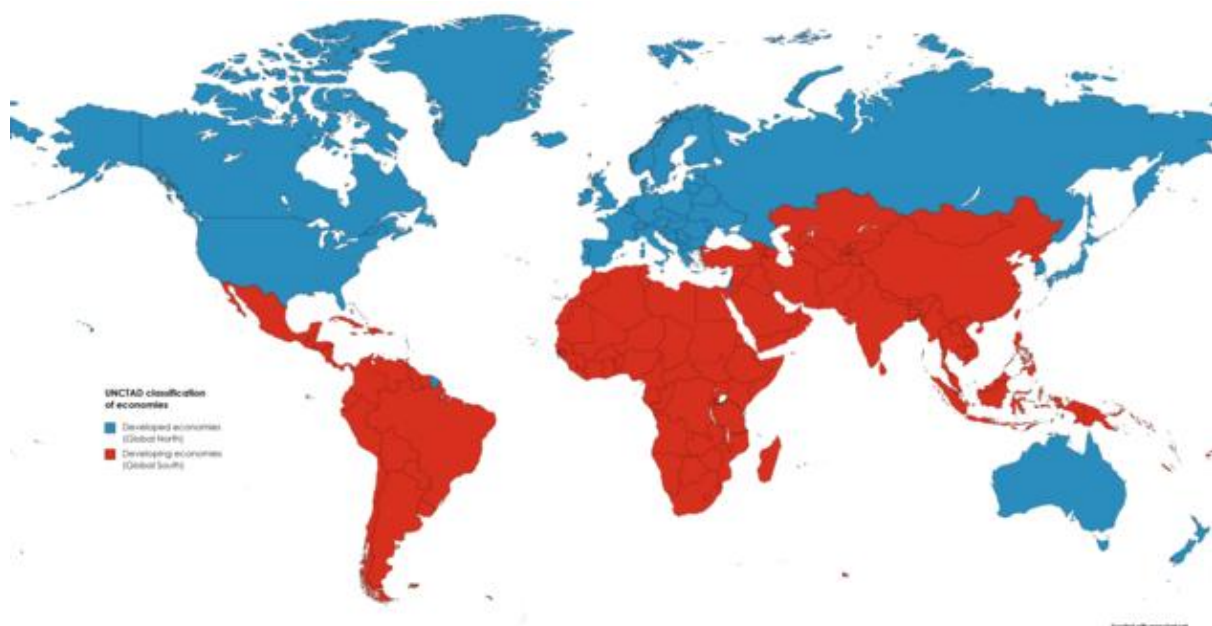
There are wailing sirens as follows.

Economics students should stay away from economics, especially development economics, if they are really serious about the economy to work for everyone (Radford, 2017). They are in the dark about the international failings to eliminate poverty, socio-economic inequalities and climate change as a result of “long standing neglect” by “many governments, economists and human rights advocates”. Their education is stunted. They lack global education which “opens people’s eyes and minds to the realities of the world, and awakens them to bring about a world of greater justice, equity and human rights for all. Global Education is understood to encompass Development Education, Human Rights Education, Education for Sustainability, Education for Peace and Conflict Prevention and Intercultural Education, and the global dimensions of Education for Citizenship.” Such, education is badly needed

through ethical communication, “training, youth work activities and awareness-raising” in order to “support young people’s active engagement in responding to global challenges and efforts to build democratic, peaceful, inclusive, equitable, tolerant, secure, and sustainable societies across the world” (see McCloskey ed., 2020).

In tune with this wailing, the purpose of this paper is to convey economics students a story of many sub-stories that they are not told. This metastory requires, to begin with, a reckoning with global inequality; and the so-called “development industry”.

As shown in the picture below, thanks to UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development), the world is divided into two parts by standard of living difference. The world in blue is the developed world or global North, and the world in brown colour is the developing and least developed world or global South. The former comprises “North America and Europe, Israel, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand”, and the latter is comprised of “Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia (excluding Israel, Japan, and South Korea) and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand)”.



Global inequality is not just inequality between countries or inequality within a country by living standards differential. It means “unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and power that shape wellbeing among the 8 billion individuals on our planet” leading to “the different lived experiences of our fellow humans, no matter where they live”. Taken this way, global inequality “is worse than inequality within countries. And economic inequality—the unequal distribution of income—is one strikingly visible dimension of global inequalities in

well-being. In the early 1800s, individuals worldwide had more similar living standards, and differences in wealth and income were closer. Global inequality grew substantially after the Industrial Revolution, sparking rapid income growth in Western Europe, the US, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand as compared with incomes in other countries. Fast forward to today, the 10 richest men in the world own more than the bottom 3.1 billion people. Economic inequality often interacts with other kinds of disadvantage that result from power imbalances in society worldwide. For example, the absence of women's voices in decision-making spaces or a caste system that discriminates against sectors of society with lower status reflect cultural, political, and social inequalities that undermine people's well-being" (Oxfam, 2022). Out-of-control inequality on these lines "creates a sense of unfairness: it erodes public trust, cohesion and solidarity. It is also linked to poorer health, higher levels of crime and less social mobility. People who live in unequal societies tend to be more frustrated, anxious, insecure and discontent with their lives" (Hickel, 2017).

International organisations, government departments, big international charities, think tanks and social movements constitute the development industry, and they are only concerned about North-South divide, as if it were a natural divide. They all have projected themselves, via development theory and practice, over time as working to fight against the causes of this divide along with climate change by giving grants or loans, promoting big infrastructure projects and employment generating industries, imposing pro-market (neoliberal) policies, building institutions like strong property rights and anti-corruption mechanisms, and implementing the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations in the global South (Our Economy, Undated).

The Lie and the Truth

According to the development industry, "it is the global North which is developing the global South with a missionary zeal so that the South will converge with the North. This is what the economic anthropologist Jason Hickel calls as the "development delusion". It is a false narrative criticised well by Alston (2020) as follows. The World Bank "persistently underplays poverty using the flawed measurement tool of an international poverty line which sets the poverty benchmark at way too low a level to support a life of dignity consistent with basic human rights." The structural adjustment programmes imposed on South "were designed to stimulate growth and facilitate debt repayments but, instead, have weakened

the hand of the state in terms of economic oversight and deepened the debt burden of poor countries". The repayments from low- and middle-income countries are astronomically more than the grants or loans received by them from the Northern OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries, so much so that the discourse of foreign aid hides "the patterns of extraction that are actively causing the impoverishment of the global South today and actively impeding meaningful development" (Hickel, 2017). The SDGs, like the Millennium Development Goals before them, use this international poverty line as a barometer of poverty. They frame their targets decoupled with human rights, without "a single reference to any specific civil and political right". "There has been a heavy dependence on private sector funding which calls into question their sustainability as a public good". Governments have paid low levels of attention to inequality, particularly in regard to gender. There is no promotion of any empowerment at all; only "the energy surrounding the SDG process has gone into generating portals, dashboards, stakeholder engagement plans, bland reports and colourful posters"! Lastly, the SDG goal of achieving the unrealistic 7 percent growth in least developed countries is "complicit with the same neoliberal growth agenda which has precipitated the existential crisis of climate change. It certainly undermines achievement of the target of limiting global warming to 1.5°C of the pre-industrial average".

The development industry's lie is also evident from the hidden truth that "what underpins Northern economic ascendance is a colonial history of coerced extraction" (Strazzante et al., 2022). Hickel (2017) has attributed poverty and inequality in the global South to a 500-year history that includes "colonialism, indigenous genocide, extractivism, indentured slavery and neoliberalism imposed by countries in the global North and their proxies" like the development industry. This was "a history of oppression and expropriation by Northern countries in the global South" right "from the first expeditions of Columbus to today's neo-colonial forms of economic control through debt and structural adjustment programmes which continue to debilitate southern economies".

Hickel (2017 and 2020) and Angus (2023) have actually revealed a unified history that can unravel the forces of global inequality in the Oxfam sense as mentioned above. This revelation, which also accounts for climate emergency as an add-on negative externality, should indeed be on the curriculum of undergrad economics students. It runs as follows.

Unified History

Hickel (2017) says that “the divide between rich countries and poor countries is not natural or inevitable. It has been created...In the year 1500, there was no appreciable difference in incomes and living standards between Europe and the rest of the world. Indeed, we know that people in some regions of the global South were a good deal better off than their counterparts in Europe. And yet their fortunes changed dramatically over the intervening centuries—not in spite of one another but because of one another—as Western powers roped the rest of the world into a single international economic system.”

When we go along with him to the times of the collapse of feudalism into capitalism, we come to know that the period from 1350 to 1500 was “the golden age of the European proletariat when they enjoyed greater economic independence, shorter working hours, grassroots democracy and improved living conditions in tandem with nature. The struggle of labour against landed tithes and taxes imposed by nobles and the church in Europe eventually led to lower rents and higher wages ‘with free access to commons’. The period from 1500 to 1800s was “among the bloodiest, most tumultuous in world history’ on two counts. The earlier relative worker autonomy was brutally destroyed by a gentrified system of enclosure which forced commoners off their land. Rural communities were thus destroyed and their relationship with nature was severed. Common land was fenced off and a nascent capitalist system emerged to have plentiful wage labour supply it needed to sustain the new cotton mills. Alongside there was colonisation of the global South which provided the cotton and other raw materials needed to fuel the industrial revolution. Indentured slaves from Africa and the Americas constituted mostly the labour needed to extract resources from the global South. They perished from a pitiless colonial system even as the enclosure system in Europe created “artificial scarcity” whereby a decent standard of living was denied to the commoners forced into subsistence labour without security or tenure. Little wonder that life expectancy collapsed to 25 years in the industrial powerhouse of Manchester due to race to the bottom in wages and appalling living conditions decimating the ranks of new urban workers. Similarly, a famine was created in India that claimed thirty million lives at the end of the nineteenth century. The development industry does not reveal these deplorable injustices to modern economics students.

This is not all. The enclosure severed humans’ relationship with the living environment and their intimate knowledge of “plants, insects, animals, rivers, mountains and soils”. In other words, animism—the idea that all living beings are interconnected and share in the same spirit of essence”—based on reciprocity was lost to ensure that ecosystems could regenerate.

It was replaced by “dualism which asserted the dominance of humans over nature” based on extraction. And this became “the philosophical grist to the mill of capitalism” which has objectified “nature as a commodity to be exploited and converted into growth and profit”. We can trace from these anthropocene origins “the trajectory of capitalism from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of fossil-fuel-based growth in the global North and exploitation in the global South to the post-Second World War obsession with GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and growthism”. And this amounts to an exploration of the “absurdity, waste, and ecological fallout of endlessly pursuing the ‘fix’ of growth “indefinitely, for its own sake”! We can understand how we are “collectively bombarded by ever more sophisticated and insidious forms of advertising to purchase commodities that we do not need and create growth that has no social value”. Besides, there is experiential developmental knowledge that more GDP is not necessary for improving human welfare at all.

Policies and Practices

The policies and practices required as historically conditioned, clear-eyed, and grounded solutions to take on global inequality, poverty and climate emergency can now be extracted from the above unified history of the “relationship between capitalism, inequality and the relentless exploitation of the natural environment for growth” at all costs. They include “the closure of tax havens that facilitate illicit transfers from the global South to the North; tax justice that increases the tax burden on the broadest shoulders; forcing transnational corporations to pay their way; dropping the international poverty line and adopting a human rights-based measurement of poverty in its place; removing the crippling debt burden from poor countries; reducing dependence on private resources for financing public development goals; restoring powers of economic sovereignty to the state; and acknowledging the “deep deficit of political motivation” underlying the malaise attached to the SDGs”.

They also include “pathways to a post-capitalist world” by degrowth or post-growth policy advocacy. Degrowth is “a planned downscaling of energy and resource use to bring the economy back into balance with the living world as a safe, just and equitable way...Reducing resource use removes pressure from ecosystems and gives the web of life a chance to knit itself together, while reducing energy use makes it much easier to accomplish a rapid transition to renewables before dangerous tipping points begin to cascade” (Hickel, 2020).

Degrowth is the only right way out of the current mess because “capitalism demands that GDP grow by 2 or 3 percent a year, which means doubling the size of the global economy

every 23 years. This, in turn, leads to an endless cycle of production and consumption to the point where it is now dramatically overshooting what scientists have defined as safe planetary boundaries”.

The degrowth pathway involves many proposals like ending “the planned obsolescence of products which are designed to fail after a short period of use in order to create a market for replacements; ending the intrusion of advertising into our public spaces in order to create a market for products we neither need or want; promoting neighbourhood workshops that create greater shared public access to services and equipment that would change ownership to usership; ending food waste and scaling down ecologically destructive industries; democratising multilateral bodies such as the IMF, World Bank and the World Trade Organisation which are dominated by the largest economies rather than the size of the populations of member states, as countries in the global South do not have an equal voice in the decision-making processes of such international organisations”.

Green New Deal proposals based on environmental Keynesianism and green energy production do not align with the above post-capitalist degrowth pathways. The former is an advocacy for green projects with state spending but it “suffers from a fatal flaw. In order to work economically, these projects depend on continuing growth in the consumer economy” which is environmentally unsustainable. And “if these projects work environmentally, they will not be economically sustainable” in terms of earning an economic return within a capitalist economy. Keynesianism is not the answer, because it is, after all, “all about expanding demand”, while our climate emergency “today requires reducing demand” (Blackwater, 2012). As regards the hype about ongoing green energy production, the heartbreak is that it is not made independent of fossil-fuel-usage (Moore, 2019).

Frankly speaking, as Cato (2013) does, there is really no progress at all in the world in making transition to a genuine green economy that circumscribes economic life flourishing within ecological limits. The reason is that policy makers are neither bold nor experimental to implement post-growth-transitional policy proposals as follows. “First, there should be only transitional investment, where energy and money are only invested in infrastructure in the short term if it can be demonstrated that in the long term it will reduce demand for energy. This is the way to discourage opportunistic behaviour of business people. Their investments must be justified if and only if in the long run they would ensure greater wellbeing with investment of less energy despite requiring more energy in the short run. Secondly, there should be substitution of local economic activity for global economic activity to build local resilience. This amounts to reducing the energy inefficiency of lengthy

global supply chains by developing a system of self-reliant local economies for enhanced accountability for both resources and wastes. Thirdly, there should be Ecological Enterprise Zones to enable experimentation with policies that would enable a transition to a postgrowth economy in pilot areas. And fourthly, there should be a sales tax related to energy and social necessity, determined by a deliberative and democratic process of consultation. This means that since high income people consume high energy-intensive products, ethically sustainable consumption cannot be incentivised unless there is the introduction of a system of sales tax proportional to the energy content of various goods consumed” (Cato, 2013).

According to ecosocialists, it is not surprising at all that policy makers are impotent to make any difference to the abominable state of affairs in the world. For example, it is impossible for agro-ecology based policy environment to emerge in favour of food sovereignty as long as land grabbing goes on under capitalism and its imperialist expansion for the promotion of industrial agriculture. As the progressive Transnational Institute points out, “Land grabbing is an expression of the dominant development model based on sustained, increased and unequal consumption of both finite and ‘renewable’ natural resources. The social and ecological limitations of this development path, as well as its extreme inequalities, are widely known and experienced daily, especially by the most vulnerable populations. Dealing with this underlying, multi-faceted and structural problem requires going beyond narrow and partial regulatory takes, in order to address the politico-economic structures where land-grabbing dynamics are rooted, i.e., the existing industrial pattern of agro-commodities (flex crops and flex trees) and energy production and consumption controlled by Transnational Corporations under a world trade and investment system where financial capital reigns. In the current global debate over land grabbing, investment tends to be equated with corporate investment that is skewed towards large scale, petrol-based and capital intensive/labour expelling ventures. As neoliberal policies were implemented worldwide, state-driven investments in agriculture dried up, while investments by small-scale farmers were made invisible. Orthodox trade liberalisation schemes have wiped out millions of small-scale farming ventures without resulting in increased levels of food security, i.e., through the foreseen augmented capabilities to buy food in the market claimed by free trade promoters. A fundamental starting point when talking about systemic change to end land grabbing are these two other types of investment, namely public investment and investments by small-scale farmers. The urgent task is to revive state investment while making investments by small-scale farmers visible. It is the combination of state and small farmers’ investments that make any systemic change to end land grabbing possible. Additionally, it is urgent to decouple food (and agriculture in general) from dominant

corporate-orchestrated trade systems at multilateral and regional scales” (TNI, 2013; also see Angelo et al., 2021). The development industry’s ideologues and economists do not talk on these sensible lines.

The green-socialist policy design for a people’s green new deal as proposed by the ecosocialists has got two important non-negotiable ingredients (Lowy, 2018): “democratic ecological planning, wherein the population itself makes the main decisions about the economy; and qualitative transformation of development by building a “moral economy” founded on non-monetary and extra-economic, social-ecological principles and governed through democratic decision-making processes”. In other words, their praxis is governed by social anarchism and their goal is a sharing economy with blossoming of quality of life within ecological limits.

However, these ecosocialists have been slapped by some fellow environmentalists on many counts: “First, most people do not subscribe to socialism and are not convinced that the nationalisation of much of private industry is either necessary or desirable. Second, although most people would agree that capitalism has serious flaws, they are not convinced that it is either necessary or desirable to abolish it altogether. Third, a movement only of ‘exploited and oppressed people’ is just not big enough to solve the climate crisis: an effective mass movement to reverse climate change must engage with all sections of society. Fourth, if we are to have any kind of stable future in this world, ecosocialists have no choice but to work with non-socialists, inside, outside and across political parties, building a highly inclusive climate and ecological movement, involving democratic participation and action at all levels and in all forms of social organisation.” Therefore, as a minimum, the policy focus should be on “appropriate regulation - nationalisation may or may not be appropriate - of fossil-fuel companies and mandating a phasing out of emissions by 2030, combined with the provision of universal basic services including on housing, transport and food and a fair taxation system, including the taxing of carbon. Greater clarity on the reasons for democratic reform would also be helpful” (Somerville, 2022).

There are non-socialist economists such as Layard (2021) who say that “we need to get the most benefit from any money that we spend. But the benefits should be measured in terms of happiness—and not of money. This thinking applies to every issue...economic or otherwise. It should apply equally to materialistic projects (like most infrastructure) and to policies with a more social or psychological objective.” Social and economic policies, thus, should take care of human life and happiness or wellbeing, but again, in light of the discussion above, whether and how much this could take place in capitalistic economic

framework with growing pressures from climate strike movement (PHFI, 2019), global justice movement and the like, is the moot question.

All the same, frustrated economics students can get a taste of what Layard is enthusiastically saying about the importance of World Happiness Movement thus: “...we should each of us, in all our choices, aim to produce the greatest happiness that we can—and especially the least misery. This noble vision does not go against basic human nature. For all of us have two inherited traits—one selfish and one altruistic. The selfish side believes that I am the centre of the universe and my needs come first. This trait was important for our survival as a race, and we should indeed take good care of ourselves and of our own inner equilibrium. But the altruistic side enables us to feel what others feel and to strive for their good. This is vital for a happy society. It is a fallacy to think that reputation is a sufficient motivation for good behaviour. We need people with an inner desire to live good lives, even without reward. A happy society requires a lot of altruism, and so it needs a culture which supports our altruistic side. This gentler culture has always been around, in some form or other. It is there in all the great religions. Yet for many people these religions have lost their ability to convince. As religious belief has declined, a void has been created and into that void has rushed egotism, by default. We have told our young people that their chief duty is to themselves—to get on. What a terrible responsibility. No wonder that anxiety and depression are rising amongst the young. Instead, people need to get out of themselves—to escape the misery of self-absorption. So there has to be a new, secular ethic, based on human need and not divine command...The world happiness movement is a house of many rooms. It is not a movement of drop-outs; it is a movement of people who want to engage passionately in the welfare of others, while taking care of their own inner space. There is no objective reason why so many lives in the West should be so stressful. We ourselves have created the stress by our goals, and the way our institutions respond to them. If we change our goals, we really can produce a happier society. Future generations will be shocked by many of the unthinking and unskilful features of life today. They will be shocked at the neglect of mental illness, at the stresses imposed on our children, and at the common assumption that everyone is an egotist. But cultures can be changed and change is often rapid. Until recently, men dominated the world of work, gay couples had to hide in shame, and it was fashionable to smoke in public places. Even more recently, domestic violence, child abuse and sexual harassment were swept under the carpet. But no longer. In every case it is a powerful social movement that has brought about the change. So the world happiness movement can indeed bring in a better, gentler culture and do it fast. But what happens will ultimately depend on each one of us. We can all be heroes in the happiness revolution.”

The development industry has not yet openly supported what the World Happiness Reports convey about how the Nordic model of development has promoted happiness and how it can be replicated elsewhere by social democratic capitalism, though. Similarly, whether most economists; politicians and public servants; scientists and technologists; educationists; health professionals; families; and communities do have commitment to human life and happiness is another moot question to be empirically researched. Some scholars have prioritised cultural change as the most important requirement by “a value change to much more concern with cooperation, sharing, helping, caring, collective welfare and living more simply” a la the Minimalist Movement (Trainer, 2024). Again, how minimalism can permeate the consumption attitudes of people is a behavioural economic inquiry to be done.

Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom for Wellbeing Economy

Multiple actors in terms of 400 plus organisations, six national governments, 88 ambassadors like Jason Hickel, 150 academics and 15 local hubs constituting the Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEA) claim themselves to be “changemakers and disruptors questioning the status quo”. In tandem with the unified history as outlined above, they define good economy as the wellbeing economy— “an economy designed to serve people and planet, not the other way around. In a Wellbeing Economy, the rules, norms and incentives are set up to deliver quality of life and flourishing for all people, in harmony with our environment, by default.”

They are against the policies and practices of the current economic system in which “problems are made worse; arts are commodified and exploited to spur consumption and conformity; the commons are plundered by individual companies and people without comparable contribution to public revenues; technological developments and intellectual property are exploited by private owners without comparable recognition of the public investment in R&D that underpinned them; there is no empowerment agenda with the powerful giving up or sharing power; and there is thin representation even when democratic systems are in place”.

Accordingly, they propose solutions, many of which are already discussed above, and offer confidence in attaining them with inspiring examples around the world showing us the way. Their approach includes “a wider suite of success measures beyond GDP with visionary national development plans; and predistribution of power, wealth, time and income so that people do not fend for themselves or rely on limited redistributive mechanisms. There are

social enterprises and businesses owned by their workers, community wealth building and living wages, citizen assemblies and participatory budgeting, and preventive measures that stop harm from happening to nature and people via outcome budgeting and circular production and consumption”.

However, WEA has been lately reviewed rather negatively (Hayden, 2024). Although the degrowth approach to development shunned by the development industry is factored into WEA advocacy, the ground level content of its achievement is said to be meagre. This only strengthens the ‘impossibility theorem’ of the ecosocialists that capitalism can never promote general welfare by eliminating inequality, poverty and destruction of nature.

Conclusion

“We Have Everything to Lose, and a World to Gain”. This indeed is the conclusion, owed to the economic anthropologist Jason Hickel, that follows from the above discussion. The development industry will definitely make us net-losers. By contrast, the wellbeing economy thinkers and practitioners will hopefully make us the net-gainers.

Economics students, thus, should not believe in what the development industry says to them if they want historically conditioned economics and economy to be in the service of people and planet. The sooner they realize the better it is that “our present economic model of exponential GDP growth is no longer realistic, and we have to face up to this fact” (Hickel, 2017). And “Traditional pro-growth policies” that the development industry endorses, “such as lower corporate tax rates, labour reform, deregulation, austerity-driven cuts to services and privatisation can have devastating effects on the wellbeing of poor people and the state’s capacity to reduce poverty” (Alston, 2020). They must embrace critical realism that there are alternative approaches to development that we need to consider in addressing the questions of inequality, poverty and climate catastrophe such as degrowth, wellbeing economy, people’s green new deal and happiness movement; and that there is growing activism in this regard.

What policies and practices work for the wellbeing-interests of people and planet need to be discovered over time from the WEA experiences. At the same time, economics students must not give up finding ways to “seed their utopian imaginations about the possible futures cracked open” by critically thinking about the issues raised in this paper like Rethinking Schools (Undated) does with children in America.

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