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ESRC-SPERI Workshop Report

Sustainable Societies

Designing Sustainable Economies:
Translating ideas and research into
policy and practice.

28-29 July 2016

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Overview

During the past thirty years, environmental issues migrated from the political periphery to the agendas of states and major international organizations. States have agreed to cooperate on dozens of problems including biodiversity loss, climate change, toxic waste, freshwater scarcity, and desertification. But, perhaps paradoxically, many indicators of environmental quality have continued to decline as agreements, declarations, and policies on sustainable development have proliferated. It is beyond doubt that existing efforts have failed to set us on a path to inclusive prosperity and environmental sustainability. We must now determine what hasn't worked and why, and what actions will genuinely be required to assure human well-being on a healthy planet. The most ambitious ideas may be ecologically necessary but socially and politically unfeasible. This is probably the greatest challenge we face. International organizations like the United Nations can provide some leadership and influence but they are constrained to a large extent by what states will allow. States in turn face their own constraints; some may say they are beholden to what the market will permit, others stress that democracies are constrained by what the electorate demands. In any case, the factors that make ecologically necessary actions unfeasible are complex and need more attention.

In July 2016, twenty-five scholars, activists, practitioners, civil society, and representatives of intergovernmental institutions gathered in Sheffield to discuss the challenge of aligning economic development and environmental sustainability. Over two days participants discussed:

- Different interpretations of green economy and sustainable development;
- How strategies of green growth, green economy, beyond-GDP indicators, and circular economy impact policy and practice;
- Whether reducing the resource-intensity of economic development is sufficient for building sustainable economies, or whether we need to move beyond growth-based development;
- Patterns of inclusion and exclusion in debates and consultations on the environment and development;
- How and when researchers can engage with civil society and policymakers to advance ideas for sustainable development.

The workshop participants shared an interest in human wellbeing and environmental sustainability. But they differed in their background, profession, and their focus on local, national, and international politics and policy. Most importantly, they differed – some radically so – in how they envision sustainable society, and the actions required to transition towards this. This diversity of perspectives is reflected in wider debates featuring concepts such as green economy, green growth, harmony with nature, degrowth, steady state economy, circular economy, and sustainable development. Different visions are informed by different knowledge, experience, and political values. There is no objective way of determining which is best; this can only be a political process and dialogue is central to politics. The aim of this workshop was to promote dialogue among those who think differently. Too often we gravitate towards those who think in the same way; the result is that dialogue

mostly occurs among like-minded people. We know this phenomenon as ‘informational cocoons’, ‘deliberative enclaves’, and ‘echo chambers’.¹ These comfortable zones can be important for clarifying interests, and sharpening arguments. But if we don’t venture out of these zones we cannot understand what others believe and why. Dialogue among people who think differently will not necessarily lead to consensus and shared visions, but it can help us to understand each other, and perhaps to better understand and communicate our own preferences and views. This is important for democracy because it allows citizens to be exposed to diverse and well-reasoned ideas.

The title of this report, *Sustainable Societies*, reflects a strong message sent by many participants: that despite the economy being just one part of society, economic language and strategies dominate discussions about sustainability. This places economists at the centre of discussions, and alienates those who find economic arguments either incomprehensible or uninteresting. As a result, highly educated men overwhelmingly dominate commentary, negotiations, and workshops on environmental issues and sustainable development. Identifying this as a problem doesn’t diminish the importance of what those people can contribute to debates and policies. But it should alert us to the voices that go unheard when we frame debates about sustainable societies in economic terms. Rather than only trying to ‘green’ economic processes, we need to question whether these processes are building the sort of societies in which we want to live. Answering this question requires engaging with diverse people who may otherwise ignore discussions about the economy.

This report aims to capture the richness of the debate, and points of consensus and contention that emerged at the workshop. The report does not attribute particular ideas and arguments to particular participants, but instead aims to communicate the key themes and collective insights to a broader audience. Judgment about which points to highlight and which lessons to distil from these debates was the sole responsibility of the workshop’s organiser, Hayley Stevenson. A list of participants is provided at the end of this report.²

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Key Themes

1. The dilemmas of development

Reflecting on the potential for sustainable economies immediately raises questions about the very concept of ‘development’. For some, the concept is based on deeply flawed assumptions about the natural world. From this perspective, our challenge is not merely to find ways of ‘greening’ development but to reject the concept all together. Transitioning towards sustainable futures would involve firstly rethinking the relationship between human beings and the rest of the natural world. The concept of development is flawed, critics argue, because it views humans as the most important part of nature, and assumed that human needs must take precedence over the needs of all other living and non-living parts of the natural world. In other words, the concept of development is *anthropocentric*. This attitude to nature has become globally dominant because powerful institutions have deliberately universalised the concept of development. This, some argue, has created and consolidated environmentally unsustainable aspirations, and empowered corporations with the capacity to deliver the large-scale projects associated with high levels of development.

Another perspective holds that it is premature to abandon the concept of development while millions continue to live in poverty. Over the past century, a commitment to development has drawn many people out of poverty so the concept itself has value. Acknowledging this does not require us to accept a notion of development based on industrialisation, fossil fuel-based infrastructure, and exponential economic growth. As subsequent sections of this report show, the workshop pointed to the rich and diverse ways in which development can be rethought to improve people’s lives without imposing further damage on the environment.

The development agenda is widely understood as one of poverty reduction and economic growth in the South.⁴ Since the concept of development is central to debates about environmental sustainability, there is a tendency to focus mainly on actions required in developing countries. Illustrative is the UK’s decision to allocate responsibility for the Sustainable Development Goals to the Secretary of State for International Development, a decision criticised by the UK Parliament’s own International Development Committee.⁵ Several participants stressed that the sustainable development is just as relevant in the global North given the extent of ‘unsustainable development’ and ‘over-development’ in this part of the world. Several participants stressed the importance of forcing attention onto unsustainable patterns of consumption in developed countries. Others reminded us of the pockets of poverty that still exist in wealthy countries; material deprivation is not only a problem in the global South. In the UK, for example, too many people continue to live in cold and damp houses, and are frequently forced to choose between heating and food. Basic needs can actually be quite carbon-intensive so ensuring these needs are met will probably require some form of ‘contraction and convergence’ of consumption. This argument reflects a view of natural resources as a limited pie that must be shared among the world’s people. Not all workshop participants shared this view. Some argued that different approaches to ‘greening’ development could allow us to provide material needs and desires without relying on redistribution. By decreasing the resource-intensity of production systems, some argued, we can continue to develop while minimising pressure on the natural world.

2. Greening growth and development

The language and principles of sustainable development have been salient for many years. But, the promise of reconciling environmental sustainability, economic growth, and social welfare has been elusive. Economic growth has pulled many people out of poverty, but in many places the cost of this progress is growing inequality, resource depletion, and environmental degradation. The 2008 global financial crash pushed social and environmental priorities even further down most countries' list of priorities. In this context, UNEP, the World Bank, OECD and others began to reframe the sustainable development agenda in more explicitly economic terms. Green economy and green growth strategies assume that the environmental and resource crises are a result of misallocated capital. This suggests that governments can drive economic growth and jobs by reforming taxation (increasing taxes on environmentally damaging practices and products, and lowering them on cleaner options); removing subsidies on fossil fuel energy to encourage investment in cleaner energy; pricing carbon; promoting investment in public transit infrastructure; encouraging compact urban planning; and supporting workers who need to move into environmentally beneficial or benign sectors. These principles and policies are seen as applicable to both developed and developing countries.

UNEP promotes the green economy framework to developing countries, emphasising poverty reduction, and sustainable practices in agriculture, fisheries, forestry, and energy. The OECD promotes green growth as a strategy for its high- and middle-income members. The European Commission subscribes to many of the OECD's green growth principles but pursues them within a 'circular economy' framework. Through its Europe2020 growth strategy, the EC promotes a shift away from a traditional 'linear economy' (extract – produce – consume - discard), which is seen as waste-intensive and inefficient. A circular economy would, in theory, minimise resource use and waste by keeping materials flowing through the production cycle. This would require innovation and 'ecodesign' to ensure that consumable goods are durable, repairable, and recyclable.

The workshop debated the merits and limitations of these strategies for transitioning to sustainable futures. These strategies all assume that economic growth is essential, but that it can and must be achieved without depleting resources and degrading the environment. The existing tension between growth and sustainability is explained as a failure to mainstream sustainability principles across all sectors of the economy. Most governments currently selectively pursue sustainability in limited sectors, but with strategic direction and political leadership, sustainability could be mainstreamed across all sectors. This could then lead to improvements in productivity, jobs, and growth without further damaging the environment.

Many workshop participants rejected the assumption that growth and sustainability can be compatible (see theme 4, p.8). But advocates of green growth offered efficiency trends to repudiate the pessimism of growth critics; if we can decouple GDP growth from material consumption there is no reason to abandon growth aspirations. OECD countries in particular are already slowly decoupling GDP growth from material consumption. The workshop heard, for example, that growth in municipal waste in OECD countries is declining relative to GDP growth, and the amount sent to landfill is declining in absolute terms. However, the problem of 'hidden' resource consumption was acknowledged. For the sceptics, this is evidence

of the flawed logic of green growth. For proponents, it is merely evidence of the significant work that remains to be done. A wealthy country may appear to be reducing its level of material consumption, but this needs to be looked at in the context of its trade flows. As countries develop, their economies tend to become more service-based while relying on other countries to produce the material goods that citizens in wealthy countries wish to consume. This reflects hidden consumption – it is hidden because it is excluded from national efficiency statistics. Countries reporting on sustainability progress should be careful to capture their country's entire material 'footprint' to avoid giving an inaccurate impression of progress and dematerialisation.

3. Learning and dialogue

The extent to which countries and regions can borrow sustainability ideas from foreign contexts was debated, as was the extent to which intergovernmental organisations can genuinely respect alternative green strategies. Environmentalists began promoting the idea of a green economy many years ago. But UNEP's adoption of this term and its subsequent inclusion in the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) has been criticised by some in civil society and academia. Some critics reject the market-based language of 'natural capital' and 'ecosystem services' that is salient in UNEP's green economy. UNEP argues that calculating the monetary value of nature can inform ecologically rational policymaking; critics fear that this reflects a commoditisation of nature that will promote trading practices and damage rather than protect the environment. Other critics rejected what they saw as a homogenous vision of green economy that privileges the economy over social inclusion and environmental sustainability.

UNEP sees its green economy framework as compatible with the multiple ways in which sustainable development is pursued in developing countries. It has gathered evidence of eight diverse frameworks: China's Ecological Civilization, Thailand's Sufficiency Economy, Bolivia's Living Well, Bhutan's Gross National Happiness, South Africa's Green Economy, Germany's Circular Economy, Botswana's Natural Capital Accounting, and Costa Rica's Payments for Ecosystem Services. Each reflects an ideal for reconciling national development aspirations with the requirements of environmental sustainability. The success of these narratives is based partly on two factors: first, they are based on philosophical ideas that are salient in their national contexts; and second, they are promoted by core government departments, and sometimes by heads of state.

By gathering details of diverse pathways, UNEP aims to promote south-south learning and cooperation. The workshop addressed the implications of context-specificity for these aims. There may be value in understanding the diverse ways in which countries pursue sustainable development and green economies, but some participants were wary of attempts to mimic or promote specific strategies in places with different social, political and cultural contexts. The danger of 'depoliticisation' was highlighted, which can be understood as overlooking the role of power in sustainability policies and debates. Power is always present when options for sustainable economies are debated and designed. International organisations are often keen to present sustainability strategies as win-win arrangements, but several workshop participants disputed this depiction. They stressed that societal transitions usually

unfold as power struggles and some groups' interests are always favoured over others. Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) was highlighted as an example of a strategy frequently praised as worthy of emulation. GNH is progressive and politically helpful in certain ways, but uncritical praise ignores the injustices perpetrated by this strategy, which is based on an exclusionary ethnic nationalism. Responsibility for recognising the negative aspects of different national strategies largely falls to non-state actors because states and intergovernmental organisations generally refrain from criticising locally defined strategies. This limits the potential to learn from diverse strategies because learning requires honest appraisal of advantages and disadvantages, and how gains and losses are distributed across society.

Some participants questioned the sincerity of efforts to learn from diverse strategies and to find commonalities across different positions. They argued that some positions are simply incompatible; efforts to find commonalities risk stripping alternative strategies of their basic principles in order to make them fit dominant approaches. Bolivia's rejection of market mechanisms in environmental policy – and the country's general hostility to capitalist development – is an example of a strategy that is fundamentally incompatible with mainstream green economy and green growth strategies. This remained a point of contention among workshop participants with some maintaining that a pluralist ideal of learning, respect, and compatibility is possible in conditions of difference.

States that have competing visions, like Bolivia, often find themselves marginalised or ignored in intergovernmental dialogues. Discussions at the workshop also revealed patterns of exclusion within civil society. Governments and international organisations increasingly promote opportunities for civil society to 'have their say' on sustainability strategies. Extensive online consultations were held during preparations for the 2012 Rio+20 Summit as well as for the Sustainable Development Goals negotiations. 'Virtual' participation may increase inclusion beyond the professional NGOs with resources to travel to UN meetings, but in practice it tends to reproduce the biases of 'live' participation: debates are still mostly conducted in English, with males over-represented compared to females, people from the global North over-represented compared to the global South, and participation reserved for those with internet access. Some participants stressed that civil society groups are often complicit in their own exclusion and marginalisation by failing to ensure they are sufficiently informed to contribute to debates. This was highlighted as a particular problem at UN-level meetings where negotiations usually have a very long history, and civil society groups with adequate institutional memory are few and far between.

Some participants raised concern that the language of 'inclusion' is used in apolitical ways that mask power differences. They pointed out that it is not just a matter of ensuring all diverse voices are represented but of recognising how some voices are influential and others are not. There was a widespread impression among workshop participants that critical voices are ignored even if they are 'included'. This points to a potential trade-off between inclusion and authenticity whereby people face a choice between framing their message to fit with dominant perspectives, or accepting that their voice will be ignored. The workshop revealed that academics aiming for research impact often face a similar dilemma. Providing research evidence that is relevant to policymakers requires accepting the existing policy context. The risk is that researchers generate 'policy-based evidence'

rather than influencing 'evidence-based policy'. Researchers and civil society alike sometimes have to decide between a short-term pragmatic strategy and a long-term principled strategy. Pragmatism might result in incremental improvements but at the cost of reinforcing a policy framework that is perceived as incompatible with long-term sustainable societies. A principled strategy may render one's research and ideas 'policy irrelevant' in the short term but there remains a possibility that the policy context will change in the longer term. Examples offered at the workshop included the climate change policy arena in which market and voluntary mechanisms are now dominant, and the conservation policy arena where nature is increasingly valued in monetary terms.

4. Rethinking progress

Many participants insisted that sustainability strategies could only succeed if states and intergovernmental organizations were willing to question the viability of continued economic growth. Strategies like green economy, green growth, and circular economy were ultimately failing to resolve the crisis of unsustainability because they unequivocally accept GDP growth as a core and legitimate goal of all states. International organisations are state-based institutions. As long as their members remain primarily interested in growth-based strategies, there is little scope for organisations like the OECD and UNEP to scale up strategies that favour alternative indicators of progress to GDP. The creation of the UK's All Party Parliamentary Group on the limits to growth can be seen as a positive sign, but the merits of GDP are generally assumed to be beyond scrutiny inside political institutions.

Several participants insisted that debates were already taking place within intergovernmental organizations about the social and environmental limitations of GDP. One sign of this is interest in broader metrics for measuring progress, such as the European Commission's Beyond GDP initiative, which is developing indicators to capture trends in environmental quality, social cohesion, and wellbeing. One set of indicators is the 'Enlarged GDP', which adjusts GDP to reflect the impact on national wealth of resource depletion, environmental degradation, and income inequality. The workshop heard that a lot more technical work is required to refine these indicators and gather the data necessary for measuring progress beyond GDP. Some participants warned against viewing this as a purely *technical* exercise; selecting non-GDP indicators is a *political* exercise. While measuring wellbeing is a potentially progressive move beyond GDP, we should be wary of policymakers reducing wellbeing to individual behaviour. It is politically easier for governments to measure aspects of people's lifestyles rather than to measure the corporate spending that influences people's lifestyles. But an individualised wellbeing agenda risks making people responsible for their wellbeing rather than acknowledging how the state and capitalist system are responsible for poor social and environmental conditions. Numerical indicators won't necessarily explain the complex social, political and economic factors that lock some people into environmentally damaging practices. But the wellbeing agenda will only help move us towards sustainable societies if these factors are acknowledged and addressed.

That international institutions are beginning to consider alternative measures of progress is a sign that growth critics are very slowly having an impact on policy frameworks. Sustained effort will be necessary if alternative measurements are ever to compete with annual measurements of GDP, productivity, and private in-

vestment (such as the Annual Growth Survey). Despite some interest from governments in alternative indicators, leadership on this topic is likely to come from non-states actors. Several participants shared insights of debates taking place among researchers and civil society that can help us to imagine sustainable futures that don't depend on exponential economic growth. Infinite economic growth, many argued, is ecologically unfeasible on a finite planet. From this perspective, efficiency figures give a misleading impression of progress because they reflect only relative decoupling not *absolute* decoupling. Most countries are reducing the rate at which they use natural resources but as long as they are committed to continuous growth, the total resources consumed will continue to increase. The fact that tropical forests are being cleared at a slower rate is hardly good news for those concerned about long-term conservation. A further problem with relative efficiency improvements is what is called 'Jevons paradox' or the 'rebound effect'. This refers to the observed tendency for consumption to increase in tandem with efficiency improvements, thereby negating any resource savings.

For those who have followed debates about sustainable development for some time, these arguments about economic growth are not new. Indeed, those participants critical of growth spent little time rehearsing familiar arguments and instead focused on the social basis of the growth 'obsession' and the opportunities for progressing towards post-growth societies. The workshop heard that economic growth is a fairly new idea, but one that quickly established hegemony over how we understand national progress and success. Election campaigns generally judge a government's success in terms of GDP growth rates; absence of growth is communicated in the language of crisis, while a return to growth is described as recovery. This GDP imagery is largely taken-for-granted and shapes social expectations. A challenge identified by the workshop is that although continued economic growth is not *ecologically feasible*, alternatives to growth remain *politically and socially unfeasible*. In short, post-growth ideas are not vote winners.

Despite the entrenched acceptance of GDP, there are a range of 'post-growth' visions emerging within civil society and academia, including de-growth and radical ecological democracy. De-growth emerged from the grassroots as a movement to promote reduced production and consumption in ways that enhance human well-being, social equity, and ecological health. Rather than offer a single roadmap or set of strategies, the de-growth movement promotes debate and creative thinking about future economic systems that don't depend on continuous growth. Radical ecological democracy imagines versions of the 'good life' that are different to those promoted by the multi-billion dollar advertising industry. From this perspective, there are many ways of enriching people's lives that do not depend on continuous material accumulation. These and other ideas for alternative futures often share an important element: they make democracy rather than the economy the central institution of society. Transitioning to socially inclusive and ecologically sustainable ways of living would thus require more involvement, ideas, and innovation from citizens. In wealthy countries, people's involvement in sustainability issues is largely limited to options for 'green consumption', and several participants observed that this reinforces rather than challenges unsustainability. It also makes sustainable lifestyles a luxury available only to those who can pay premium prices on 'green' products. Leaving sustainability concerns to the market, or alternatively only to economists and bureaucrats, would deliver marginal improvements at best – and unjust and damaging outcomes at worst.

5. Inspiring the democratic imagination

Conventional wisdom holds that citizens are economic rationalists, especially at the ballot box. Workshop participants cast doubt on whether this is always or necessarily true. Britain's decision to leave the European Union despite warnings of likely economic damage showed that emotions can be a powerful political force. The xenophobia displayed during the Brexit campaign was a reminder that emotions can be manipulated for political gain, but for several participants Brexit was also a sign that citizens are willing to radically reimagine the economic order. This is a positive sign for post-growth movements that hope to appeal to morals and emotions for more progressive and sustainable outcomes. A key challenge for such movements is the lingering perception that environmentalists want to return to a pre-industrial age when life was hard and pleasures in short supply.

Breaking the association between sacrifice and sustainability is essential for popularising debates about sustainable futures. This would involve framing change in a positive light, such as emphasising the leisure time to be gained from a shorter working week; the lower crime rates and higher life expectancy that is correlated with income equality; the health benefits of consuming local and organically grown food; the social bonds that can be forged through sharing arrangements, etc. It also involves using positive language to talk about post-growth visions, for example, words such as abundance, enriching, thriving, prosperous, wellbeing.

But breaking the association between sacrifice and sustainability doesn't depend solely on telling positive stories. Some workshop participants urged us to remember that negative stories can be politically powerful; they can trigger anger, which in turn can motivate people to demand change. Environmental justice movements have struggled for years to attract attention to the victims of growth strategies; these include communities displaced for large-scale energy infrastructure, others displaced for mining projects, and those most exposed to waste and pollution. The discussions highlighted many other sacrifices associated with growth. In developing countries, growth is pursued through industrialisation and private investment. National accounts present these developments only in terms of progress. While some groups in society certainly benefit, others have a very different experience: disrupted local markets, lost livelihoods, diminished rural communities, migration to urban centres, and expanding slums. In industrialised countries, growth is pursued through gains in productivity. Again, national accounts depict progress but people's lived experience is often different: longer working hours for lower pay; redundancies and hiring freezes; increased levels of stress and burnout; over-employment for some and under-employment for others.

Treating GDP as synonymous with progress appears socially irrational when we acknowledge that GDP is measured based on all market activity – good and bad. If a house burns down it will be rebuilt and the occupants' possessions replaced; this contributes to economic growth but certainly not to prosperity. Just as negative experiences are included when measuring GDP, many positive experiences are excluded. Eating home-grown fruit and vegetables doesn't count, but eating a McDonald's Happy Meal does. Joining a neighbourhood car-sharing scheme instead of buying a new car would also undermine GDP growth. These aspects of growth reveal that the relationship between GDP and progress is more complicated than commonly assumed. Drawing attention to this is part of the process of making post-growth ideas socially and politically feasible.

Many participants believed that a sustainable society will be a post-growth society, but they don't share a single vision of how it would work and what transition would look like. There is considerable diversity of perspectives and insights among those who believe in the idea of post-growth societies, and many workshop participants stressed the potential for collaboration to build knowledge and popular support.

Key Lessons

Key lesson for policymakers

Green teaming: The defence community might seem an odd place to seek inspiration for building sustainable societies. But stripped of its military purpose, the strategy of ‘red teaming’ holds considerable potential for environmental policymakers. Red teaming recognises that decision-makers on their own will never have all the insights they need: they need to draw on diverse insights from outside. Weaknesses and problems in policy proposals will more likely be exposed when ideas are scrutinised from diverse perspectives. A strategy of ‘green teaming’ could be widely applied in the environmental policy community. National and local government agencies periodically revise policies and develop new initiatives relating to conservation, consumption, environmental accounting, ecosystem valuation, taxes and subsidies, energy systems and efficiency. All these policy areas would benefit from green team scrutiny. Inter-governmental organisations like the OECD, UNEP, and World Bank often adopt a capacity building or advisory role to support states in improving environmental policy. Irrespective of the skills and credentials of those responsible for designing these initiatives, an external team with diverse perspectives would likely detect weaknesses and improvements.

The greatest potential for green teaming lies beyond environmental policy. Mainstreaming the environment into broader policy remains an aspiration in most organizations. Establishing green teams to scrutinise and challenge proposals across policy units – from trade and transport to education and media – would help create pathways to sustainable societies. Similarly, governmental organisations without an explicit environmental remit, such as the IMF and WTO, are important sites for green teaming because their policies often have the greatest impact on the state of the planet.

In practice, green teaming involves bringing together an independent group of people (usually between 5 and 9) to critically assess and challenge plans, programmes and organisational assumptions, and to offer alternative perspectives. Unlike consultations in which large numbers of people provide input, the green team strategy ensures that ideas and knowledge are directly applied to ‘stress test’ strategies for sustainable development.

Key lesson for researchers

Engagement and impact: There is much to be gained by academics and independent researchers offering their expertise to policy processes. New initiatives and strategies are often presented in depoliticised ways that don’t acknowledge or anticipate how benefits and costs will be distributed across society. Social scientists are often more attuned to the politics of policy. Incremental gains can be achieved by persistently highlighting the weaknesses of dominant policy approaches and pushing alternatives; this is evident, for example, in the growing interest in ‘beyond GDP’ indicators of progress, and the emerging interest in ‘value pluralism’ for biodiversity policy.

However, many researchers who work on aspects of sustainable societies don’t expect to influence policy in the short-term. This is legitimate and reasonable. The

sources of unsustainability are embedded in culture, social systems, infrastructure, and policy frameworks and most will only change slowly over time. Just as we need researchers who aim to directly influence policymaking in the short-term, we also need researchers who maintain a critical distance from current policymaking. We can think of this as a division of labour. The rise of the ‘research impact’ agenda presents a challenge. There are numerous professional incentives for academics to pursue ‘policy-relevant’ research (e.g., for recognition and promotion, to satisfy funding bodies, and to meet the requirements of national evaluations like the Research Excellence Framework). The meaning of research impact is not fixed, but it is widely associated with policy influence. Shaping the impact agenda in a way that serves the interests of research on sustainable societies requires academics to vocally defend the value of critical distance between research and policy.

The workshop heard examples of cases where impact-aspiring academics felt pressured or compelled to conform to a policy paradigm at the expense of research integrity. Sharing such concrete examples more broadly among colleagues could help to build nuanced understandings of the merits and limitations of policy-oriented research. It could also help build alternative understandings of impact that place more value on the processes of engagement (crucially including public engagement) rather than on the outcome of that engagement.

Key lesson for civil society

Balance critique and vision: Building broader public interest and support for more ambitious sustainability initiatives will involve breaking the lingering association between sustainability and sacrifice. This requires balancing critique and vision to develop people’s understanding of the sacrifices involved in contemporary development/growth models, and the gains to be made from alternative futures. Often the sacrifices of development pass unnoticed because they occur in distant places where resource extraction and large-scale energy infrastructure is built. Other times the sacrifices are experienced when redundancies are made to protect profits, or when corporate advertising is prioritised over children’s health. Political actors have been very successful in equating social wellbeing and progress with growth, productivity, and increased consumer spending. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that these economic processes and social outcomes are linked until a certain point, but then societal wellbeing remains stagnant or declines as growth and productivity increase. This suggests that we could collectively imagine alternative economic means of achieving desired social outcomes.

Non-economists can probably best understand the limits and weaknesses of economic principles when they are revealed in mundane, everyday activities. The example shared at the workshop of Australians’ growing preference for artisan bread is illustrative. It showed how ‘productivity’ is not necessarily aligned with public interests. In 2016, Australia’s Productivity Commission criticised artisan bakers for dragging down the country’s productivity figures. Australians were encouraged to buy cheaper factory-produced bread because it is produced twice as efficiently as bread produced by hand in local bakeries. Comparative nutritional values, working conditions, and environmental impacts are excluded from productivity calculations along with other reasons people may have for choosing local handmade bread. But

the fact that the artisan bread is half as efficient means that twice as many people are employed in its production. Such stories allow the general public to see the limits of economic ideas like productivity that carry so much weight in political discourse. Allowing people to see the limits of mainstream economic principles is one part of democratically imagining what future sustainable societies could look like.

Notes

1. See, for example, Cass Sunstein (2006) *Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
2. Readers interested in discussing particular ideas can contact the organiser who will connect them with the most relevant participant/s: h.stevenson@sheffield.ac.uk
3. Grant number ES/K009761/1.
4. The terms 'global South' and 'developing countries' are widely used interchangeably. They are used interchangeably in this report (as are 'global North' and 'developed countries') while fully acknowledging that all such terms are problematic.
5. Commons Select Committee (2016) 'Sustainable Development Goals: call for clear leadership across Government', 8 June. <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/international-development-committee/news-parliament-2015/sustainable-development-goals-report-published-16-17/>

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