Measuring progress of a wellbeing economy bottom-up from micro to macro

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The concept of measuring progress in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) was developed in close coordination with corresponding scientific findings (of Keynesianism as a response to the prevailing neoclassicism) and political programmes (of deficit spending - after the Great Depression). The political importance of GDP hints at economic growth as the implicit goal. But indicators should be derived from goals - not vice versa. For a transformation towards a more sustainable and distributive society, the measurement of progress beyond the financial (income, GDP) needs to be broader (Binswanger, 2006; R. A. Easterlin, 1974).

To achieve what can be described as a "wellbeing economy" a fundamental transformation is needed on all political and administrative levels (local, regional, national and multilateral) as well as by businesses and individuals. In order to monitor whether progress towards a better life for all (now and in the future) is being achieved, we suggest a new approach that measures what those involved in the transformation process really aim for instead of putting over concepts developed by experts or bureaucrats.

In several projects (Hinterberger et al 2023, Kirchner et al 2023, Bukowski et al. 2024) we have been working in several projects on schemes to monitor sustainable development derived from goals and involving citizens and stakeholders, in which we

applied participatory, ie. transdisciplinary approaches, which support citizens and/or stakeholders in developing pathways into a positive future in line with their own wellbeing as well as with planetary and societal conditions. In participatory workshops we accompany citizens and stakeholders to

- understand what is at stake
- formulate visions goals
- pathways to achieve the goals together in a systemic way and
- derive indicators from the very goals of the participants (and not vice versa).

This results in qualitatively and quantitatively formulated statements, in which they describe their goals in the form of positive images/stories of the future. In this way, the participants realise their goals as a team with everyone involved, without this being at the expense of others.

From this follows that individuals, businesses, regions and countries (in the end: we all on earth as a global community) can achieve a common system understanding and problem identification in reaching their goals in terms of synergies and trade-offs as well as problems and conflict potentials that may arise.

Artistic actions such as collages and songs are used as well as intellectual ones (e.g. systemic analyses) in order to look beyond the familiar, but also to develop an understanding of which goals are achievable and need not remain mere wishful thinking.

In a Project called SDGVisionPath (Kirchner et al 2023) we combine the application of "Communities of Practice (CoP)" (Wenger, 1999) for stakeholder and expert collaboration on the macro level with two models, specifically suited to address SDG interactions and for integrating stakeholder and expert knowledge on the Austrian national level.

In a first workshop, the stakeholders developed a common system's understanding. In a second workshop they jointly formulated visions and goals applying an arts-based method called speculative thinking (Dunne and Raby, 2013) before appling storytelling in a third workshop to develop pathways that could bring them to their desired futures. In a final workshop stakeholders together with the research project team will identify a set of policy recommendations based on the earlier findings and guided by findings from the quantitative simulation model iSDG (Spittler and Kirchner, 2022; Allen et al., 2019) as well as the qualitative Inequality and Poverty Assessment Model (IPAM) (Bukowski and Kreissl, 2022).

In another project (Hinterberger et al. 2023), four regional workshops were held with interested people and decision-makers from the Dachstein-Salzkammergut-Totes Gebirge region to develop a shared positive image of how the economy, society and nature should change in the face of the climate crisis and how they can subsequently recognise ("measure") whether the region is moving in the direction of creating Austria's largest biosphere park in the region.

For this, adaptation to climate change plays a central role thematically. What do we want to adapt to in the face of climate change and, going further/deeper: where do we want to go? Or even more concretely: How do we (people and nature) in the region want to live with climate change? The global sustainability goals provide a globally recognised framework for this. "Adaptation to climate change" represents one of the 169 targets (= sub-goals) of the UN's 2030 Agenda - more precisely, Target 13.1. The measurement of the success of "adaptation to climate change" can thus be placed in relation (synergies and trade-offs) to the other goals of the people in the region: what adaptation is needed to achieve the goals?

More recently, we could proof the feasibility of this concept with a group of students interested in the topic of affordable sustainable housing in Salzburg (Bukowski et al 2024) using a 2 days song-writing workshop to develop goals for a "good life for all" in the sense of "leave no one behind" under the conditions of the climate crisis. The success of corresponding implementation steps can then be evaluated in a holistic sense with the help of a set of comprehensive leading indicators.

In 2022, we supported five companies and start-ups in formulating their sustainability program, in which companies formulate 5-10 goals with key figures that are accompanied by ambitious stories and a carbon footprint. It was important to us that indicators for monitoring sustainable development are derived from the company's specific goals.

The process comprised four modules, the sequence of which follows the path outlined above. From a footprint perspective, a common, comprehensive and systemic understanding of the challenges and one's own role on the topic of "sustainability" is established and the challenges of your company within the framework of the 2030 Agenda are clarified.

The methods described in this article show promising opportunities based on transdisciplinary research for participatory processes that support people and communities in striving for their aims in terms of wellbeing and sustainability. Eudaimonic wellbeing can be considered as the basis for positive visions and therefore transformation towards what is considered as a "better world" by the people involved.

The combination of arts-based workshops to develop visons goals and systemic methodologies to judge their feasibility along with monitoring indicators derived from those goals proofed to be applicable on the micro, meso and macro levels.

The initiators are looking for more experts and stakeholders, individuals and organizations such as companies or citizen initiatives to apply the tools developed and support us in the further development and implementation of the concepts developed.