

Wellbeing for people and the planet: how to value everyone and everything on a thriving planet beyond 2030

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Humanity is crossing multiple planetary boundaries while facing rising inequality, democratic fragility, and worsening mental health, exposing the incompatibility of unlimited gross domestic product-driven growth with a finite, socially interdependent planet. Only 17% of the Sustainable Development Goal targets are on track, indicating the need for a deeper transformation rather than faster implementation. Synthesising evidence across disciplines, we argue that human beings are evolutionarily wired for cooperation and relational wellbeing, and not perpetual consumption and status competition. This argument underpins a post-2030 shift in a global development paradigm that places multidimensional wellbeing, of people and the planet, at its core. We outline three mutually reinforcing systemic shifts: deliberative democracy that gives communities real power to shape collective futures; economic democracy that redirects finance, enterprise design, and fiscal policy towards equitable, regenerative outcomes; and transformed land and resource governance that recognises ecological limits and the rights of nature. By aligning institutions with the cooperative nature of humans and the Earth's regenerative capacity, societies can achieve flourishing lives for all within planetary boundaries, offering a scientifically grounded agenda for the decades beyond 2030.

Introduction

This Personal View resulted from a three-day deliberative workshop for experts conducted by the authors in May, 2025, to synthesise an approach to post-2030 development. Freeform discussions were framed around the global political context, governance and democracy, good and bad growth, and positive futures. Meeting notes were used to generate themes for further discussion, and a framework for this Personal View was developed and refined throughout the workshop. The participants were former members of the International Expert Working Group of the Secretariat for the New Development Paradigm commissioned by the Royal Government of Bhutan and UN in 2013. Participants had experience in international, regional, and local policy and practice, in addition to academic expertise in ecological economics, environmental sciences, epidemiology and public health, and environmental and social policy. Participants are affiliated with organisations dedicated to sustainable wellbeing-centred development, including the Club of Rome, Wellbeing Economy Alliance, the Leverhulme Centre for Anthropocene Biodiversity, the Institute for Global Prosperity at University College London, and the European Environment Agency.

The urgency of rethinking growth and development

Humanity stands at a crucial inflection point facing converging crises of climate destabilisation, biodiversity collapse, widening inequality, and democratic erosion within the next few decades. The current development paradigm is fundamentally misaligned with both planetary boundaries and human wellbeing.¹ Despite commitments to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), progress remains inadequate, with only 17% of targets on track for fulfilment

by 2030.² This shortfall reflects not merely implementation failures but deeper structural contradictions in the current development model.

The assumption that infinite economic growth can coexist with a finite planet has become increasingly untenable. Research on planetary boundaries shows that humans have already transgressed safe operating limits for climate change, ocean acidification, biosphere integrity, land-system change, freshwater change, novel entities, and biogeochemical flows.^{3,4} Simultaneously, despite unprecedented global wealth, mental health disorders affect one in eight people globally,⁵ loneliness has reached epidemic proportions,⁶ and billions remain excluded from basic services and dignified livelihoods. These crises are not separate, but instead, are interconnected manifestations of systems that misunderstand both human nature and ecological embeddedness.⁷

The SDGs represent an important advancement in global consensus, acknowledging the interconnected nature of social, economic, and environmental challenges. However, their voluntary nature, continued prioritisation of gross domestic product (GDP) growth, and inadequate critical analyses of power structures have constrained their transformative potential. As 2030 draws closer, humans face not just the task of accelerating SDG implementation but the more fundamental challenge of reimagining development itself.

This reimagining requires scientific reassessment of core assumptions about human nature, governance, economic organisation, and humans' relationship with the living world. Emerging evidence from disciplines such as evolutionary biology, neuroscience, political science, ecological economics, epidemiology, and Indigenous peoples' knowledge systems offers a different understanding of what humans need to thrive. This evidence suggests that

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wellbeing, and not GDP growth, should be the central organising principle for post-2030 development frameworks.

The path forward demands more than technical solutions or policy adjustments; it requires transforming the systems and structures that shape the collective future of humanity. This transformation needs to be democratic in the deepest sense, ensuring that those most affected by decisions have a meaningful voice in making these decisions. The latest innovations in deliberative democracy, economic governance, and land stewardship show that alternatives are not merely theoretical but already emerging in communities worldwide. This Personal View presents a science-informed case for a wellbeing-centred development paradigm that values everyone while respecting planetary boundaries. We outline how deliberative democratic processes, economic democracy, and transformed land governance can create systems aligned with the evolved social nature and ecological reality of humanity. The future of development lies not in extractive growth but in creating conditions in which all people can flourish within the regenerative capacity of Earth's living systems.

Valuing everyone: the evolved social nature of humanity

The dominant economic model gives rise to a fundamental mischaracterisation of human nature. As a result, the *homo economicus* model, which depicts humans as primarily self-interested, consumerist individuals, has shaped development theories, economic policies, and governance structures for decades. However, this model contradicts mounting scientific evidence from evolutionary biology, neuroscience, anthropology, sociology, and psychology about who humans really are as a species.

Humans evolved not as isolated competitors but as deeply social beings whose survival depended on cooperation, sharing, and strong community bonds.^{8,9} The evolutionary success of humans stems largely from their capacity for collective action, empathy, and care for others beyond immediate kin. This social orientation is not merely cultural but neurobiological; human brains developed specialised neural circuitry for social cognition, with cooperation activating reward systems more powerfully than self-interested behaviour.¹⁰ Far from being a veneer over self-interest, the human nature represents the core of the human evolutionary inheritance.

The growing worldwide crises of mental health, loneliness, and status anxiety are not simply policy failures but predictable consequences of forcing social creatures to live within self-interested structures. When people are treated primarily as consumers and competitors rather than community members, the result is what evolutionary psychologists term adaptive mismatch, that is, a condition in which evolved psychological mechanisms operate in environments radically different from those in which they developed.¹¹ This mismatch creates chronic stress and psychological harm, as evidenced by epidemiological studies linking competitive,

unequal societies to higher rates of mental illness, addiction, and social dysfunction.^{12,13}

The environmental consequences are equally crucial. Status competition drives resource-intensive consumption far beyond what satisfies actual needs or enhances wellbeing.¹⁴ Since status is inherently relative, one person's gain is another's loss. This competition creates a zero-sum dynamic that accelerates climate change, resource depletion, and environmental degradation without improving collective wellbeing. Current economic systems effectively harness humans' vulnerability to status comparison while undermining the cooperation and connection that are essential to fulfilling deeper social needs.

Development frameworks beyond 2030 need to recognise that human wellbeing is fundamentally relational. Even in market-dominated societies, millions volunteer, care for others without compensation, and express desires to contribute to something larger than themselves, revealing humans' intrinsic social orientation despite systemic incentives to the contrary. Rather than forcibly adapting to increasingly competitive and individualistic systems, humans need to align their goals and institutions with their cooperative nature. Evidence shows that people flourish in environments that foster connection, provide meaningful contribution, and ensure everyone feels valued.¹⁵ Building such environments requires transforming governance structures, economic systems, and relationship with the natural world, not as a utopian aspiration but as a practical alignment with the kind of beings humans actually are.

Wellbeing as the central frame for development

GDP has long served as the primary metric for assessing the progress of development, despite the explicit warning from its architect, Simon Kuznets, against mistaking GDP growth for wellbeing improvement. An extensive body of evidence now shows that beyond moderate income levels, GDP growth fails to deliver proportionate gains in life satisfaction, health outcomes, or social cohesion.^{16,17} Moreover, GDP actively miscounts societal progress by including environmentally destructive activities as positive while omitting crucial unpaid care work, ecosystem services, and social capital that underpin both human and planetary health.¹⁸

Nations at the forefront of development innovation have begun implementing alternative frameworks. Bhutan pioneered the Gross National Happiness index with nine domains spanning psychological wellbeing to ecological resilience. New Zealand introduced the world's first Wellbeing Budget in 2019, allocating resources on the basis of impacts across five priority areas, including mental health and environmental sustainability. Scotland, Wales, Iceland, Finland, and New Zealand, as members of the Wellbeing Economy Governments partnership, are systematically reorientating policy towards wellbeing outcomes rather than economic growth alone.¹⁹ These approaches share a common recognition that development needs to be evaluated

through a multidimensional lens reflecting what actually constitutes a good life within planetary boundaries.²⁰

The scientific basis for wellbeing-centred development has strengthened considerably this century.²¹ Research in positive psychology identifies key components of human flourishing, including positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment.²² Public health studies show how social determinants—from income equality to community cohesion—shape population health more powerfully than medical interventions alone.²³ Ecological economics quantifies the dependency of human wellbeing on functioning ecosystems, revealing the false economy of growth that depletes natural capital.²⁴ Indigenous knowledge systems, long marginalised in development discourse, offer sophisticated frameworks for wellbeing that integrate social, spiritual, and ecological dimensions.²⁵

Operationalising wellbeing as the central frame for development requires metrics that capture this multidimensional reality. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Better Life Index, the Sustainable Development Index, and various national wellbeing frameworks provide tested models for measuring progress more holistically.¹⁸ These approaches typically incorporate objective indicators (health outcomes, education levels, environmental quality) alongside subjective measures (life satisfaction, sense of belonging, trust in institutions). Crucially, the indicators need to be capable of being disaggregated to reveal inequities in wellbeing distribution, recognising that averages can mask substantial disparities across, for example, sex and gender, ethnicity, and geography.²⁶

Transitioning from GDP-centred to wellbeing-centred development demands more than new metrics; it requires transformed governance processes that prioritise what actually matters to people and the planet. Evidence from participatory wellbeing assessments shows that when communities define progress on their own terms, priorities often shift towards stronger social connections, healthier ecosystems, more equitable power relations, and meaningful livelihoods rather than maximising consumption.²⁷ A post-2030 development paradigm needs to adopt and institutionalise these perspectives, ensuring that wellbeing in its fullest sense (not merely economic growth) becomes the measure against which all policies and investments are judged.

Democratic renewal: citizens' assemblies for inclusive governance

Contemporary governance systems, even in nominal democracies, increasingly function as plutocracies wherein economic elites and organised business interests exert disproportionate influence over policy outcomes. Empirical research by Gilens and Page examining 1779 policy issues in the USA found that economic elites and business groups substantially affect policy, whereas average citizens have little or no independent influence.²⁸ Similar democratic deficits have been documented across global governance

institutions, wherein asymmetrical power relations between nations and corporate capture of regulatory processes undermine inclusive decision making.²⁹ This systemic failure of representation has eroded public trust, fuelled populist backlash, and created policy deadlocks on urgent planetary challenges that require collective action.

Drawing on Mercier and Sperber's evolutionary account of human reasoning³⁰ (ie, reasoning evolved primarily to justify and defend viewpoints in social interactions, to persuade others, and to win arguments within a group), deliberative processes that emphasise reasoning as a cooperative enterprise and as a social negotiation, and structure public reasoning as explicit, transparent, and contestable, are likely to rebuild trust. Deliberative democracy can function as a social technology that channels the evolved human social nature towards collectively beneficial outcomes. By designing processes that acknowledge reasoning as inherently social, humans can foster more robust, inclusive, and evidence-informed democratic decisions.

Citizens' assemblies, which are bodies of randomly selected individuals who deliberate on specific issues after receiving balanced information, are one example of an empirically supported alternative or supplemental system for democratic renewal. The selection method, known as sortition, creates statistically representative samples of the population that can reflect diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, genders, and geographies. Unlike elected representatives vulnerable to special interest influence, assembly members have no need to fundraise, campaign, or satisfy donors, allowing them to deliberate on the basis of values and the evidence presented to them, rather than political calculus. Structured facilitation ensures that participants can engage meaningfully regardless of previous expertise, whereas expert testimony provides necessary context without dominating the process.^{31,32}

Evidence from hundreds of citizens' assemblies worldwide shows their capacity to break political deadlocks, produce nuanced policy recommendations, and rebuild public trust.³³ In Ireland, a citizens' assembly helped to resolve the contentious issue of abortion rights through a deliberative process that overcame decades of political stalemate, ultimately informing a constitutional referendum.³⁴ France's Citizens' Convention for Climate, comprising 150 randomly selected citizens, developed 149 detailed climate action measures after months of deliberation with experts.³⁵ In the German-speaking Community of Belgium, a permanent citizens' council works alongside the parliament, selecting topics for deliberation by temporary citizens' assemblies whose recommendations receive formal parliamentary response.³⁶ Transnational assemblies on climate were held in 2020 in relation to Conference of Parties (COP) 26 and in 2021 by the Conference on the Future of Europe, showing the feasibility of global assemblies.^{37,38}

The time has come to scale these and other democratic innovations to the global level. A global citizens' assembly,

composed of randomly selected individuals from all regions and backgrounds, could provide legitimate input into post-2030 development frameworks. Such an assembly would complement existing international institutions by introducing a truly global citizens' perspective. Careful independent, multistakeholder, and transparent governance of the processes for selecting participants and experts, rotation of leadership and secretariat roles, prohibition of lobbying, and conflict-of-interest disclosure are among the mechanisms that would be needed to mitigate against undue national interests or corporate influence.³⁹ UN has already recognised the potential, exploring permanent citizens' assembly mechanisms to address global challenges. The Iswe Foundation and the Global Citizens' Assembly Network, backed by the Government of Brazil, are setting up what they hope will be a global and permanent citizens' assembly to "unlock the planet's most valuable asset in tackling the planet's most pressing crises: its billions of citizens, all of whom have knowledge of and care for their local environment and a stake in their collective future".⁴⁰ The same globalisation and technological advances that have accelerated the environmental crisis have also created the capacity to engage millions of people worldwide, enabling citizens to lead the way in a collective platform to shape global negotiations. Digital platforms can facilitate multilingual deliberation across borders, whereas stratified random selection ensures inclusive representation from historically marginalised communities.

Establishing a mixed binding-advocacy system, with an international accountability council to monitor progress on global citizens' assembly targets, backed by legally binding country commitments and voluntary corporate pledges, wherever appropriate, would be crucial. Such a system could standardise indicators, require independent verification, and publish open data dashboards plus regular progress reports. Enforcement would need to combine incentives and sanctions, whereas independent reviews, stakeholder participation, dispute resolution, and corporate due diligence would ensure accountability. Such a framework would allow iterative learning and adaptation, refining targets and methods as the system matures.

Beyond the global level, citizens' assemblies at the regional, national, and local scales could form an interconnected deliberative system for implementing wellbeing-centred development. This approach addresses the fundamental misalignment between our social, cooperative nature and current competitive, interest-driven governance structures. By creating spaces wherein ordinary people can find common ground through informed deliberation, citizens' assemblies tap into the evolved capacity for collective problem solving while reducing the influence of wealth and power over decisions that affect us all. The result is not just more legitimate governance but a potential for much better outcomes, such as policies that reflect genuine public interest rather than narrow economic or political agendas.⁴¹ As we develop a vision for governance beyond 2030, citizens' assemblies represent not merely

procedural reform but transformative democratic renewal aligned with both human nature and planetary needs.

Economic democracy: realigning work with wellbeing

The structure and governance of economic institutions, including businesses, non-governmental, not-for-profit, and public employers, fundamentally shape individual wellbeing, social cohesion, and the environment. Conventional economic arrangements in all of these institutions usually treat work primarily as a means of survival, that is, a wage-based transaction wherein workers exchange their labour for income often disconnected from the purpose and impact of both their efforts and the societal impact of the institution they work for. Such arrangements remove people's agency, in addition to creating a fundamental misalignment between human needs and economic activity, with far-reaching consequences for both people and the planet.

Evidence from psychological research shows that extrinsic rewards often crowd out intrinsic motivation, turning potentially meaningful activities into transactional relationships.⁴² When financial incentives become the primary link between workers and their labour, the social purpose of work, which is meeting others' needs through contribution, becomes obscured. This separation contributes to widespread disengagement; globally, only 21% of workers report feeling engaged at work.⁴³ Furthermore, hierarchical workplace structures and substantial pay disparities create status anxiety, which drives environmentally damaging consumption patterns beyond what enhances actual wellbeing.¹⁴

Both employee-owned and democratically managed enterprises offer a scientifically validated alternative. Meta-analyses across diverse sectors show that such firms tend to outperform conventional businesses on productivity, innovation, and resilience during economic downturns.⁴⁴ Workers in democratically owned and managed workplaces report substantially greater identification with the employer, more participation, and increased productivity; employee-owned enterprises have more equal distribution of wages and more stable employment.⁴⁵ By aligning organisational structure and governance with workers' shared purpose or wider societal purpose rather than external shareholders' or management demands, these enterprises can create flatter hierarchies, meaningful participation in decision making, and reduced internal inequality, all of which are factors strongly associated with improved wellbeing outcomes; this approach applies to not-for-profit and public employers as much as to private businesses.

The environmental benefits are equally substantial.⁴⁶ When economic activity is governed by those with long-term stakes in local communities rather than distant shareholders seeking short-term returns, decisions align more readily with environmental protection. Democratic enterprises typically maintain lower pay ratios between the

highest and lowest earners, reducing the status competition that drives environmentally harmful consumption.¹⁴ Evidence from cooperative movements worldwide shows that democratic ownership structures foster stronger environmental stewardship and more circular resource use than conventional profit-maximising firms.⁴⁷

Transforming economic institutions requires policy frameworks that actively support democratic alternatives. These include legal recognition of, and incentives to support, diverse ownership models, preferential procurement by public bodies from democratic enterprises, dedicated financing mechanisms for employee buyouts, and education systems that develop cooperative skills alongside technical ones. Alongside is a need for kitemarks for ethical and democratic enterprises to allow the public to exercise a preference for economic democracy⁴⁸ (eg, the Good Business Charter accreditation in the UK). Universal basic income represents a complementary approach, reducing wage dependency and giving people greater freedom to choose more fulfilling work or make non-market contributions through care, community service, or creative pursuits.^{49,50}

The path towards economic democracy is exemplified by existing models that are operating successfully across the world. Well known examples include the Mondragon Corporation in Spain (employing more than 80 000 worker-owners), the Emilia-Romagna cooperative network in Italy (generating 30% of the region's GDP), and the emerging platform cooperatives challenging the exploitative gig economy.⁵¹ By democratising economic institutions, work can be transformed from an extractive necessity into a fulfilling contribution, inequality and the environmental harm caused by status competition can be reduced, and economies that genuinely serve human wellbeing within planetary boundaries can be created. This transformation represents not a peripheral reform but a central pillar of development beyond 2030, one that realigns economic activity with evolved social nature and the ecological systems upon which all life depends.

Land justice: reconnecting people and the planet

Land represents a key domain for the consideration of ecological justice, and perhaps the most fundamental interface between human societies and Earth's systems; yet, current approaches to land governance profoundly misvalue this relationship. Dominated by market metrics and formal titling systems, conventional land frameworks fail to capture land's multidimensional importance for wellbeing, culture, and ecological function.⁵² This narrowed perspective drives unsustainable resource extraction, displacement of vulnerable communities, and severed connections between people and the ecosystems that sustain them, undermining both human flourishing and planetary health.

Empirical evidence shows the consequences of this disconnect. Approximately 60% of African land remains

under customary tenure systems unrecognised by statutory frameworks, creating legal uncertainty that facilitates land grabbing and undermines community stewardship.⁵³ In urban contexts, land commodification has created housing crises worldwide, with between 1·6 billion to 3 billion people lacking adequate housing despite sufficient physical space, a distributional failure rather than absolute scarcity.⁵⁴ Land degradation, which affects 3·2 billion people globally, has a disproportionate effect on those whose wellbeing directly depends on healthy ecosystems, particularly Indigenous peoples and rural communities in low-income countries who have contributed least to global environmental changes.⁵⁵

Science increasingly validates what Indigenous and traditional communities have long understood: land's value transcends market metrics. Ecosystem service research quantifies the hidden contributions of land systems to human wellbeing, from water purification and carbon sequestration to flood regulation and pollination services, functions that are typically excluded from commercial valuation.⁵⁶ Anthropological studies document how land-based food systems support human health through biochemical diversity unavailable in industrialised food chains.⁵⁷ Humans possess evolved capacities to detect nutrient-dense foods when connected to diverse landscapes—capacities undermined by disconnection from the ecological systems that co-evolved with the sensory apparatus.⁵⁸

Climate change further heightens the need for transformed land governance. As coastal and arid regions face increasing risks whereas other areas become more habitable or agriculturally productive, climate-responsive land systems need to balance adaptation needs with equitable access. Indigenous knowledge systems, with their sophisticated understanding of ecological dynamics and intergenerational stewardship principles, offer tested frameworks for climate-resilient land management.⁵⁹ Yet, these knowledge systems remain marginalised in dominant policy approaches that prioritise technical solutions over relational understanding of human–land interdependence.

A wellbeing-centred approach to land requires governance systems that recognise plural rights, maintain ecological function, and ensure intergenerational equity. Community-led mapping initiatives have successfully documented customary and Indigenous land claims, creating hybrid systems that bridge formal and traditional tenure.⁶⁰ Deliberative land-use planning processes that meaningfully include all stakeholders have resolved competing claims while maintaining ecosystem integrity.⁶¹ Digital technologies can secure, rather than undermine, customary rights when designed with and for affected communities.⁶²

Beyond specific tools, land justice demands fundamental reconceptualisation of the relationship of humans with land, shifting from ownership and extraction towards stewardship and reciprocity. This shift aligns with both emerging ecological understanding and traditional wisdom

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practices that recognise humans as embedded within, rather than separate from, the living world. By revaluing land as the foundation of both human wellbeing and ecological health, post-2030 development frameworks can address the profound disconnections at the heart of the current sustainability crisis. True land justice would not only create more equitable human societies but also restore relationships with the living systems that make human flourishing possible.

The commons: a concept for a wellbeing-centred future

The concept of the commons has evolved from its historical roots in shared pastures and fisheries to encompass a comprehensive framework for managing essential resources. This concept offers a compelling alternative to traditional private ownership and state control models, emphasising collective stewardship of digital, atmospheric, and ecological systems that transcend conventional boundaries.⁶³ The theoretical foundation of commons governance was fundamentally reshaped by Ostrom's groundbreaking work,⁶⁴ which challenged Hardin's pessimistic tragedy of the commons narrative.⁶⁵ Through extensive empirical studies, Ostrom showed that communities can, under the right conditions, successfully manage shared resources through local governance structures incorporating defined boundaries, collective decision making, monitoring systems, graduated sanctions, and conflict-resolution mechanisms. This evidence-based approach revealed that environmental degradation results from poor governance rather than collective ownership *per se*, highlighting the important distinction between properly managed commons and unregulated open-access regimes.

The framework of the commons has been expanded to address global environmental challenges. Barnes proposed innovative Sky Trust mechanisms,^{66,67} wherein carbon polluters compensate the public through cap-and-dividend systems, whereas Standing has advocated for Commons Funds supporting universal basic income from shared resource revenues.⁶⁸ These proposals align with ecosystem service valuation approaches that quantify natural functions such as carbon sequestration, creating economic incentives for conservation.⁵⁶ Legal innovations have advanced commons protection through rights of nature movements; landmark cases granted legal personhood to the Whanganui River in New Zealand and Colombia's Atrato River, establishing precedents for ecosystem rights.^{69,70} Simultaneously, international efforts to recognise ecocide as a criminal offence aim to prevent severe environmental destruction, creating legal frameworks that prioritise ecological integrity alongside human welfare.⁷¹ The Blue Commons concept addresses marine and polar ecosystem pressures through shared governance models extending beyond exclusive economic zones.^{72,73} Successful institutional examples include the UK's National Trust, which has preserved landscapes through collective ownership since 1895,⁷⁴ and the enduring Indus Waters Treaty,

which exemplifies effective transboundary resource management through equitable sharing principles.⁷⁵

Commons-based governance offers integrated legal, economic, and ethical dimensions essential for collaborative planetary stewardship. This framework provides concrete pathways for valuing everyone on a thriving planet through collective responsibility, democratic participation, and equitable resource sharing that recognises both human dignity and ecological integrity.

Implementation pathways: from vision to reality

Transforming the global development paradigm requires more than compelling vision: it demands practical pathways for implementation across multiple scales and contexts. The transition towards wellbeing-centred development, aligned with both human nature and planetary boundaries, needs to be strategic, evidence-based, and attentive to existing power dynamics. Although comprehensive transformation is necessary, implementation needs to recognise different starting points, capacities, and priorities across communities and nations.

A multiscale approach offers the most promising implementation strategy. At the international level, the post-2030 development agenda provides a pivotal opportunity to formally adopt wellbeing as the central organising principle, with corresponding metrics and accountability mechanisms; this agenda would be a step change in ambition from the SDGs. The UN can establish a global citizens' assembly to inform this process, ensuring broad legitimacy beyond traditional state-centred negotiations. Evidence from climate deliberations suggests that representative citizen bodies tend to prioritise ambitious, equitable action more consistently than government negotiators constrained by short-term political considerations.⁷⁶

At the national and regional levels, institutional innovations could systematically embed wellbeing frameworks within governance structures. Wales's Well-being of Future Generations Act provides a tested model, requiring all public bodies to show how decisions contribute to seven wellbeing goals while creating an independent commissioner to represent the interests of the future generations.⁷⁷ The 2025 report by the Auditor General for Wales describes many positive impacts but also calls for more action to drive the system-wide change that was intended.⁷⁸ Similar legislative frameworks can be adapted across diverse contexts, creating institutional mechanisms to counterbalance short-term economic pressures with longer-term wellbeing considerations. Parallel reforms to reorient economic policies from GDP growth towards wellbeing outcomes, as exemplified by New Zealand's Wellbeing Budget, would redirect public resources towards what genuinely improves lives within planetary boundaries.

Local implementation offers fertile ground for transformative change. Municipal governments and community organisations worldwide have pioneered participatory budgeting, community land trusts, and local democratic

enterprises and platforms that embody wellbeing-centred development principles.⁷⁹ These bottom-up innovations are not only feasible, but also help to build practical experience in democratic economic governance. Strategic support for such initiatives, through policy frameworks, financing mechanisms, and knowledge exchange networks, can accelerate their adoption and adaptation across diverse contexts.

Overcoming implementation barriers requires addressing power dynamics explicitly. Vested interests in current systems will inevitably resist changes that threaten their privileged position.⁸⁰ Evidence from successful transitions suggests that building broad-based coalitions is essential, linking environmental advocates, labour organisations, community groups, faith communities, and progressive businesses around shared wellbeing goals.⁸¹ These coalitions can create political space for policy entrepreneurs within governments to advance more ambitious reforms than would otherwise be possible.

The timeline for transformation should balance urgency with realism. Initial efforts should focus on building the conceptual foundation and case studies of wellbeing-centred approaches. The crucial period of 2026–30 provides the opportunity to evaluate SDG outcomes while developing the post-2030 framework through deliberative processes at multiple scales. Full implementation from 2031 onward, with regular assessment and adaptation based on emerging evidence and changing conditions can mitigate some of the most harmful impacts of climate change and environmental damage.

This transformation represents not a fixed blueprint, but an adaptive process guided by shared wellbeing principles. Experience from past systemic changes shows that successful transitions combine clear directional vision with emergent, context-specific implementation.⁸² By creating multiple entry points for action while maintaining a coherent orientation towards wellbeing for people and the planet, humans can begin to navigate the complex path from current systems to ones that genuinely value everyone and everything on a thriving planet.

Conclusion: cocreating a new global consensus

As 2030 draws closer, humanity faces a defining choice: continue along the current trajectory of ecological degradation, social fragmentation, and democratic erosion, or forge a new development paradigm that aligns human systems with humans' social nature and planetary boundaries. The evidence presented throughout this Personal View shows that the new paradigm is not merely a moral imperative but a practical necessity. Existing systems are based on and entrench a fundamental misunderstanding of what humans need to flourish, what economies are for, how decisions should be made, and how humans relate to the living world. Yet, emerging alternatives across these domains offer credible pathways towards systems that genuinely value everyone on a thriving planet. We are not alone in proposing transformative frameworks for change.

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services Transformative Change Assessment and the Earth System Justice Framework are just two examples of comprehensive and expert frameworks that point towards the need for a shift towards wellbeing; the challenge now is to bring this perspective to the centre stage in policy making.^{83–85}

The wellbeing-centred approach we propose builds on diverse knowledge, from evolutionary biology and neuroscience to ecological economics, epidemiology, and Indigenous wisdom traditions. Although these perspectives emerge from different contexts, disciplines, and methodologies, they converge on a profound insight: humans are deeply social beings embedded in and dependent upon living systems. Development frameworks that honour this reality by fostering connection, participation, meaning, and ecological stewardship create the conditions for genuine flourishing; the frameworks that ignore this reality by privileging competition, extraction, and material accumulation ultimately undermine both human and planetary health.

Transforming global development requires more than technical adjustments or policy tweaks; this transformation demands the fundamental reorientation of the measurement of progress, decision making, organisation of work and the economy, and relationships with land. Citizens' assemblies offer mechanisms for inclusive, deliberative governance independent from capture by special interests. Economic democracy provides pathways to meaningful work and reduced inequality. Land justice creates the foundation for both human wellbeing and ecological regeneration. The development and amplification of the commons gives people shared investment in stewardship of the natural world. Together, these approaches form an integrated vision for post-2030 development aligned with the best scientific understanding of what humans and the planet need to thrive.

The moment for this shift has arrived; as existing systems reveal their limitations, spaces for transformation are opening. The post-2030 development agenda offers a concrete opportunity to institutionalise wellbeing as the global central organising principle. By grounding this work in both rigorous evidence and inclusive deliberation, development frameworks that reflect shared humanity, while respecting the Earth's regenerative capacity, can be created.

Contributors

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Declaration of interests

We declare no competing interests.

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