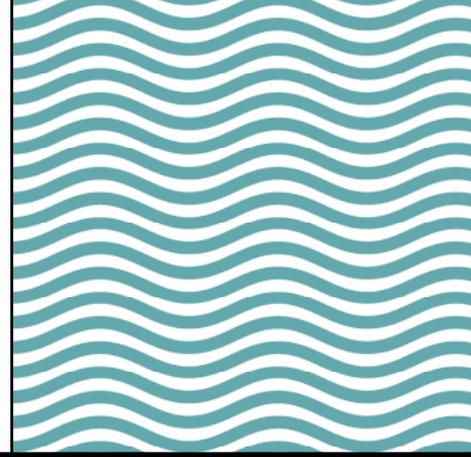




Towards sustainable wellbeing: Integrated policies and transformative indicators.



Deliverable 1.5

*Time ToBe Transformative:  
Strengthening sustainable  
wellbeing and economic  
alternatives*

**WP 1 - THEORIES AND INDICATORS**

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This policy brief gives research-based insights for on-going discussion about how to transform the economy, design desirable policy options and measure development towards sustainability paradigm. European Union, United Nations and other global organisations all work towards common goal of protecting a good life for all within planetary boundaries. At the 2023 World Summit on the Mid-Term Review of the Sustainable Development Goals, the key message was that the SDGs are not on track (United Nations 2023). Instead, the trend is reversing with the intertwining global crises. Our shared planet is not on a sustainable path to the future. At the Summit, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called on governments, businesses, youth, activists and NGOs to put global goals on track. He said it is not a time for small changes but for a societal breakthrough in sustainability transformation.

This call is targeted also to Europe. Even though Green Growth as well as mitigation and adaptation to climate change has been the major policy goal for EU and its member states during the ongoing election period, the implementation of sustainability transformation has proved difficult. The economic mindset prioritising growth is institutionalised in all levels of decision making and societal activities. This makes it difficult to create new imaginaries about economies and especially to put into practice alternative visions, although many agree that multidimensional, sustainable wellbeing must be the basis and goal of the economy.

In ToBe – research project a multidisciplinary group of scholars is addressing this puzzle. With this first policy brief, we present our first results about how to drive sustainability transformation. We provide an understanding of how social thinking can be explored, interpreted, and modernised through innovative and transformative frameworks, objectives and policies for sustainable wellbeing, ranging from green growth to post-development thinking.

## How does sustainability transformation happen?

Sustainability transformation requires a foundational societal change. The necessary scale of change could be compared to the emergence of industrial society and the entailing restructuring of the economy and daily life. This kind of holistic paradigm change involves a thorough alteration of shared interpretative frameworks, normative horizons, and institutionalized mechanisms as established patterns of interpretation, values, and conducts are replaced with novel ones.

The desired sustainability transformation does not proceed straightforwardly. It makes it difficult to pinpoint the one time and place and a set of actors for whom it occurred. No single turning point or crisis necessarily leads to a fundamental change. The totality of transformation is formed by the complex relationships and interconnections between different developments. Therefore, its phases and depth are likely to be understood only in retrospect.

In general, sustainability transformation is often understood as a three-stage process of change: emergence, acceleration, and stabilisation (United Nations 2023). Change starts with ideas, experimentations, and learning. It accelerates as successful ideas and experiments expand and spread. The adoption of new practices or technologies is followed by a period of rapid growth and change. During the consolidation phase of change, new practices and technologies become stabilized into a “new normal” in everyday life. At the same time, established and replaced practices and technologies destabilise, collapse, and gradually demise.

Different societal features are highlighted in the phases of sustainability transformation (United Nations 2023). In the first, transformative phase, shared narratives, visions, and experiments are created. This is the paradigm-definition stage, where new ideas and new understanding of the structure in which they will operate is adopted by the community. In the second, acceleration or collapse phase, society and activities change rapidly. This is the paradigm shift in practice, where a new paradigm is implemented in a multitude of processes that we find ourselves in individually and communally. Change is reinforced by shared objectives and investments, and by regulation to drive change. In the third, the consolidation phase, practices and technologies are anchored in infrastructure, regulations, habits, and standards. To take root, reforms need to be institutionalised.

Systemic change means that individual and collective actors do not have to wait for someone else to act or make decisions but can accelerate change through individual actions and approaches at different levels of activity. Although individual actions may seem disconnected and insignificant, they contribute to the same overall effect: for example, all climate emission reductions mitigate global warming. Resisting change or maintaining the old ways of doing things is counterproductive.

To better understand sustainability transformation, ToBe elaborates a new line of thinking towards, what we call, a naturalist theory of social transformation. The idea is to think how societies change along with biophysical processes. This kind of an approach builds ecological ontological imaginary to view agency beyond human beings and human dependencies in the natural world. It can provide both material and ideational grounds for a sustainable transformation of societies.

## Sustainable wellbeing as a normative vision for sustainability transformation

The transformation should be steered with a robust understanding of sustainable wellbeing. In policymaking, sustainable wellbeing can function as a shared policy goal for transformative policies. It thus sets the vision for public policies and informs what kinds of impacts are valuable. It also informs what to measure and how to select indicators and policies that are best fit with sustainable outcomes.

Sustainable wellbeing can broadly be understood as ensuring a good life for all within planetary boundaries. Yet, what is meant by wellbeing, what we need for a good life, and how to approach

wellbeing within planetary boundaries are open and disputed questions – both in science and policymaking. In ToBe, we aim to contribute to policymaking by providing a holistic and rigorously defined conceptualisation of multidimensional, sustainable wellbeing.

The discussion of sustainable wellbeing in research has intensified in the last decade. Along with the previous research, we draw on needs theories to identify universally shared requirements for wellbeing. Based on the review of different needs theories (Allardt 1993; Deci & Ryan 2000; Doyal & Gough 1991), we suggest that wellbeing-enhancing policies and indicators should measure wellbeing outcomes by focusing on the satisfaction of three universal human needs: *health, relatedness, and autonomy*.

- *Health* is a need and important precondition for physical functioning. As mammals, we need to avoid illnesses and survive with a preferably long life. Health refers both to physical and psychological health.
- *Relatedness* is a necessary part of human nature. For healthy development, individuals need love and relatedness through participation in communities and everyday situations. Interdependence refers not just to other human beings but also to other species. It touches upon our deep need for coexistence with all creatures who share our common biosphere.
- The need for *autonomy* refers to self-endorsement of one's behaviour and experiences of feeling integrated. Autonomy is the ability to integrate values to guide behaviour, make informed choices and ultimately be able to change cultural rules. The opposite of autonomy is the experience of feeling pressured to think, feel, or behave in certain ways.

Together, these three universal needs build the cornerstones for sustainable wellbeing. They show how wellbeing is multidimensional and cannot be measured with one indicator only. Sustainable wellbeing is about meeting both physical and psychological needs.

While these three needs are universally shared and essential elements of wellbeing, it is important to acknowledge that the experiences and conceptualizations of wellbeing are culturally rooted and changing according to moral visions or individuals' judgments about what is a good life. Human wellbeing is contingent on Earth system stability and planetary boundaries that exists beyond social constructs. However, the ways in which human needs and planetary boundaries are met, how different elements are valued, and where the personal and collective limits are set, are socially constructed. This also means that our ways to achieve wellbeing can change and will change when societies change.

Transformation towards the safe and just space for sustainable wellbeing is required in a situation where rich countries have transgressed planetary boundaries and not all countries have reached sufficient level of wellbeing (Fanning et al. 2022). Necessary in this transformation are the changes in provisioning systems that mediate the way biophysical resources are used and transformed into social outcomes. Sustainable wellbeing is based on sufficiency as it requires a balance between poverty and excess (Figure 1).

Sufficiency denotes that there are limits below which people suffer from a lack of need satisfaction and limits beyond which consumption or activities no longer contribute to need satisfaction. Overconsumption is detrimental to multidimensional wellbeing because it leads to situations where

material use transgresses the planetary boundaries and is no longer beneficial to physical or mental health.

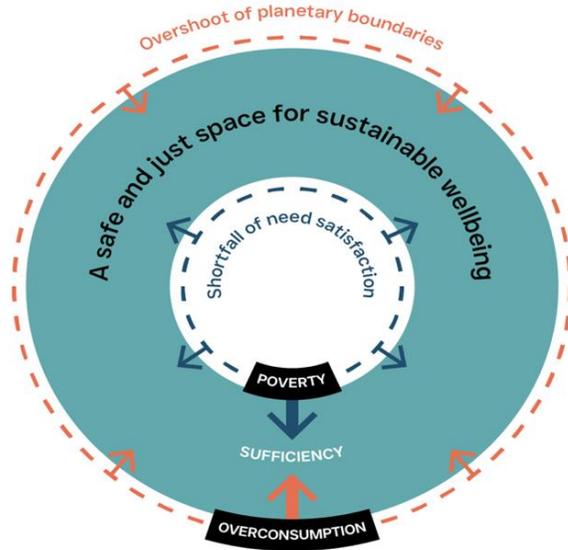


Figure 1. ToBe conceptual frame of sustainable wellbeing

## Post-growth initiatives provide alternative pathways for transformation

Many countries and cities currently witness the change from ‘business as usual’ models to alternative economic systems. As a basis for empirical work, ToBe has synthesized a typology of alternative growth initiatives, often understood in terms of post-growth thinking (Angresius et al. 2023). Post-growth is used as an umbrella term which houses a range of growth-critical or growth-agnostic positions. Our typology consists of green growth, a-growth, de-growth and post-development initiatives (Table 1).

<i>Position regarding:</i>	<b>Green growth</b>	<b>A-growth</b>	<b>De-growth</b>	<b>Post- development</b>
<b>GDP as indicator</b>	GDP as welfare indicator	GDP is not suitable measure of welfare. Indifference to GDP	GDP is poor indicator for societal progress	Decentering the focus on GDP to construct other indicators
<b>Relationship between growth and environmental outcomes</b>	Decoupling is absolute and comprehensive	Agnostic to decoupling	Absolute decoupling is not working	Decoupling is infeasible
<b>Relationship between growth and social outcomes</b>	Social conflicts can be alleviated with economic growth	No clear relationship between economic growth and social outcomes but economic growth alone does not enhance social outcomes	Not possible to achieve economic growth and social outcomes	Transformation of society rather than development
<b>Role and type of innovations and technologies</b>	Technologies and innovation have dual role. Green technologies and innovations; service innovations	Positive to environmental innovation and socially beneficial technologies	Technological development seen possible via convivial (social and frugal) innovations	Pluriversal technologies and grassroots innovation
<b>Recommended measures of social performance</b>	Indirect wellbeing measures in the form of environmental risks and amenities	No established alternative indicator framework	Dashboards of social and ecological indicators	Environmental and climate justice, food and energy sovereignty

**Table 1.** Typology of alternative growth initiatives.

Of these, green growth thinking follows the idea that economic growth can be pursued while fostering environmental outcomes. These initiatives use GDP as the main welfare indicator, put emphasis on technology and innovations as solutions for sustainability and understand nature as an asset. Furthermore, green growth initiatives do not aim to restructure the existing economic system, social and power relations.

Post-growth initiatives move away from this GDP-centric thinking in criticising the current economic system and potentially aiming to restructure it. These alternatives include a range of growth-critical or growth-agnostic positions. The growth-agnostic approach argues for GDP to be disregarded from policymaking, while growth-critical approaches understand the reduction of material and energy use as a central policy goal. For a-growth thinking, including Doughnut economy and the Wellbeing Economy approaches, economic growth is not equivalent to societal progress. De-growth thinking, in turn, explicitly understands economic growth in contradiction to achieving human wellbeing and positive environmental outcomes as well as advocate a decline in consumption and resource use. What all post-growth initiatives have in common is that they advocate the use of alternative welfare indicators, do not see nature as an asset, and follow a participatory approach to design sustainable economies.

Post-development initiatives emerge in the context of the Global South. They are critical of global development policy and the authorised role of development thinking in the current system. These

initiatives strive for a post-capitalist society which allows for a pluriverse of ways of being and overcoming of a nature-human dualism. They use decolonial measurement frameworks for wellbeing as well as foster pluriversal technologies and grassroots innovations that aim for locally defined need satisfaction rather than economic growth (profit) and marketable commodities.

The typology summarized in Table 1 can be used when exploring different types of initiatives and alternative growth settings in the Global North and Global South. The typology is useful to develop a context-sensitive understanding of local change processes and their role in wider transformation towards alternative growth models and sustainability. Suggested examples (Cuestas-Caza et al. 2024) include such as:

- EU policies striving for green growth as one of the main targets at European level and national implementation plans of EU Green deal.
- National or regional implementation of wellbeing, living standard frameworks and ecological sustainability goals that complement GDP, including initiatives by “Wellbeing Economy Governments” and “Doughnut Economy Cities”.
- Buen Vivir initiative institutionalized by the Constitution of Ecuador with alternative perspectives on wellbeing through principles of sustainability, identity and equity.

## Transformative indicators and models give direction for systemic change

Policy and decision makers use a broad set of indicators to assess and estimate the on-going and future development in society. The most powerful indicator at the national level is GDP. Usually, policy decisions are made and argued to serve GDP growth. Sustainable development indicators have been developed to provide more detailed information on the direction of development and on whether societies are on track to meet the SDGs in 2030. These indicators are institutionalized in global governance and national statistical reporting just like calculations on climate emissions. However, they have not replaced or balanced GDP-based decision-making.

One response to this problem is the use of systemic macro-economic models. The first findings in ToBe show that existing models have too narrow focus on climate change, the green transition, and economic indicators wellbeing (such as employment and income) (Van Eynde et al., forthcoming). Inclusion of environmental and social indicators does not mean that models include biophysical limits or basic needs. Within existing models, environmental impacts are largely driven by GDP and agriculture, and social outcomes largely by income per capita, government spending, and governance. Some fundamental ecological systems of our planet are underrepresented in models (for instance

biodiversity, soil quality). Existing models also lack insight into how wellbeing can be achieved sustainably. They don't include feedback loops integrating environmental and societal impacts back to the economy. Therefore, there is a risk that fundamental ecological systems and social aspects are ignored in policy and decision making on how to achieve a good life for all within planetary boundaries.

The lack of comprehensive models and weak understanding of transformative indicators undermines the ability to develop effective scenarios to support sustainability transformation. First results from ToBe define characteristics of transformative indicators through three criteria: theory, statistical quality and impact (Figure 2). Theory refers to our sustainable wellbeing framework and the emphasis on the three interconnected needs. Indicators should be adaptable. They should integrate data and insights from multiple sources and disciplines for a comprehensive understanding of sustainable wellbeing as well as trajectories leading to wellbeing within planetary boundaries. For statistical quality, it is vital to achieve the same levels of quality and standardization as the traditional indicators including accuracy, robustness, timeliness, coherence and comparability, accessibility, and clarity. Impact criteria are significant for understanding the potential of an indicator to drive sustainability transformation forward. The influential capacity of indicators relies on inherent variability and nuances of policymaking processes and societal change. The indicators are context-sensitive, which means that their impact is linked to established policies, culture, institutions, and societal values, as well as to processes of social change including transformational phases of the sustainability transformation.

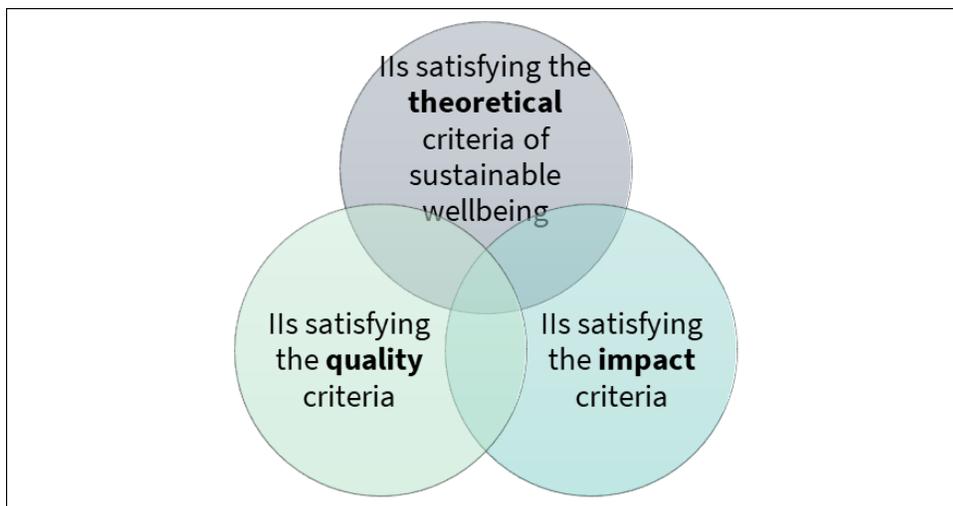


Figure 2. ToBe criteria for transformative indicators.

This implies that indicators leading towards sustainable wellbeing are not uniform. Their evaluation can be based on specific criteria, giving a nuanced understanding of their effectiveness in the sustainability transformation supporting the objective of sustainable wellbeing. Besides, the initiatives underlying specific indicators have importance. The impact and relevance of an indicator are closely tied to the

nature, objectives and context of the initiative it represents. Therefore, the process of selecting and developing indicators is a crucial moment of developing transformative indicators. For example, involving a diverse set of stakeholders from various sectors and communities in indicator selection ensures that indicators represent people's values and priorities like suggested in post-growth approaches.

Criteria for transformative indicators help assess the effectiveness of indicators in terms of designing policies that address not only economic growth but also broader aspects of sustainable wellbeing. With a nuanced understanding of indicators and their underlying initiatives, policy makers can select indicators driving broader sustainability goals addressing multidimensional wellbeing and biophysical limits. The criteria for transformative indicators shift towards more holistic decision-making, leading to policies that promote a more balanced and sustainable development path.

## Transformative policy options consider different policies together

Sustainable transformation requires understanding how different policies converge in people's lives and in society. Because different policies can work together either towards the same or opposite direction, it is crucial to understand the interplay between policies at different levels. For example, fiscal rules such as an EU stability and growth pact are less relevant if they prevent the necessary welfare provisioning and do not foster social and environmental convergence. To overcome growth dependencies by reforming macroeconomics and public finances so that states and local governments can afford to provide wellbeing across Europe is a necessary step. Transformative indicators and models will provide tools for designing desirable policy options to respond to these challenges.

In ToBe, we are not yet close to our final conclusion, but we have already developed ideas in this direction. Our first recommendations for desirable policy options supporting sustainable wellbeing and economic alternatives are the following:

**Environmental policies need social policies:** When looking at the relationship between environmental policies and social policies, traditional forms of social protection (such as contributory social insurance and means-tested social assistance) reduce poverty impacts of environmental taxation (Nelson et al. 2023). Social insurance reduces poverty risks related to environmental taxes among those with higher education, whereas social assistance does the same among those with lower education. The welfare state may, thus, act as an income buffer against poverty and increase societal resilience when climate change mitigation and environmental protection measures have to be implemented and scaled up.

**Universal basic services support societal change:** Universal basic services seek to ensure that everyone has access to essentials such as health care, education, housing, public transport, and

childcare. Water, electricity, and telecommunications can also be considered as publicly provided basic services. Protecting the existing universal basic services in current welfare states and expanding the provisioning of services to poorer countries is important for sustainable wellbeing. Universal basic services are envisioned to stabilise society by reducing vulnerabilities and increasing resilience. At their best, universal services can strengthen communities, reduce dependence on the labour market and increase stability in everyday life. Basic services also play a key role in crises. When people can rely on access to essential services, they can overcome crises more quickly and adapt to new circumstances.

**Sufficiency contributes to the development of fair policy solutions:** Sufficiency policies can be implemented in many ways. Sufficiency policies aim to decrease the demand or use of those goods and services that have high environmental impacts. They also seek to lead to actual savings in resources rather than just improving efficiency. The demand is avoided to an extent where it is possible to deliver human wellbeing within planetary boundaries in a socially just way. Sufficiency policies can have different targets. For example, they can be structural (e.g. bringing places of work and residence closer together), dimensional (e.g. reducing the size of cars), related to usage (e.g. taking public transport) and collaborative policies (e.g. promoting car sharing). Local policies can support innovative solutions based on co-operatives, commons and not-for-profit businesses (e.g. reparation cafés, DIY workshops and makerspaces) that help address locally defined needs in a socially just and ecologically sustainable manner.

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## About ToBe

ToBe is a 3-year project funded by the European Union through the Horizon Europe framework programme. Tampere University (Finland) acts as a coordinator for the project.

The ToBe project aims at studying the way in which mindsets, indicators, innovations, and policies could better work together towards a sustainability paradigm. The need for moving toward a sustainability paradigm has been widely called for, yet the path to achieving that is not clear. ToBe aims to contribute to filling this gap and create an understanding of a sustainable wellbeing economy through integrated policies and transformative indicators.

The ToBe consortium brings together acknowledged scholars with previous high-quality research on the topic and with diverse backgrounds from social sciences, ecological and political economy, environmental and innovation studies, science and technology, data science, AI and machine learning. All partners represent well-known and established universities, other research institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Table 1 lists the members of the consortium, which consists of 13 beneficiaries and one associated partner.

Table 1. ToBe Consortium Members

No	Role	Short Name	Legal Name	Country
1	COO	TAU	TAMPEREEN KORKEAKOULUSAATIO SR	FI
2	BEN	SU	STOCKHOLMS UNIVERSITET	SE
3	BEN	VTT	TEKNOLOGIAN TUTKIMUSKESKUS VTT OY	FI
4	BEN	EURADA	ASSOCIATION EUROPEENNE DES AGENCESDE DEVELOPPEMENT	BE
5	BEN	Sciences Po	FONDATION NATIONALE DES SCIENCES POLITIQUES	FR
6	BEN	ICHEC	HAUTE ECOLE ICHEC - ECAM - ISFSC	BE
7	BEN	IPE	INSTITUT ZA POLITICKU EKOLOGIJU	HR
8	BEN	UB	UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA	ES
9	BEN	Ugent	UNIVERSITEIT GENT	BE
10	BEN	EPC	EUROPEAN POLICY CENTRE	BE
11	BEN	UAB	UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA DE BARCELONA	ES
12	BEN	EPN Ecuador	ESCUELA POLITECNICA NACIONAL	EC
13	BEN	CHAL	CHALMERS TEKNISKA HOGSKOLA AB	SE
14	Associated partner	UnivLeeds	UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS	UK

The main objective of ToBe is to contribute to a clearer understanding of how to move to a sustainability paradigm. More specifically, ToBe aims at achieving the following objectives:

- Construct a theoretical framework for a sustainable wellbeing economy by providing a systemic and dynamic understanding of how changing policy goals, mindsets, indicators, innovations and policies work together towards a sustainability paradigm.
- Identify different processes of economic growth by analysing their social and environmental implications.
- Evaluate and compare alternative growth initiatives as systemic innovations with a focus on drivers and barriers to implementation and impacts.
- Develop an ecological macroeconomic model combining conventional macroeconomic variables with indicators of wellbeing and sustainability to assess policies from a multidimensional perspective, and to reveal the synergies and trade-offs inherent in the transition to sustainability.
- Co-create policy solutions together with stakeholders to help institutionalise the new policies and indicators in Europe and beyond (potentially including South American and African countries).