

RSE Workshop: *Looking beyond growth: exploring the transformative potential of alternative economic development approaches*

Cardiff, 15 November 2023

This briefing summarises the workshop held in Cardiff on 15 November 2023 to explore how ‘alternative’ economic development approaches are being put into practice. Other workshops are being held in Birmingham, Sheffield and Glasgow.

Our aim from these workshops is twofold:

- Develop a policy-research learning network on alternative approaches (online and through further events).
- Prepare for a larger research funding bid that would enable a more detailed exploration of the alternative approaches and how they are being put into practice.

The research team – which includes academics at Birmingham, Glasgow, Sheffield Hallam, Manchester, Newcastle and Cardiff universities – has been working together since 2019. We have developed an initial paper (<https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980231187884>) that contrasted five prominent alternative approaches: **Wellbeing Economy; Doughnut Economics; Community Wealth Building; Foundational Economy; and Inclusive Growth**. The workshops in this series enable us to build on this initial work by incorporating practitioner experiences.

The workshop in Cardiff was attended by 23 representatives from the public, higher education and third sectors. The discussion was organised around the following objectives:

- Examine how alternative approaches are being understood, adopted and implemented in different cities.
- Explore the factors that enable or constrain the operationalisation of alternative approaches.
- Identify what success looks like and how this can be measured.

Key feedback is outlined on the page which follows (please note that discussion points noted do not necessarily equate to agreement across all attendees).

Objective 1 – Understanding, adopting and implementing alternative approaches

- The foundational economy (FE) has some traction as both an ‘approach’ and a ‘programme’, as there is buy-in at the Welsh Government level.
- The Well-being of Future Generations Act (WFGA) has won national and international recognition but has not necessarily cut through beyond the political sphere: “How many people in Wales have heard of it? Hardly anyone outside of the bubble. Indeed, approaches are not yet in the public consciousness.”
- Doughnut Economics was described as the “North Star” for one third sector organisation.
- There is a general “absence of an overarching framework”.
- Due to political short-termism (especially relative to European counterparts) it was considered “challenging to stay on a core path for a long time”.
- The implementation of the FE in Wales lacks fidelity to the model developed by the FE Collective although it was recognised that it still helped to stimulate discussion.
- Approaches may get “watered down” but there was a view that there is still more happening in Wales than England.
- There is not a single approach – and this makes sense because not all local areas have the same concerns or face the same issues.
- Motives to adopt a particular element of an approach are likely to depend on what leaders wish to do.
- Sometimes actions are ‘ticked off’ post hoc as fitting with foundational economy aims even when they were not informed initially by that approach.

Objective 2 - Exploring the factors that enable or constrain the operationalisation of alternative approaches

Enablers

- Local funding (where available) especially when budgets are/can be pooled.
- Closeness to the Welsh Government means it is possible for local actors to “have a discussion”; this is less feasible in England due to distance from the UK government.
- An emphasis on wellbeing and on ‘future generations’ helps in thinking longer-term. This is especially important for infrastructure development.
- Innovative wellbeing legislation has won recognition and stimulated discussion although some organisations sometimes lack capacity to implement it.
- FE has more traction for Wales as a smaller nation with a strong community focus.
- FE is something local authorities have more control over (e.g. through grants, business support, regeneration) compared with knowledge intensive business/tradeable sectors.

Constraints

- A lack of data to inform policy – this was particularly evident during Covid-19.
- Lack of capacity at local levels.
- Activity focuses on “putting fires out” ‘rather than deliberative planning.
- Shortfall in funding after withdrawal from EU.
- Emaciated third sector (given funding shortfalls).
- Competitive rather than needs-based funding.
- The scope to implement progressive procurement is limited given the lack of an appropriate skillset in procurement teams that are still very much focussed on value for money rather than sustainability.
- A lack of a clear vision, capability and sense of shared endeavour to bring people together around shared agendas.
- Scale of funding and short timelines are issues.
- FE does not address the “elephant in the room” of the Treasury failing to prioritise objectives that can’t be easily valued financially.

Objective 3 - Identifying what success looks like and how this can be measured

- There are issues around the geographical scale of measurement – the appropriate geographical scale is not necessarily the same for all indicators.
- There is a lack of data for benchmarking and monitoring.
- For wellbeing we need to measure, ideally, factors such as co-operation and unpaid care.
- Overload of indicators attached to the WFGA makes data collection difficult.
- UK government incentives tend to measure performance against traditional growth indicators.
- Money is being pumped into alternative approaches but there is no data to show impact.
- Wales is prone to ‘pilot-itis’- supporting pilots but with limited evaluation or strategic plans for future roll-out.
- Monitoring is often a rushed afterthought when applying for funding.
- It is difficult to measure factors such as community strengths in the wellbeing agenda.
- There is scope for greater use of qualitative data to add layers of understanding that cannot be provided by quantitative data.