

BRAINPOoL: Lessons from the Beyond GDP world for degrowth

Long abstract

BRAINPOoL was a 2.5 year project funded by the EU FP7 funding stream to understand and explore the barriers to the use of Beyond GDP indicators in policy-making, and to identify opportunities to accelerate that use. The project involved a broad range of activities including a review of Beyond GDP initiatives, interviews with Beyond GDP indicator developers and the policy-makers and politicians who the indicators are intended to be used by, seven case studies looking at different institutional settings and how Beyond GDP indicators could be advanced, and various workshops and seminars.

This presentation will present the key lessons from this research for the degrowth community, and explore the synergies and tensions between the degrowth and Beyond GDP communities as they currently stand. It will consist of four sections.

In section 1, we will present theory on how indicators can be used to achieve outcomes. This will highlight that the main use of indicators is not 'instrumental' – i.e. not based on a rational analysis of numbers to choose policy outcomes. Instead, 'conceptual' use – i.e. using indicators to reinforce a particular context – and 'political' use – for example using data to back up a pre-existing opinion may be more relevant.

In section 2, we will present our findings on what has some indicator initiatives more successful than others. Mutability, ease of understanding, and apparent neutrality were all found to be important, whilst our research stressed the importance of partnership working and a strong link between the indicator producer and the intended user.

In section 3 we will stress that despite Beyond GDP actors frequently coming together at conferences, etc. the community is multi-vision. On the one hand there are those that believe that Beyond GDP indicators are part of the process of transforming our vision of society and radically altering how the economy runs. On the other hand, there are those who simply feel that the new data might help us tweak policy, or provide further useful information. In BRAINPOoL we argue that the latter is not truly 'Beyond GDP', as it is often simply about developing indicators to use alongside GDP for assessing specific policy areas (e.g. health care or social policy). We argue that indicators are only Beyond GDP when they are used in the way that GDP and other high-level economic indicators are used – i.e. to assess policy overall, including economic policy. We consider the implications for the degrowth community in terms of identifying partners and synergies within the Beyond GDP community.

In section 4, we explore some of the barriers to Beyond GDP indicators being used, and note that many of them are relevant to degrowth as well. For example:

- **Holism.** Beyond GDP is multi-dimensional, which raises challenges for decision-making; multi-disciplinary, which raises challenges for understanding; and its policy-implications are multi-departmental, raising challenges for implementation. We have explored to this problem which we believe might have relevance for degrowth as well.
- **Public demand.** Whilst both Beyond GDP and degrowth are attempts to deal with a problem which is perceived to be relevant for the public at large, and whilst both concepts take as a starting point widespread public concerns about the current economic and political situation in many countries, neither community has fully tapped into these concerns and made known the link between their world visions and the problems the public talks about.

- An economic model and narrative. GDP growth has been such a prize because it is perceived by most to be the answer to so many public woes. Unemployment high? Need growth. Public debt high? Need growth. Inequality rising? Need growth – a rising tide lifts all boats. Furthermore it fits into a very simple economic narrative: unregulated markets maximise productivity and therefore GDP growth which maximises welfare. Beyond GDP advocates have struggled to communicate a clear model of how the economy can be successful without growth, and a simple narrative of how such an economy would work. We believe that Beyond GDP and degrowth advocates need to work together to develop this narrative.