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Societal Wellbeing: Catalyst for Systems and Social Change in Northern Ireland?

Peter Doran and Susan Hodgett

Improving wellbeing for all ...

(Draft Northern Ireland Programme for Government, 2016).

INTRODUCTION

After more than 40 years of low-intensity conflict over the constitutional future of Northern Ireland (NI), a complex legacy of suffering has impacted on individual and collective wellbeing. Even after the establishment of new democratic institutions in 1998¹ a series of recurring political crises has regularly destabilised the region and threatened political settlement. This instability culminated in a collapse of the NI Assembly² in January 2017 (Hughes 2017).

As part of its response to recurring crises in governance and overdue public sector reform, the Executive arm of government, along with the senior civil service, looked to the global policy conversation on wellbeing

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(Diener 2009; Deneulin and McGregor 2010) to inform a series of discussions across government, the public sector and civil society. These conversations contributed to the adoption of Northern Ireland's *Draft Programme for Government (PfG) 2016–2021* and an outcomes-based framework based on the delivery of 'wellbeing for all' with the promise of a systems change in pursuit of 'whole-of-government' delivery. The achievement of a wellbeing focus was notable in a situation of increasing political instability and suspicion. However, critiques emerged that were centred on a decision by the NI Executive³ to adopt an 'off the shelf' approach to outcomes-based accountability, as a substantive response to the wellbeing policy conversation in the region.

With the collapse of the Assembly and its Executive⁴ and the calling of a new election on 2 March 2017, the development of a fresh programme for government was expected to follow intense negotiations on a wider political agreement between the Assembly parties and the Governments in London and Dublin. This might afford an opportunity to revisit some of the complicated methodological issues identified below. During the Executive's interregnum the civil service proceeded apace, in collaboration with Northern Ireland's powerful third sector, to embed the Outcomes-Based Accountability methodology with a series of trainings and briefings even as a questions about the utility of the approach began to take hold.

This chapter outlines the development of the process leading up to the stalled *Programme for Government (2016–2021)* including an innovative *Roundtable on Measuring Wellbeing in Northern Ireland* (2014) inspired by the Report of the Commission on Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (CMEPSP 2009). It describes the emergence, and critique, of a unique public policy experiment that supported the adoption of the outcomes-based performance framework in the *PfG for Northern Ireland (2016–2021)*⁵ together with the incorporation of wellbeing as a core organising principle across the public sector. In the context of the collapse of the political institutions and of deteriorating relations between the two main governing parties, the policy conversation about wellbeing and governance comes at a critical time, with increasing public anxiety about the fate of the devolution experiment and effective policy delivery. The UK's decision to leave the European Union, following the 2016 referendum, with far-reaching implications for the border on the island of Ireland, has added a new layer of complexity and has come to dominate political discourse in the region. In a significant development in June 2017, the Conservative and Unionist Party

of United Kingdom (UK) Prime Minister Theresa May called on the NI Democratic Unionist Party to support her new minority administration after a calamitous decision to call an early General Election that saw her party lose its majority in Parliament.

THE ORIGIN AND ROLE OF INVESTIGATING WELLBEING IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Dimensions of trauma in NI are inter-generational. Interest in wellbeing grew out of the suffering, both visible and hidden, endured during the 30 years of ‘the troubles’ and since. ‘The troubles’ is a euphemistic phrase used by the NI and UK media to refer to the low-level conflict that consumed the region, and impacted both the Republic of Ireland and England, between the late 1960s to the 1990s when a ‘peace process’ was initiated following a ceasefire by the Provisional Irish Republican Army in 1994 and renewed soon afterwards following a short breach. Throughout the emergent policy debate on wellbeing there has been a focus on the specifics of Northern Ireland’s status as a society emerging from conflict, and on the implications of a legacy of conflict impacting people, directly or indirectly, physically and mentally.

The damage to people and place is evident in more than 3500 deaths during this time (Rogers 2010) and the impact continues today, as numbers of the population suffering from post-traumatic illnesses rise across generations. According to a major study undertaken at Ulster University (2011), Northern Ireland has the world’s highest recorded rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), at a yearly cost to the public purse of around £175 million. It cites a World Health Organisation report stating that NI ‘has the highest level of 12-month and lifetime PTSD among all comparable studies undertaken across the world including other areas of conflict’. It estimated too that nearly 40 per cent of the population had experienced a conflict-related traumatic experience. Worryingly, the report noted that those suffering these conditions would worsen without treatment as they aged. In addition to, and exceeding, the number of deaths from violence during the troubles, 3600 people died by suicide between 1999–2016, with 318 deaths so attributed in 2015 (Hughes 2016). Statistics demonstrate NI’s much higher suicide rates compared to England with figures of 16.5 versus 10.3 (per 100,000) in 2014 (ONS 2013).

As government has struggled to deal with the immediate imperative of keeping the political show on the road, there has been insufficient recognition and planning to address these complex and costly social problems, despite the growing unease amongst academics and the medical profession.⁶ In grappling to understand the experience of the troubles and the later difficult transitional path towards post-conflict, researchers have sought ways to reconceptualise these chronic political and social problems. Hodgett (2008 p. 165) in reviewing the quality of life in NI commented on the importance of considering alternatives because ‘it is a person’s *overall freedom* that influences their opportunity to have *valuable outcomes to their lives*, prov[ing] important to the whole society’s development’.

In considering what happens to the whole society, we need to begin by contemplating the individual’s experience of their personal wellbeing and the quality of everyday lives in that place. Such is the foundation of the interest in wellbeing as a contribution to transition. Wellbeing has been viewed as a generative theme (Galtung 1967) because part of the legacy of the NI conflict that has not yet been addressed by institutions is the direct and indirect suffering experienced by communities. Legacy issues range from agreement on the definition and treatment of ‘victims’, approaches to the prosecution of historic cases, including murder, and truth recovery. Concerns about an apparent paucity of respect and equality feature at the core of current societal and political distrust, notably between the two largest parties, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin (SF). This less tangible dimension is driven, in part, by the continuing politicisation of the legacy agenda at the centre of the constitutional conflict wherein the parties continue to mobilize around deeply disputed versions or narratives of the past, including the circumstances that sewed the seeds of the most recent protracted period of political violence involving unionists, republicans and the British State. In many ways – in the absence of felt reconciliation – the wider geopolitical dispute addressed by the Belfast Agreement is being repatriated to the territory of Northern Ireland and played out again within the domestic politics of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly, due in part to the incentives and rewards built into the consociational arrangements that lie at the core of Strand One of that Agreement.

The wellbeing policy conversation in NI takes place in particularly complex conditions due to the transitional nature of post-conflict governance institutions, wherein the over-arching objective is to secure

continuing accommodation and the conditions necessary for parties to the conflict to adapt to democratic norms. Devolution in Northern Ireland, with its Assembly and Executive institutions, is part of a complex inter-governmental arrangement designed, in part, to transcend residual constitutional contestation over the future of its people and their divided loyalties to London and Dublin. There is a radical uncertainty or contingency at the heart of the institutions that feed a recursive process of politicising the legacy agenda.

While the tipping point that led to the collapse of the Assembly was a financial scandal over a renewable heat incentive scheme, the underlying problem had been the diminishing trust between the two main parties making up the Executive and a growing concern about the impact on effective delivery.⁷ All of this was compounded by the nature of consociational arrangements with the two main Executive parties, resulting in an incentivisation of negative behaviours ranging from wholesale clientelism to allegations of corruption.^{8,9} Wellbeing and common purpose are increasingly viewed as potential keys to achieve a new and urgent shift in the political conversation or narrative(s) about the role of civil society in addressing legacy issues and identifying pathways to ‘living well together’.¹⁰ Public sector reform and the role of the political institutions are regarded as a necessary enabler of that aspiration.

THE WELLBEING POLICY CONVERSATION

Scholars have referred to at least two waves of activity that have carried forward the political interest in the wellbeing debate into politics and policy (see Bache and Scott, this volume, Chap. 1), while noting that conversations about the ‘good life’ have been a tacit dimension of political and philosophical discourse going back to the time of ancient Greeks. Hodgett (2008) reflected concerns about the good life in her earlier work on Northern Ireland over the period 1999–2004 when seeking to understand how progress towards peace might be theorised pursuant to apply ideas of human flourishing or eudaimonia to the region’s public policy. This research supported the development of the *Integrated Capabilities Framework* (ICF) for investigating human wellbeing (Hodgett and Clark 2011), piloted in Canada and made operational through fieldwork with practical policy relevance. Based on the work of Amartya Sen (1999), the ICF brought together emphases on wellbeing, resources, quality of life and considered how people moved in and out of

poverty over time.¹¹ This work was presented to the NI Roundtable on Measuring wellbeing in 2014. The interest internationally in frameworks based on Wellbeing was used to support the developing argument for policy in this field with government in Northern Ireland.

The Roundtable was initiated and supported by the School of Law¹² at Queen's University in partnership with the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust (CUKT). In an unusual expression of cross-community and cross-party consensus, a Minister and Assembly Committee Chair representing the two main parties in NI, the DUP and Sinn Féin, supported the initiative. In addition, Roundtable members were drawn from the highest ranks of the civil service and civil society, local government, academia and the private sector. The Roundtable's recommendations were expected to inform the design of outcomes drawn up for the 2016 *PfG* in Northern Ireland.

The recommendations made by the Roundtable encouraged the inclusion of a framework that placed wellbeing at the heart of governance. One of the key learning points was the observation¹³ that shared aspirations exist across Northern Irish society for transformation in governance and citizen engagement. Co-production, and meaningful engagement of all sectors of society, at all stages in the policy cycle was identified as an essential approach (see *Appendix* for a brief chronology of the wellbeing conversation in Northern Ireland).

The Roundtable itself acted as a catalyst for a high-level conversation about the NI system of governance to 'speak to itself' at a moment characterised by desire for change across the public sector and of palpable loss of public confidence during an earlier period of political instability. It further developed a global policy debate on wellbeing as a departure point for far-reaching local systems change and provided a lynchpin for the integration of a number of other initiatives. These included an Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development Public Governance Review of the public sector in Northern Ireland (the first to be carried out at the sub-state level on local government reform: OECD 2016); a rationalisation of departments from twelve to nine; and reforms in the *Fresh Start* agreement of 2015 including political accommodations intended to bring the instability in inter-party relationships to a conclusion. The *Fresh Start* agreement encompassed plans for private high-level ministerial workshops on the proposed wellbeing framework.

Before the collapse of institutions in early 2017, the NI *Programme for Government 2016–2021* was launched as part of an innovative

consultation process, inviting citizens and organisations to respond to a series of draft outcomes, indicators and key measures, and to take on a new role in co-delivering the agreed outcomes. Meanwhile, Hodgett and Clark's (2011) *Integrated Capabilities Framework* formed the basis of investigations in a successful national public dialogue on wellbeing carried out in Northern Ireland over a number of meetings in 2015 (*What Works for Wellbeing* 2006) and later doctoral research amongst communities in NI. After a period of prolonged instability in the Northern Ireland Government, the growing wellbeing initiative was welcomed by senior politicians, including the then First and Deputy First Ministers, Arlene Foster (DUP) and Martin McGuinness (SF), as an opportunity to put government on a footing focused on the quality of its policy delivery.¹⁴

WELLBEING, GOVERNANCE AND AN OUTCOMES-BASED APPROACH: A GLOBAL AND LOCAL CONVERSATION

While the movement calling for a move beyond an exclusive focus on GDP as a society's key measure of economic progress¹⁵ was beginning to incorporate the holistic concept of wellbeing, a parallel development in social policy had also been nudging governments. By the mid-2000s, the literature was shifting from support for new public management (with its focus on targets) towards increased public value. Public Value consists of three distinct, interrelated processes (Benington and Moore 2011) clarifying and specifying strategic goals and public value outcomes; creating the environment necessary to achieve these outcomes; and utilising the required operational resources, staff, skills and technology. This trend received a boost from the review of public governance by the OECD carried out in NI 2014–2015 building on earlier recommendations on measuring outcomes in public services (OECD 2005).

As outcomes-based performance management has developed, a plethora of guides has been published to help service providers understand and measure outcomes (Friedman 2015). Belfast City Council has been working to apply results-based accountability to their work while signature projects were sponsored by the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister (OFMdFM) (Friedman 2015).^{16,17} These projects aimed to develop whole-systems approaches to public service interventions and outcomes. Moreover, their inclusion of a dashboard of wellbeing indicators met some of the recommendations set out by the Sarkozy

Commission on measuring economic progress (CMEPSP 2009). This pattern of bringing together outcomes-led public sector reforms and a wellbeing policy narrative was influential in NI. The Roundtable was also informed by Scotland's National Performance Framework and its collaborative policy design and delivery with local government and the third sector. It also noted international research by the CUKT that wellbeing frameworks can inform policy in five key ways: creating a vision for society; building support and community buy-in; developing new policies; evaluation; and communication.

All of this indicated that wellbeing is about the experiences of citizens and communities and the outcomes that matter to people's quality of life and the distribution of this across society. Therefore, it can provide a useful complement to system-level measures of performance. Wellbeing also highlights *gaps and omissions* exposing outcomes that have not been systematically included. Outcomes such as social connections, quality of place, civic engagement and work-life balance raise issues about groups that are disadvantaged across the range. Third, concentrating on wellbeing helps *improve scrutiny* by requiring policymakers to state clearly what they understand wellbeing to be and how they intend to monitor improvements or declines over time. Finally, such approaches support *joined-up policy working* bringing trade-offs between different outcomes into sharper focus. A clear range of outcomes needs to be considered when designing the likely impact of policy and evaluating results.

Still, some caution is merited. In their submission to the Roundtable, the OECD remarked that '[wellbeing] should not be understood as providing a technocratic solution to solve the prioritisation dilemmas that are at the heart of government—which concern values as much as numbers' (see Doran et al. 2015). This OECD observation signals a potential source of tension in the conflation of public value agendas and wellbeing agendas: a concern running through all the wellbeing work in NI has been the risk of appearing to short-circuit the legitimate role of political parties in setting out their mandated priorities. For this reason, the final report of the Roundtable underlined that 'The determination of high-level government commitments are, most fundamentally, the responsibility of the Executive parties' (Doran et al. 2015, p. 8). The publication of the draft *PfG (2016–2021)* triggered some scepticism from opposition parties who criticised the lack of detailed policy commitments, ignoring plans by the Executive to publish parallel high-level strategic economic and social policy papers aligned to the outcomes-based methodology.

In 2014, the Northern Ireland Executive's Department of Finance and Personnel invited the OECD to assess its public sector reform agenda. The *Northern Ireland (UK) Implementing Joined Up Governance for a Common* (OECD 2016) *Purpose* report covers three dimensions of reform, including the adoption of a multi-year outcomes-based approach to future programmes for government. The report cited the findings of the NI Roundtable on measuring wellbeing.

ADOPTION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF AN OUTCOMES AND WELLBEING APPROACH

Towards the close of the Northern Ireland Executive's last mandate (2010–2016), the First and Deputy First Ministers, Arlene Foster MLA and Martin McGuinness MLA, appeared before the Northern Ireland Assembly's Committee with responsibility for the scrutiny of the OFMdFM (9 March 2016). In her evidence to the Committee,¹⁸ the First Minister announced that her aspiration for the Executive's forthcoming *PfG* (2016–2021) was to try to establish a shared vision for the public sector in shared outcomes and to foster collaboration and support for greater efficiency and effective delivery. Speaking in the wake of the *Fresh Start*¹⁹ political agreement, which allowed the main parties to re-commit to cooperation, First Minister Foster announced that wellbeing would become central to the role of government and the new *PfG* (2016–2020):

It will be important that the processes that lead to the development of the next Programme for Government take into account critical influencing factors, in particular the aspirations of our people and their priorities; the financial position of the Executive, of course, and the budgetary responses to that position; and the increasing recognition that the achievement of wellbeing is at the centre of government's role, and that a coordinated cross-sectoral outcome-focused model of governance is required to deliver on that.²⁰

The significance of the First and Deputy First Ministers' commitment to an outcomes-focused approach, including a cross-departmental collaborative approach, cannot be underestimated in the NI context. The tradition of silo-bound policy and service delivery has been entrenched by the nature of Northern Ireland's political dispensation, wherein ministerial

appointments lead to party ownership of departmental remits. The shift to a more collaborative approach, including co-design alongside local government, the third sector and the private sector, is more significant given this pattern in the past.

After the May 2016 elections, Foster and McGuinness headed up a new Government. Shortly after the formation of the new Executive, a draft *PfG 2016–2021* was published. Responses to the consultation approached 1000 submissions. Town hall meetings organised by the Executive explained the structure of the new draft programme, with its 14 outcomes, 42 indicators and 42 key measures. During the consultation process, the two party leaders announced that they would be engaging outside government to develop plans with local government, the private sector, the voluntary and community sectors and beyond.

The key features of the programme are as follows:

- A focus on outcomes that people can identify (e.g. living longer and healthier lives) to be measured over time;
- Indicators to demonstrate the change the Government wants to bring about;
- Key measures that will show whether Government is hitting its goals;
- A focus on shifting what happens in people's lives in areas such as jobs, education and health;
- A focus on impact rather than the amount of money ('inputs') or the number of programmes introduced; and
- An opportunity for the Executive to work with local government, the private sector and the voluntary and community sector on how to tackle the greatest challenges to society in Northern Ireland.

(Source: NI Draft Programme for Government Framework [2016](#))

Controversially, the Executive Office agreed that the measuring of outcomes would be based on an approach designed and promoted by Mark Friedman²¹ of the US-based Fiscal Policy Studies Institute and the private company Clear Impact. Outcomes-based Accountability (OBA) (also known as Results Based Accountability or RBA) outlined in Friedman's book, *Trying Hard is Not Good Enough* ([2015](#)) is a do-it-yourself manual for public officials and community-based organisations seeking to improve the performance of programmes and track their impact, at the level of whole populations and of organisational

performance. OBA is broadly described by Keevers et al. (2012:5) as a methodology underpinned by three ideas: justifying service provision on the basis of outcomes; demonstrating outcomes by data-based evidence; and assuming that setting targets ('results') and measuring progress will improve the social service system.

The OBA process (Keevers 2012, p. 22) involves individuals and organisations involved in service delivery working through a step-by-step process:

1. The identification of the 'results' they want to achieve;
2. The selection of quantitative measures or indicators for each 'result' and the construction of a baseline graph tracking an indicator with a history, and a projected forecast, and the desired 'turning of the curve';
3. A discussion of the factors and 'causes' influencing baselines;
4. Identification of the partners with a stake in 'turning the curve';
5. Identification of solutions, with a recommendation that initial consideration be given to low-cost approaches; and
6. Agreement of a strategy.

A network of licensed consultants and partners linked to Clear Impact offer training.²² Users of the methodology begin with a series of desired conditions of wellbeing ('Residents with good jobs', 'A safe neighbourhood') and work their way back to the means of improving those conditions, using baseline data. The chief selling point is simplicity. Friedman (2015, p. 12) explains '[t]he most basic version of RBA can be done in less than an hour and produces ideas that can be acted on immediately. RBA is an inclusive process where diversity is an asset and everyone in the community can contribute'.²³

CRITIQUES OF OUTCOMES-BASED MEASURES IN NI

The OBA approach is controversial, however, and many challenge this perspective, arguing that it will over-simplify complex social problems and risk excluding valuable contributions made by locally based community organisations to the *PfG* outcomes. For example, Inspiring Impact is a UK-based network that has been working closely with the community and voluntary sector on evaluation methods and measuring impact. The Northern Ireland Director of Inspiring Impact, Aongus O'Keefe,

underlined a shared concern over ‘the singularity of approach through which these outcomes and their related indicators will be monitored and measured’ while highlighting the dangers of relying on a model that prioritises quantities over qualities (Inspiring Impact 2016: 2). In the context of a Northern Ireland voluntary and community sector already in danger of losing its identity and independence due to complex relationships with Government and funders during and following the period of conflict (Ulster University 2015) the draft *PfG* methodology could risk further embedding a service delivery model working to a pre-written script and pulling back from critical and innovative intervention. Ulster University (2015, p. 10) research on the independence of the voluntary community and social enterprise sector in Northern Ireland found that:

- Pressure from some funders is making some organisations copy the practices of the public and private sectors or dominant organisations within the sector, with the result that the sector is losing some of its distinctiveness and becoming internally homogenous;
- Many organisations feel that government funding is available only for activities that meet pre-defined objectives, making it difficult for organisations that wish to develop innovative ways to meet newly identified needs;
- Access to funding has become the new measure of success amongst many organisations, and competition for funding is having a negative effect on collaborative relationships and trust.

Perhaps most worrying within Northern Ireland’s fragile governance arrangements is the reported moderation of actors’ critique of government and policy directions, often out of fear of losing funding. Increasingly, Northern Ireland’s voluntary and community sector has become a set of arms-length bodies delivering out-sourced public policy objectives and programmes. Such practice has been strongly criticised as a means to control devolution of services and government accountability procedures (Keevers et al. 2010). Indeed, a report prepared for the Roundtable (Doran et al. 2015) recommended caution in the adoption of an outcomes-based approach, noting that they should form part of a wider shift in governance that must go *beyond measurement*. Wider lessons have been learned on this front in broader human development internationally, as a plethora of literature has demonstrated the

importance of *going beyond numbers* in understanding *what is wellbeing and quality of life* for citizens (Hodgett and Deneulin 2009).

In fact, Keevers et al. (2010, 2012) demonstrate that performance measurement and accountability frameworks such as OBA are ‘not technologies that peer and measure innocently and disinterestedly from a distance’ (2012: 1). Rather, they operate as a bundle of material-discursive practices that work to include some things and excluding others. They (Keevers et al. 2012, p. 37) conclude that the mandating of OBA in community organisations encourages their focus to shift from actual practice to the correspondence between ‘results’ and ‘reality’ and measurement. In addition, the implicit privilege granted to ‘facts’ and quantification renders practices, relationalities, values and context marginal or invisible, hampering inclusion of the local practice experience of both workers and service participants. Finally, the introduction of Friedman’s methodology—when deployed using computerised case-management monitoring technology and entangled with funding to individualised outcome targets—can unravel some of the daily organising practices of social justice that create a sense of belonging, assist young people to have a sense of control over their lives and build hope for their futures.

Professor Derek Birrell (2016, p. 5–9), a long-standing observer of public policy in Northern Ireland, has highlighted the weaknesses and risks of OBA:

‘An immediate problem with this approach is that OBA is an evaluation and performance methodology and as such cannot and does not prescribe any policies for a programme for government. Such models and methodologies have been subject to a range of criticisms ... [I]n a response to the consultation on the [PFG] the BMA expressed concern that the Framework was based solely on OBA and questioned whether it constituted a robust evidence base and was fit for purpose’.

He observes that OBA demonstrates conceptual flaws. First, it uses ‘desired outcomes or imagined outcomes not actual outcomes’ (Birrell 2016, p. 5). This places Northern Ireland’s outcomes in the realm of a hypothetical exercise and ‘significantly involves a rejection of other outcome based methodologies using actual outcomes’ (Ibid). Birrell is critical of Friedman’s grasp of causation because achieving policy objectives is a much more complex and multi-faceted exercise. A third criticism is the re-introduction of indicators, ‘which have largely fallen into disuse’

due to difficulty in finding consensus on what should be measured, the potential for manipulating data and the problem of attribution. Fourth, Birrell (2016, p. 7) questions the OBA's evaluative criteria of 'is anyone better off?' He notes that this phrase can vary in meaning, interpretation and calculation. He points out that many current UK government policies are not intended to make people better off, but have other aims such as reducing expenditure, achieving fairness or making people less dependent.

At the very least in conditions of complexity, an outcomes-focused approach needs to be taken up with an acceptance of uncertainty, abandoning the false assumption that real-world impacts of a given policy intervention can be accurately modelled in advance. This suggests a new approach to policymaking that values innovation and experimentation, focusing less on pre-implementation analysis and more on post-implementation evaluation. According to the New Economics Foundation (2015), the Roundtable's background report also made a number of cogent observations, noting that focusing on outcomes can create unwelcome paradoxes, distorting priorities and practices, including gaming and goal displacement. The report highlights an emergent consensus in opposition to 'command and control' target setting and promotes the value of a distinction between population and performance level accountability. It argues for the essential involvement of partners in discussions about desired 'end states', foregrounding conditions of trust and the desirability of an Asset-Based Community Development approach together with co-production. Lastly, it observes the essential role of evidence-informed narratives and stories behind baseline analyses, which has been noted as crucial in studies of policymaking internationally (Hodgett 2012; Acheson and Hodgett 2012) and in NI (Hodgett 2008).

The convergence of the wellbeing policy narrative and the political imperative to respond to 'austerity', with the subsequent need to demonstrate 'value for money' from public investment in resources, has opened opportunities and risks for the wellbeing narrative in NI. The Roundtable tracked public sector reform and the adoption of an outcomes-based approach in the National Performance Framework. Developments in NI have subsequently mirrored the hybrid approach in Scotland insofar as there is a coming together of an agenda to generate more 'public value' from decreasing resources (cuts to the Block Grant from the UK Treasury), the adoption of an OBA that will

distribute responsibility for policy delivery and pick up on the wellbeing policy narrative. It remains to be seen how the convergence of these agendas delivers, for example, how the fiscal narrative might come to compete with and even undermine attempts to embed a shared governance narrative around an ill-defined understanding of wellbeing; one that is reduced to an aggregate of activities derived from a series of outcomes and indicators. It is this tension that lies behind the controversial decision by the Executive Office to base the working of the new framework on Friedman's OBA system, essentially a stripped-down value-for-money-driven evaluation methodology imported from the private sector.

DISCUSSION: THE WELLBEING NARRATIVE IN A POST-CONFLICT SOCIETY

The original recommendations by the Roundtable envisaged an approach, such as Sen's Capabilities Approach (Alkire 2002) or the OECD's wellbeing measures, that would establish internationally-agreed benchmarks against which outcomes and policies in Northern Ireland might be tested and measured. These were to focus on qualitative data and critical engagement by policy actors, notably think tanks and citizens—using the framework as a platform for a standing conversation facilitated by social media and real time data visualisation. The Roundtable, in 2016, expressed some reservations about the adoption of an 'off the shelf' methodology for the facilitation of the outcomes approach. Compared to the wellbeing methodology that might have been constructed in the work of Sen and Nussbaum or other normative benchmarking approaches, the OBA approach risks falling short of fundamental infrastructural and capacity support. This includes opportunities for civil society to offer their own methods for evaluating their work (a pluralist approach to evaluation methodology), a capacity for longitudinal studies (at organisational performance level and population level) and demonstrating its value to Government. Indeed, there is a serious hazard that the intrinsically emergent properties of outcomes in a post-conflict society, such as embedding reconciliation, democratisation and social justice practices, might be ill served by the off-the-shelf approach. Such short cuts illustrate the insufficiency of current public administration in Northern Ireland and how investment is needed to improve local political and administrative capacity to assist the public imagination.

The authors have been deeply influenced by the work of Amartya Sen (1992, 1999, 2000, 2002, and 2011) and the contributions to develop the Capability Approach (CA) made by Martha Nussbaum (2011) and others (Crocker 2008; Terzi 2014) when addressing wellbeing. We have seen the clear opportunity to link societal wellbeing as a shared policy narrative to strengthen the demos of the region; in a post-conflict society, there is a challenge that goes beyond agreeing a shared vision of the future. It is no less than the trial of *cultivating the societal conditions and capabilities*—‘internal’ and ‘combined’—that go towards the construction of a non-violent political culture, a culture emergent as a function of reasoned argument and debate. This includes NI’s critical investment in the cultivation of skills and conditions associated with a transition to a non-violent decision-making and institutions.

Northern Ireland’s ‘peace process’ has a sophisticated geopolitical architecture (internal to NI together with institutions that embrace relations across Ireland, and between NI, the Republic of Ireland and Britain). These institutions have been operated by political elites; insofar as the internal dimension locks parties into ancient antagonisms, they reproduce communal fractures, contested identities and deep disconnects between their institutional expressions (symbolisms, policy priorities) and the different constitutional aspirations of large numbers of citizens. The ‘peace process’ has yet to translate into a citizen-owned process of transformation, wherein the conditions for a peaceful and a truly non-threatening debate can take place on the evolution of NI’s constitutional status. Public reasoning, insofar as it is accommodated at all, is translated into a repetitive series of disabling and debilitating stand-offs between the Nationalist and Unionist parties and within their own constituencies. This has recently been evidenced by the collapse of institutions and speculation that NI may not be able to resuscitate the Assembly so necessitating a period of direct rule from Westminster (Belfast Telegraph 2017). A vast chasm continues to lie between the lives, aspirations and identities as they are *lived* by the people and the repetitive calculations from the party leaderships of the political institutions.

What we are coming to recognise in the most recent crisis of the devolved institutions in NI is that even the tripartite architecture of the *Good Friday Agreement* of 1998 is not sufficient for the cultivation of new political relationships and dispositions. Alongside the controversies over post-conflict legacy issues, policy differences and dysfunctions in governance, there is a quantum gap in the levels of trust between certain

parties. This gap, in the case of SF and the DUP, sat at the heart of the mandatory coalition process and proved corrosive. This problem calls to mind Sen's (2011) insight into the nature of justice, wherein he argues that the principles of justice are not solely defined in terms of institutions, rather in terms of the lives and freedoms of the people involved (2011, xii). Such insights from the CA provide a compelling case for the continued consideration of its theory and practical application. While societal institutions may facilitate scrutiny of values and priorities and shape public discussion, successful democracy should be assessed in terms of public reasoning and the promotion of 'government by discussion' (Sen 2011, xiii). So, bringing a sense of reason into diagnosing justice and injustice while concentrating on the actual lives that people may lead. It is at this intersection between institutional approaches to post-conflict accommodation and the less tangible, dispositional, attitudinal, demands of transitional justice where the wellbeing policy debate has something original to offer.

It was often stated at the Roundtable that wellbeing, in the context of an evolving post-conflict democratic settlement, is a means and an end. It is a means, insofar as wellbeing invites policymakers to address the felt circumstances of citizens, on the journey of transition out of conflict. Issues such as mental health and post-conflict trauma are not only symptoms of the conflict, but remain potential obstacles to progress. They may impede the emergence of new attitudes and capacities to embrace 'otherness' including otherness-as-emergent future, as opposed to the over-determination of the present by the weight of an imperative for historical justification. Wellbeing introduces a language that counters the colonisation of Northern Ireland's politics by the language of pure calculation; it introduces an alternative set of languages that begin to place value on liberating concepts such as 'care' and 'forgiveness' without diminishing the importance of justice understood as institutional guarantees of rights and protections. Wellbeing, in a post-conflict society, contributes to ends by inviting politicians and citizens to cast the management of their fragile – perhaps contingent – democratic institutions in a context that lies beyond the immediate need to fixate on political accommodation of constitutional differences. Instead, it allows them to begin to embrace an emergent style of politics, tolerant of uncertainty while focusing on the cultivation of those dimensions of freedom (Sen's articulation of wellbeing) that are valuable in their own right. An understated dilemma for NI remains the degree to which core political

or constitutional antagonisms—that provide the *raison d'être* of the two main parties—implicitly render all policy prospects vulnerable to instrumentalization in the service of larger constitutional preferences, so virtually all policy considerations are seen as proxy battles over unresolved fractures rehearsed by political elites.

CONCLUSION

Peter Senge (2009) has commented on the ability of societies to comprehend change, noting that the limited social or learning field remains largely unchanged because the level of attention renders the scope of the need for change invisible. Societies do not see the subtle forces shaping what happens because they are too busy *reacting* to immediate forces and acting out of embedded—often redundant—assumptions or worldviews, thus limiting the scope of policy responses to incremental or short-term calculations. This applies, especially, to under-developed systems of governance where styles of administration, thought and practice, have been inhibited and insulated by the all-consuming agenda of societal conflict and managing of the politics of accommodation.

Such forces have shaped the NI public sector where the immediate imperative of conflict management has led to levels of introversion and risk aversion in the policy process. For this to change Senge notes: ‘people [must] truly start to recognize their own taken-for-granted assumptions and [...] hear and see things that were not evident before’ (Scharmer 2009: xiv). When the structure of attention moves deeper, so, too, does the ensuing change. The invitation to engage in a collective reflection on a narrative on wellbeing must include an inner regard (‘seeing our seeing’) so that collective learning is not limited to drawing lessons from the past, but is open to learning from an emergent future. This necessitates accommodating greater levels of ambiguity, uncertainty and willingness to experiment while contemplating and permitting failure. Interrupting the collective and institutionalised narratives and practices of the past is a critical challenge in successful post-conflict societies. Wellbeing offers a germane and generative platform for this delicate and gradual process.

The current political hiatus may provide a breathing space for senior civil servants to begin to absorb emergent criticisms and reservations about the Executive’s adoption of the OBA approach to the delivery of ‘wellbeing’. Ironically, if we are to note the work of Keevers et al.

(2010, 2012), the approach of the NI Executive not only risks falling short of the original ambition raised by the Roundtable but also risks embedding a methodology that may be antithetical to the transformative animus of societal wellbeing, running counter to the articulation of wellbeing as a significant contribution to social justice and freedom as articulated by Sen and Nussbaum.

The NI Executive (2016) has demonstrated receptivity to an initiative designed to explore recommendations on the relevance of wellbeing as an organising principle for policymaking in a highly complex, post-conflict society. As identified by the Roundtable in 2015 and the OECD's (2016) work on public governance in NI, there are pressing obstacles to effective governance that must be addressed in parallel with, and at the service of, the taking up of wellbeing as an organising principle for policy design. For the moment, the NI Executive and civil service governance capacity has demonstrated a deep fragility when it comes to policy design and accountability. This has been apparent in the collapse of the institutions over the botched Renewable Heat Incentive scheme and to an extent in the Executive's decision to conflate its response to the global wellbeing policy debate with the adoption of the OBA methodology for its draft *PfG* (2016–2021). This decision was driven by a desire on the part of senior civil servants for simplification in meeting the multiple challenges identified as part of the wellbeing agenda, including parallel needs to engage stakeholders more closely in the policy design cycle while also embedding universal performance measurement protocols to ensure value for money.

In some ways, the initial responses by the NI Executive to the wellbeing agenda have fallen victim to the very weaknesses identified in the governance arrangements and style by the Roundtable and the OECD. This has resulted, for now, in a significant shift away from the challenging and iterative wellbeing agenda that attempted to consider the specific circumstances of the conflict. The Capability Approach, could make significant contributions on matters of trust and freedom both individually and collectively. Only where such an approach is taken up are we likely to encourage a politics of emergence that counters the risks of over-determination and the repetition of crises in NI.

Developing an emphasis on wellbeing governance in Northern Ireland could open further positive and exciting possible futures for the region. It has already offered a contribution to the increasing drive to blur genres in policy evolution internationally (AHRC 2016) alongside

substantial intellectual developments in interpretive policy analysis world-wide (Yanow 2000). Such positive optimism should not be allowed to fall at the last staging post, just as others globally (Arndt and Volkert 2007) recognise the wisdom it can impart. In the circumstances following the collapse of the NI institutions, confidence building and moves to promote wider wellbeing became more important than ever and deserve closer examination for how we might increase desperately needed societal trust.

NOTES

1. The Good Friday Agreement brought to an end the 30 years of sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland known as 'The Troubles'. See http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/events/good_friday_agreement was ratified in a referendum in May 1998. The agreement set up a power-sharing assembly to govern Northern Ireland by cross-community consent.
2. The Northern Ireland Assembly is the devolved legislature for Northern Ireland. It is responsible for making laws on transferred matters from Westminster and for scrutinising the work of NI Ministers and Government Departments see <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/>.
3. The NI Executive is made up of the First and Deputy First Minister, two junior Ministers and eight departmental Ministers. The Executive Committee exercises executive authority on behalf of the Northern Ireland Assembly and takes decisions on significant issues and matters that cut across the responsibility of two or more Ministers. It agrees proposals put forward by Ministers for new legislation in the form of 'Executive Bills' for consideration by the Assembly. It is responsible for drawing up a programme for government and an agreed budget for approval by the Assembly see <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/topics/your-executive>.
4. For a detailed review of the collapse of both see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/uk-northern-ireland-politics-38635708>.
5. Following the 2016 election to the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly, the main parties expected to form a new coalition government and launched a public consultation on a draft *Programme for Government 2016–2021*. For the first time, the draft outcomes and indicators were presented as a framework for measuring wellbeing, and outcomes were presented as part of a new wellbeing narrative. The Programme for Government (PFG) sets the strategic context for the Budget, Investment Strategy and Economic Strategy for Northern Ireland.

6. Interview with Consultant Psychiatrist on NI high suicide rates over 10 years and rates of poverty <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07myr3f> (Accessed 7/8/2016).
7. For an explanation of the RHI scandal see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-38301428> (Accessed 31/1/2017).
8. For insight into the events see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-31489031>.
9. See <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jan/16/northern-ireland-power-sharing-government-expected-to-collapse-sinn-fein-cash-for-ash>.
10. Our thanks to the Corrymeela Community of reconciliation in North Antrim for this beautiful and evocative phrase.
11. This chapter develops an Integrated Capabilities Framework for investigating human wellbeing in multicultural settings, shows how it can be made operational through fieldwork and argues it has practical and policy relevance for studying immigration, multiculturalism and social cohesion in Canada. <https://www.erudit.org/revue/ijcs/2011/v/n44/1010086ar.html>.
12. The process leading to the establishment of the Roundtable was initiated by one of the authors, Dr Peter Doran, and his colleague at the School of Law, John Woods. The second author, Dr. Susan Hodgett, contributed to the work of the Roundtable with a presentation on the Capabilities Approach and societal wellbeing.
13. From the document, Towards a Wellbeing Framework: Background Document (2015): 'That's why our proposed Framework is much more than an attempt to capture and share information. Our era is confronted less by the demand to measure and more to understand. The proposed Framework is a platform, a process, a way of engagement and much more. It is a communications process designed to support the emergence of a 'learning society', much more agile and inclusive in the co-design and deliberation of policy options, insightful with regard to the difficult trade-offs that accompany policy choices, and creatively engaged with the world of ideas and deep social trends locally and globally. A Wellbeing Framework can provide a single point of reference to which all public services and partners are aligned. It can become part of a transformative shift in how policy is made, and a key enabler of public service reform. By aligning the whole public sector around a common set of goals—that have been the subject of public deliberation, even contestation—government can deliver lasting collaboration and partnership working. Organisations across the community, including local government and community planning partnerships, can begin to work towards shared goals defined in terms of benefits to citizens, tailored to local places, rather than simply efficient service delivery' (Doran et al. 2015).

14. See First and deputy First Minister addressing the First and deputy First Minister Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly on 20 January 2016. The website: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6camyw24AeY>.
15. The Beyond GDP initiative is about developing indicators that are as clear and appealing as GDP, but more inclusive of environmental and social aspects of progress. See http://ec.europa.eu/environment/beyond_gdp/index_en.html.
16. Friedman, M. Results Based Accountability <http://resultsaccountability.com/> 2015.
17. Now The Executive Office.
18. Northern Ireland Assembly Committee of OFMDFM, Hansard Report, March 2016, 'Programme for Government: First and Deputy First Minister and Officers', Official Hansard Report, <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/committee-17722.pdf>.
19. *Fresh Start: A Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan* involving the main political parties and the Irish and British Governments was published on 17 November 2015. The agreement brought to an end an extended period of instability for the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly, following disagreements among the parties over paramilitary activity and difficulties in reaching an agreed response to welfare reforms introduced by the British Government. The Agreement is available at: <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/committee-17722.pdf>.
20. *Ibid.*, P. 2.
21. Friedman, Mark, 2015, *Trying Hard is Not Good Enough: How to produce measurable improvements for customers and communities*, Parse/Amazon, United Kingdom.
22. One of the Clear Impact (US) partner organisations is the National Children's Bureau in Northern Ireland.
23. *Ibid.*, P. 12.
24. Hodgett, Susan L. (2008) Sen, Culture and Expanding Participatory Capabilities in Northern Ireland. *Journal of Human Development*, 9(2). pp. 165–183.
25. Hodgett, Susan and Clark, David (2011) Capabilities, Wellbeing and Multiculturalism: A New Framework for Guiding Policy. *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, 44 (2). pp. 163–184.
26. http://pure.qub.ac.uk/portal/files/15384858/1095_Measuring_Wellbeing_in_NI_v3.1.pdf.
27. See What Works Wellbeing Centre and <https://whatworkswellbeing.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/community-public-dialogue-final.pdf>.
28. http://pure.qub.ac.uk/portal/files/15385327/carnegie_short_report_compressed.pdf.
29. <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/consultations/draft-programme-government-framework-2016-21-and-questionnaire>.

APPENDIX ONE—CHRONOLOGY OF THE WELLBEING CONVERSATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

- 2008: Hodgett applies Sen's Capability Approach on wellbeing to ideas of quality of life in NI in the United Nation's *Journal of Human Development*.²⁴
- 2011: Development of the *Integrated Capabilities Framework* (ICF) on wellbeing by Hodgett and Clark (Ulster and Cambridge Universities) piloted internationally.²⁵
- 2012: QUB School of Law and New Economics Foundation conference on wellbeing.
- 2013: CUKT invited to collaborate in conference and formation of *Roundtable on Measuring wellbeing in NI*.
- 2013–2017 Hodgett supervises Doctoral researches on wellbeing in NI, including modelling the ICF, investigating the experiences of the LGBT community, and the voluntary and community sector in NI (Ulster University).
- 2014: Publication of *Measuring Wellbeing in Northern Ireland: a new conversation for new times*.²⁶
- 2014–2016: Four meetings of the CUKT-School of Law *Roundtable* on measuring wellbeing which includes Hodgett's work.
- 2015: Conduct of, and publication a year later, of the *What Works Wellbeing's* National Public Dialogue on (Community) Wellbeing in NI informed by Hodgett and Clark's (2011) ICF framework.²⁷
- 2015: Publication of *Towards a Wellbeing Framework: Findings from the Roundtable on Measuring Wellbeing in Northern Ireland*.²⁸
- 2016: Publication of the *Draft Programme for Government Framework 2016–2021*.²⁹

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