

Essay

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Essay

Systems Thinking for Global Health: How Planetary Health and Wellbeing Economics Can Restore the SDGs' Transformative Potential

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Abstract

As the 2030 deadline approaches with most Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets off-track, the global development community faces a critical choice: continue with technocratic indicator-focused implementation or embrace the fundamental transformation the SDGs originally promised. This opinion piece argues that the convergence of planetary health, wellbeing economics, and systems thinking offers a pathway to restore the SDGs' transformative potential through community-governed, power-redistributive approaches. Current SDG implementation has been reduced to a technocratic exercise that obscures power dynamics, ignores Indigenous knowledge systems, and perpetuates growth-oriented economic logic that conflicts with planetary boundaries. This approach treats symptoms rather than root causes while maintaining consultation models that create an illusion of community engagement without redistributing decision-making authority. The wellbeing economy movement and planetary health framework offer complementary lenses for recalibration: wellbeing economics challenges GDP-focused development by prioritizing collective flourishing within ecological limits, while planetary health reframes development within Earth's life-support systems. However, translating these frameworks into concrete policy mechanisms requires systems thinking that includes explicit power analysis and centers relational accountability to communities most affected by current systemic failures. A post-2030 agenda must resist fixing the SDGs through more indicators and instead institutionalize community governance, redistribute decision-making power, and co-create implementation tools that communities own and adapt. This requires breaking silos between health, environmental, and economic sectors, while centering Indigenous voices as leaders rather than beneficiaries. The convergence of crises demands courage to chart a new path guided by community wisdom, planetary boundaries, and relational accountability—one that restores not only ecosystems but decision-making power to those who understand that health, economy, and ecology are inseparable.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals; planetary health; wellbeing economics; systems thinking; community governance; Indigenous knowledge; post-2030 agenda; power analysis

Introduction

As world leaders begin preparing for a post-2030 agenda, with most Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets already off-track, the choice ahead is stark: continue with technocratic box-checking, or embrace the fundamental transformation the goals originally promised. The 2030 Agenda, once framed as a bold vision for justice and sustainability, has too often been reduced to siloed reporting exercises. While countries race to showcase progress through numerical indicators, the deeper issues of planetary boundaries, wellbeing, and structural equity are left unresolved. Building on my earlier work advocating for a planetary health perspective to reposition SDG implementation (Onabola, 2019), I argue that a recalibration is long overdue; one that places wellbeing economies and planetary health at the center, and restores meaning to the SDGs through

community-governed, power-redistributive approaches. This tension between transformative ambition and fragmented delivery is nowhere more evident than in the SDGs themselves.

The SDGs: A Global Blueprint Reduced to Metrics

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by all United Nations member states in 2015, were envisioned as a global blueprint for a just, inclusive, and sustainable future by 2030. Encompassing 17 goals ranging from poverty eradication and quality education to climate action and reduced inequalities, the SDGs were built on the principle of “leaving no one behind.”

Yet that transformative vision has too often been reduced to a technocratic exercise in indicator-tracking and box ticking, where fragmented efforts and disproportionate reliance on numeric indicators obscure the power dynamics and structural inequities that shape outcomes (Heller et al., 2024). A development framework that can count trees planted, but fails to address the systems driving deforestation, or to include the communities whose knowledge could prevent it, is clearly missing the point. While data remains essential, the transformation promised by the SDGs cannot be achieved through metrics that ignore who controls decision-making processes and who bears the costs of current systems.

Beyond Metrics: What the SDGs Are Missing

Over time, SDG monitoring has become increasingly driven by indicator reporting, often at the expense of community leadership and the original transformative vision the goals once promised. While metrics provide comparability and accountability, these indicators create the illusion of progress: comparable numbers, tidy dashboards, upward arrows. Yet they rarely capture the lived experiences of people on the ground, the ecological limits of growth, or the power structures that determine who wins and who loses. As I have shown in earlier work, attempts to link health equity with the land-water-energy nexus within the SDG framework often expose persistent integration gaps, with equity considerations sidelined in favor of technical efficiency (Onabola et al., 2022).

This technocratic approach obscures several blind spots. First, SDG implementation has largely ignored systemic power imbalances that determine who participates in development decisions and who reaps the benefits (Heller et al., 2024). Metrics may track poverty reduction without questioning wealth concentration, or note environmental improvements without examining the extractive corporate practices that cause degradation (Heller et al., 2024; Biermann et al., 2022).

First, SDG implementation tends to treat symptoms rather than root causes: poverty is tracked without examining wealth concentration, while environmental gains are reported without naming the extractive industries driving degradation.

Second, universal indicators often silence contextual knowledge systems, particularly Indigenous worldviews that treat health, economy, and ecology as inseparable domains (Wildcat & Voth, 2023).

Third, the economic logic underpinning many targets prioritizes growth, frequently at odds with planetary boundaries, and creates trade-offs that pit ecological sustainability against development goals (Ross, 2019; Whitmee et al., 2015).

Perhaps the most damaging omission is the lack of community governance mechanisms that would enable affected populations to lead their own development processes. Instead of participatory decision-making, SDG implementation often relies on consultation models that maintain existing power structures while creating an illusion of community engagement (Cargo & Mercer, 2008). This results in interventions that may improve indicators while failing to address the relational and structural determinants that community members identify as priorities (Heller et al., 2024).

Addressing these blind spots requires moving beyond metrics toward frameworks that center equity, ecological sustainability, and shared decision-making. The wellbeing economy, with its rejection of GDP growth as the dominant measure of progress, offers one pathway. Planetary health, which insists that human and ecological systems are inseparable, offers another. Together, they

provide a foundation for reimagining the SDGs, not as a dashboard of numbers, but as a blueprint for just and sustainable futures.

Wellbeing Economics and Planetary Health: Complementary Lenses

If the SDGs are to recover their transformative intent, they must be guided by frameworks that both redefine what progress means and set the ecological boundaries within which it can unfold. The wellbeing economy and planetary health perspectives offer these complementary lenses.

The wellbeing economy movement critiques the dominance of GDP as the primary yardstick of societal progress. It argues instead for policies that prioritize collective wellbeing, social equity, and ecological regeneration over extractive growth (Costanza et al., 2014; Costanza et al., 2018; Trebeck & Williams, 2019; Labonté, 2024; EuroHealthNet, & Institute of Public Health, 2024). This movement recognizes that true development cannot be measured solely through economic output but must encompass multidimensional wellbeing that includes social cohesion, cultural vitality, environmental health, and community self-determination (Fioramonti et al., 2022).

National experiments such as New Zealand's Wellbeing Budget (New Zealand Government, (2019) are important steps forward, broadening measures of success to include child welfare, mental health, and environmental sustainability. Similar initiatives in Iceland (Kristjansson et al., 2020; WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2023) and Scotland (Trebeck and Williams, 2019; Hjelmekog et al., 2023)) have demonstrated that governments can, in practice, align budgeting and planning with wellbeing priorities.

Yet, even these innovations remain vulnerable to reductionism. Without meaningful redistribution of decision-making power, "wellbeing" risks being translated into yet another set of indicators, another dashboard to manage, rather than a transformative reordering of priorities. True transformation requires coupling alternative metrics with community power, while ensuring that wellbeing is not only measured differently but pursued through processes that redistribute decision-making authority and center those most affected by inequities (McLaren & Graff-McRae, 2024; McLaren, 2025). Wellbeing economics explicitly challenges the assumption that economic growth automatically translates to improved quality of life, instead advocating for redistributive policies and regenerative practices that operate within planetary boundaries while prioritizing collective flourishing over individual accumulation (Kallis et al., 2025). This shift is especially critical for Indigenous communities, whose self-determination and holistic worldviews are often sidelined in national policy frameworks despite their long-standing stewardship of ecological systems (Wildcat & Voth, 2023).

While the wellbeing economy reframes what societies value, planetary health clarifies the boundaries within which those values must be pursued. Planetary health, defined as the health of human civilization and the natural systems on which it depends (Whitmee et al., 2015), offers an integrated approach to understanding how ecological degradation undermines human health and development (Myers, 2017; Perilli et al., 2024). It invites us to move away from reactive, siloed strategies and towards anticipatory, multisectoral actions rooted in systems thinking and relational accountability to communities.

Taken together, these two frameworks shift the conversation away from narrow efficiency metrics toward a more systemic and justice-oriented vision of development. Their combined potential lies in how they are operationalized: not as abstract global agendas, but as community-driven frameworks that center equity, redistribute power, and hold systems accountable to those most affected by inequities (Marmot et al., 2020; Cargo & Mercer, 2008).

Operationalizing the Vision: From Frameworks to Practice

When planetary health and wellbeing economics are applied to the SDGs through community-governed approaches, the result is a more honest and actionable vision: one that accepts planetary limits, redistributes decision-making power, and embraces multidimensional understandings of

progress. However, it is one thing to critique GDP, call for planetary stewardship, or propose equity as the core of development; it is another to translate these frameworks into practice. Translating these integrated frameworks into concrete policy mechanisms remains a significant challenge.

Existing cross-sectoral policy models such as Health in All Policies (HiAP) were designed to break down silos and integrate health considerations across government sectors. However, in practice they often remain conceptual and face persistent implementation barriers (Cairney et al., 2021; Bernier, 2023).

Its equity-focused evolution, Health Equity in All Policies (HEiAP) (Amri and Bump, 2023), offers a sharper tool for embedding distributional justice and power redistribution into policy design (McLaren & Graff-McRae, 2024). Yet even these frameworks require mechanisms to operationalize them through genuine community governance. Without such power-sharing structures, HEiAP risks defaulting to interdepartmental coordination rather than achieving the systemic change it promises.

Integrating HEiAP with wellbeing economy principles, particularly approaches that prioritize redistribution, ecological boundaries, and community leadership, offers one promising but still underdeveloped pathway for translating planetary health and wellbeing economics into practice (Williams et al., 2023; McLaren & Graff-McRae, 2024). This gap between transformative vision and operational tools remains one of the most critical barriers to fulfilling the SDGs' original promise.

Beyond HEiAP, other operational frameworks such as Raworth's Doughnut Economics (Ross, 2019) and the Wellbeing Economy Governments (WEGo) alliance have begun to demonstrate alternatives through wellbeing budgets, participatory policymaking, and new dashboards of progress. These efforts provide important building blocks, but without a systems-thinking approach that explicitly maps relationships, power dynamics, and feedback loops, they risk remaining isolated innovations rather than catalysts for transformation (Hjelmskog et al., 2023).

The Role of Systems Thinking in Reclaiming SDG Transformation

If wellbeing economics reframes what societies value, and planetary health reframes the ecological boundaries within which those values must be pursued, systems thinking provides the connective tissue that allows these frameworks to be operationalized (Hjelmskog et al., 2023). Systems thinking encourages us to see relationships instead of isolated indicators, feedback loops instead of linear inputs, and collective wellbeing instead of fragmented silos. However, systems thinking for SDG transformation must include explicit power analysis as a core methodology. This means mapping who benefits from current systems, who bears the costs, and how decision-making authority can be redistributed to communities most affected by environmental and health inequities (Heller et al., 2024).

Current carbon offset schemes illustrate the problem. On paper, they appear to advance climate goals by funding reforestation or conservation efforts. In practice, however, they often extract value from Indigenous territories while allowing corporate extraction and emissions to continue elsewhere. This is precisely the kind of systems-level contradiction that a power-sensitive systems approach would reveal, and that genuine community governance could prevent. By embedding such analysis, systems thinking becomes more than a diagnostic tool; it becomes a strategy for reorienting development towards justice. It highlights not only ecological and social interdependencies but also the structural inequities that shape who wins and who loses under the current SDG regime.

A systems approach informed by planetary health and wellbeing economics must center relational accountability to communities and community governance (Wildcat & Voth, 2023). This means elevating community knowledge systems that understand health, economy, and ecology as inseparable. Indigenous worldviews, for example, embed relational accountability and intergenerational ethics at the core of governance; principles that conventional development approaches often overlook. By centering these perspectives, systems thinking moves beyond consultation models toward genuine community governance and power-sharing arrangements where communities govern research and policy design processes (Wildcat & Voth, 2023).

Ultimately, the promise of systems thinking is not simply analytical but political. It equips us to reveal root causes, unintended consequences, and leverage points for change, while ensuring that solutions emerge from community wisdom rather than external expertise. For the SDGs to reclaim their transformative intent, systems thinking must be deployed not as a technical tool, but as a framework for redistributing power, centering marginalized voices, and holding global development accountable to both people and planet.

Charting a Post-2030 Agenda

With the 2030 deadline looming and most targets off track, the imperative to rethink our global development architecture becomes more urgent. The convergence of planetary health, wellbeing economics, and systems thinking offers a powerful framework for the next phase, but only if these ideas are grounded in community governance rather than elite dashboards or managerial reforms.

A post-2030 agenda cannot simply add new indicators or tweak existing ones. That would repeat the very errors that have led to the current impasse — treating development as a technical exercise rather than a political and relational process. Instead, the future must be built around concrete integration mechanisms that redistribute power, embed Indigenous and community knowledge systems, and align governance with planetary boundaries.

A post-2030 agenda requires concrete integration mechanisms such as community-governed Advisory Circles led by affected populations, equity-weighted indicators co-designed with affected communities, and policy systems mapping that reveals leverage points for structural change (McKelvie-Sebileau et al., 2022; Heller et al., 2024). These are essential to ensuring that policies reflect lived realities rather than abstract metrics. Such approaches move beyond tokenistic consultation and begin to institutionalize community sovereignty over decision-making.

Implementation must shift from top-down metric reporting to community-owned tools that communities can use to hold governments accountable. This transition requires breaking the silos between public health, environmental science, and economics while confronting power imbalances in global governance and centering marginalized voices, not as beneficiaries, but as leaders and co-designers (Yap & Watene, 2019). It calls for a radical redistribution of political attention and economic investment, from short-term returns to long-term resilience guided by community priorities.

Above all, a post-2030 agenda must resist the temptation to repackage the SDGs in new dashboards and global reports. The task ahead is not better management of the same system but a radical reimagining of what progress means: a shift from growth to flourishing, from extraction to regeneration, and from top-down decision-making to community-governed transformation.

Conclusion: Toward Integrated Futures

Nearly a decade after the 2030 Agenda was launched with great promise, its transformative spirit has been constrained by metrics, market logic, and managerialism that sideline community leadership. If we are to reclaim that spirit, we must look beyond indicators to meaning; beyond growth to flourishing; beyond symptoms to root causes; and beyond expert-driven solutions to community-governed transformation.

The convergence of planetary health, wellbeing economics, and systems thinking offers more than critique; it provides actionable frameworks for community-led transformation. This requires institutionalizing community governance, redistributing decision-making power, and co-creating implementation tools that communities can own and adapt. The post-2030 agenda must emerge not from expert recommendations, but from relational accountability to those most affected by current systems' failures.

Academics must lead in advancing transdisciplinary research that centers community governance and challenges dominant metrics. Policymakers must embed equity, ecology, and community authority in budgetary and legislative frameworks. Development actors must shift from

extractive models to relational, regenerative systems of care that honor community leadership and Indigenous knowledge systems.

The window for incremental change is closing. A post-2030 agenda must rise from the convergence of crises with the courage to chart a new path; one guided by community wisdom, planetary boundaries, and relational accountability. One that restores not only ecosystems, but also relationships and decision-making power to those who understand that health, economy, and ecology are inseparable.

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