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Mapping sustainable wellbeing viewpoints on two dimensions: technical and socio-cultural decoupling

Can wellbeing be created on the basis of an economy that is not sustainable? Of course it cannot. So why are we collectively so incapable of turning around the current unsustainable system of producing wellbeing globally? One reason for this is that we look at "sustainability" from perspectives that are, or seem to be, incommensurable. As a result, we keep talking or even shouting past each other. I will attempt to put some of the key talking points onto a map that can collectively be used as a reference point for a better dialogue.

Two key dimensions of (dis)agreement

It seems that there are two key dimensions on which arguments are spread. The first dimension of (dis)agreement relates questions such as: Can we decouple economic growth from its environmental ills? What is the probability that global economic growth can continue, while its harmful environmental effects are cut effectively and rapidly enough so as to avoid the looming global disasters related to environmental degradation? I will label these type of questions as the "technical decoupling question". The arguments in, for instance, Jackson (2009) and can den Bergh (2011) fall mostly within this category.

What kind of answers do we have to this question? The optimistic answer seems to be that human technological creativity has no limits and that we can triumph over all the key environmental challenges we will be facing in the next 20 to 100 years without having to compromise on economic growth. The pessimistic viewpoint is that, regardless of human creativity, decoupling cannot be executed effectively and rapidly enough to enable avoiding environmental disasters merely by developing and using technologies, and therefore compromises related to economic growth will be necessary. The middle ground between the more optimistic and pessimistic views includes opinions that could be described as rational optimism ("thus far, challenges have not prevented us from making developments, so there is no need to be worried now") or realistic pessimism ("hope for better but expect the worst – a pessimist is never disappointed").

The second dimension of (dis)agreement relates to questions such as: Which are more crucial to human wellbeing – economic manmade resources or other "resources" such as the Nature and non-economic social and cultural relations? Can we handle the global unsustainability crisis through economic reforms (whether radical or moderate) only, or is there a deeper crisis of human civilization behind the predicament? These questions represent what I would call the "socio-cultural decoupling question". It seems that Latouche (2009) and Kallis (2011) fall well within this category.

How can we approach the socio-cultural decoupling question? On one hand, we can argue that the Nature is the most crucial source of human wellbeing because it is practically impossible for us to sustain life without access to its diverse resources. Simply put, without Nature, no human. On the other hand, there are also grounds to argue that economic activity is primary, because natural resources do not provide wellbeing benefits to humans *unless* there is economic activity through which the resources are used to build wellbeing for humans. To put it bluntly, one would die quickly out in the wilderness if one would simply lay there and do nothing – since "doing something" would count as economic activity. Hence, economic activity could be considered primary in the human quest for wellbeing, while the Nature is a "mere" resource in this quest.

These two dimensions – the technical decoupling question and the socio-cultural decoupling question – together form a map (see Figure 1).

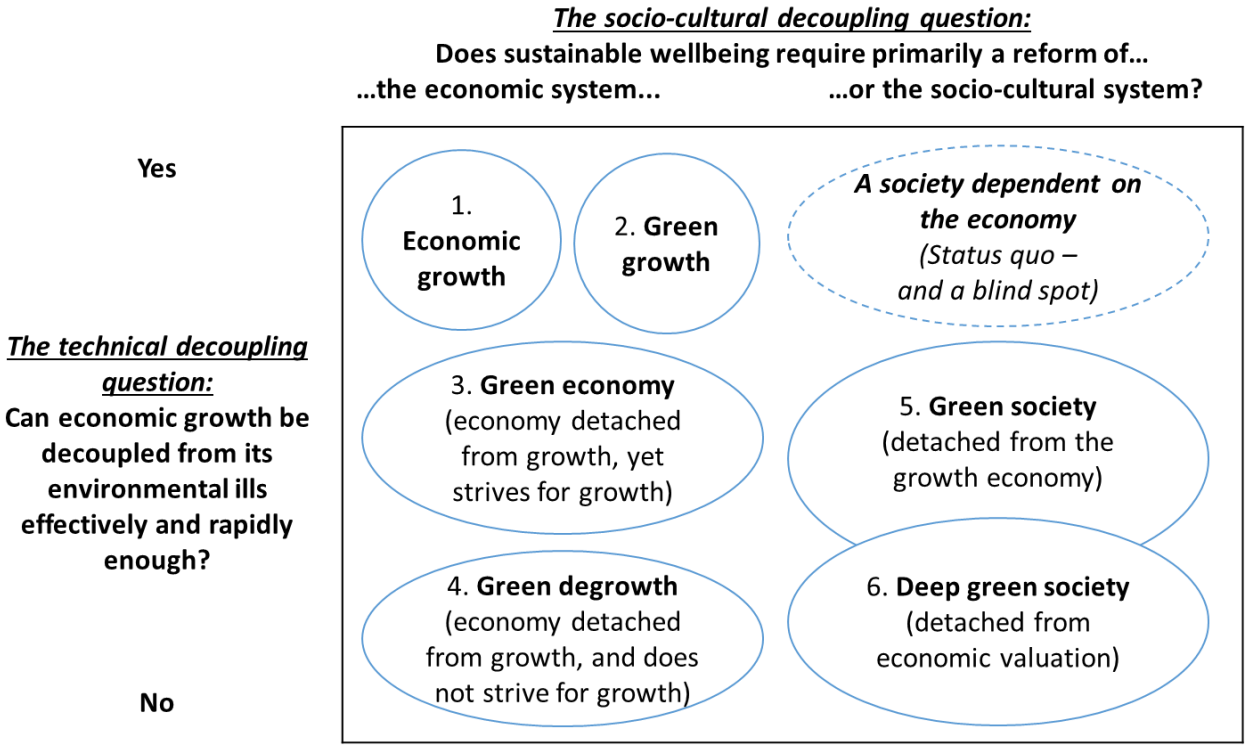

Figure 1: Six basic viewpoints to sustainable wellbeing plus a blind spot

Illustrations of the viewpoints

There are at least six possible perspectives on "sustainable wellbeing" that we can put on the map – and a blind spot. Next, I will illustrate how the proponents of each perspective would likely present their argument.

1. Economic growth as the foundation of wellbeing (1): "Economic growth increases wellbeing. The resources provided by the natural environment are limited but in practice, through technological development, those limits will not hinder economic growth. For example, advantage can be taken of technology in the mitigation of climate change, and there will be enough solar energy to meet practically all our needs. The wellbeing of the

natural environment must be respected. However, this is a task for environmental policy rather than economic policy."

2. Green growth (aka immaterial growth) (2): "Many of the limits of the natural environment are about to be exceeded. The key challenges include climate change and the deterioration in biological diversity. These challenges must be resolved quickly. The technology necessary for de-coupling is already here, or soon will be, and therefore environmental problems will not stand in the way of economic growth. Green, or immaterial, economic growth must be set as an economic policy goal. Co-ordination between economic policy and environmental policy will be required in order to achieve this."

3. Green economy detached from economic growth, but strives for growth (3): "The limits of the natural environment have been reached. Environmental policies must be put into practice in order to ensure the avoidance of global environmental problems swiftly and effectively. By taking advantage of technology, economic growth can be made greener. In an optimistic scenario, global green economic growth becomes a reality. This should be the goal. There is also a more pessimistic scenario: as the result of strict environmental standards, economic growth could slow down, stop or even turn into degrowth in the coming decades. Green growth should be pursued but, at the same time, to be on the safe side, the economic system's dependence on growth should be reduced."

4. Green degrowth detached from economic growth, does not strive for growth, but strives for sustainable economy (4): "Economic activities must be green. It is highly probable that detaching economic growth from harmful environmental effects cannot be done as effectively as necessary within the required time limit. In all probability, making the economy greener will, therefore, bring economic growth to a halt and possibly lead to decades of degrowth. Degrowth is not an objective; it is the outcome of strict environmental standards. For this reason, the emphasis must be on building a type of economic system that can also maintain its socially sustainable functionality during the periods of degrowth, eliminating the need to strive for economic growth."

5. Green society detached from growth (5): "Environmental and societal policies are prioritised over economic policy. The economy is merely a tool. Green societal policy is necessary in building natural and human wellbeing. The benefits of economic growth are recognised and the green economy is valued, but the economy is very clearly viewed as a tool. Preparations are made for the pessimistic scenario that the detachment of harmful environmental effects from economic growth fails, resulting in stagnation or degrowth. The focus is, therefore, on building a green society in which wellbeing can be sustained without economic growth."

6. Deep green society detached from economic valuation (6): "The relationship between humans and nature is unhealthy and it is unlikely that it can be revived in a society based on economic-centric ideologies. In an economic-centric thinking pattern, too much emphasis is put on measuring the economic efficiency of activities, thus restricting societal creativity. Being economically efficient does not, however, mean the same as being environmentally or humanly healthy. The goal should be set at achieving human wellbeing that respects the natural environment, in the most holistic and diverse form possible. The domination of economic policy should be actively demolished in order to

make more room for discussion of societal values and for policies in which life is the crucial factor."

Finally, there is the **blind spot**. Any discussant that has no urge or capability to look at sustainable wellbeing as anything but an economical question or a technical question within the economical paradigm has this blind spot. "Just fix the economy, no need to look elsewhere." Hence, no need to look toward the right hand side of the map.

Conclusion

In this paper I have presented a map of different perspectives to sustainable wellbeing. It is my hope that the map can be used in order to improve dialogue among the fighting camps such as "green growth" and "degrowth". I do not suggest this map would stop or solve the argument – indeed the argument may currently be unsolvable or it may be that only time will tell. But I do hope that the map will help the discussants to better understand each other's argument and stop talking past each other.

The map has been tested at a leadership course on sustainable financial policy offered by Sitra (The Finnish Innovation Fun). Each viewpoint was supported by someone. Some participants learned that their perspectives widened – "it never occurred to me that green growth and the green economy could be different things". The far ends of the spectrum, idealism and realism, went head to head inside a single person – "ideologically, I want a society detached from economic valuation, but green growth is the only realistic option". Thus, it seems that the map can function as a tool to bring about a more collective understanding on possible perspectives to sustainable wellbeing.

References

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