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An ecosocial welfare future: how to make it happen

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A fuller account of the arguments in this article can be found in M.P. Murphy, *Creating an Ecosocial Welfare Future* ([Policy Press, May 2023](#)). Prof Mary Murphy is Head of the Department of Sociology in Maynooth University. An advocate for equality and social justice, she is a member of the Council of State.

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For further reading, education and discussion resources (including blogs and pod casts, PowerPoints, links, journal articles) see www.ecosocial.ie

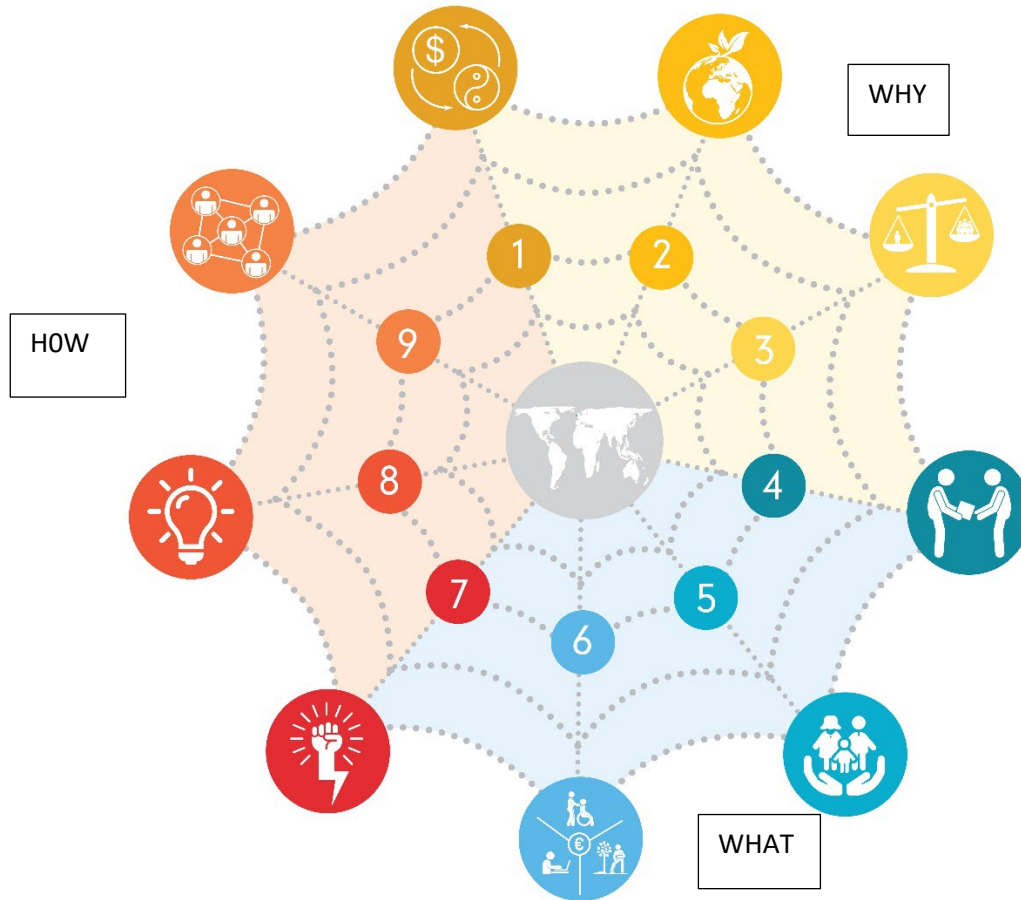


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We need big imaginative ideas about the direction of travel but also need capacity to define the smaller first steps in traveling down that route.

Storytelling, narratives and framing are an essential part of any strategy for change. This short article addresses the who, what, why, how and where of creating an ecosocial welfare future. It is organised as nine key steps to a future welfare settlement, which are outlined in the visual of the Spiders Web below. This article identifies the dual challenge of environmental destruction and inequality and proposes an ecosocial solution as part of a broader transformative agenda to a post-growth world. It situates a political strategy for making it happen through a deepening and widening of democratic institutions and processes, and coalition-building. This version of an ecosocial welfare future is offered not as a concrete solution or definitive answer but to prompt social and institutional imagination and encourage discussion and debate. The conclusion underscores the urgency of now and the need to be *Ready Now*.



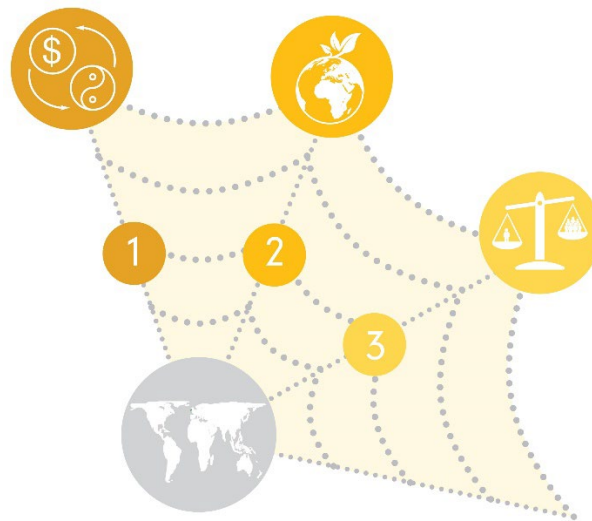
WHO

The who in this story is me, the author, you, the reader, citizen's and residents and the civil society we work with and through to make change happen. The story challenges all of us to play our part in creating an equal and sustainable future, in demanding tangible and urgent action for climate justice from government and elites. Author and climate activist, Naomi Klein ([2014](#)), has candidly admitted that, like many of us, she came late to climate change politics. Rebecca Solnit ([2016](#)) argues humanity needs to shift priorities and make its 'mild engagement with climate something larger and fiercer'. We all need to find our place in engagement with climate change – the most important action we can take is to use our voice and vote to demand systemic change.

WHY

There are by now numerous arguments for a new ecosocial settlement of welfare along with many examinations of the politics of making ecosocial welfare a reality. There are many reasons for recasting the welfare state to meet the challenges of achieving sustainability and equality. It is important to integrate ecological and social issues in identifying the problems and solutions, and the political strategies to make change happen. Theory can help us understand why and how we need to act. Key concepts including globalisation, sustainability, institutions, services, income, imaginaries, transformation, and power all inform welfare reform ambition.

Contemporary Irish capitalism, and capitalism globally relies on growth as a legitimating narrative. We need to contest this entrapment in consumption and the growth myth (JCFC, 2020, Hicckel, 2021). This requires a social and political imagination that integrates the combined demands for justice and sustainability as the basis for a rejuvenated society. Our entire political imagination must undergo an ever deeper ecological conversion (JCFC, 2020, p 48). We need to trigger the transformational potential of social policy in specific reform proposals across institutions, services and income supports as ecosocial welfare.



“An ecosocial welfare solution demotes economic growth as a policy objective, and focuses on maximizing human well-being, collectively meeting basic needs, and valuing socially useful work.”

The political economy

While this is largely an argument about how welfare and social policy needs to change, the starting point is defining the problem: that the political economy of 21st century capitalism impacts negatively on both environmental sustainability and societal inequality. 80 years ago Karl Polanyi wrote *The Great Transformation* which explored the social and environmental destruction associated with the industrial revolution (1944 [2001]). His work understood social policy as a reaction or response to capitalism and its

unrelenting commodification¹ of labour, land, and money (Kirby 2021). Social protection and welfare can be understood as decommodifying responses – a need for decommodification² underpins this analysis. Contemporary political economy models and the related worlds of welfare capitalism are deficient. They fail to secure gender and other equalities, socio-economic justice, health and well-being, social reproduction, democratic participation as well as sustainable ecologies. The case for transformation is stronger from these multiple perspectives and demands a comprehensive political response. The case for an ecosocial solution is obvious, and true from perspectives of climate change and wider system change. Green-growth solutions that are overly productivist or techno-optimist in nature are not consistent with a post-growth transformation. An ecosocial model demotes economic growth as a policy objective, and maximises human well-being, meets basic needs, and protects our common eco-system.

The Polanyian framework (1944 [2001]) and the concept of commodification offers a way of understanding our contemporary globalised and financialised eco-political economy – and the problem of related social and ecological destruction – as commodification. The concept of decommodification to frame potential solutions points to an eco-social project that de-emphasises the role of the market in favour of an enhanced role for the state and society. States should focus on addressing need through social, public and local mechanisms in which we care for each other and put our planet at the center of our policy processes.



Environmental degradation

Exploring the impact of this regime on the planet cannot be done without analysis of the impact on society: these interrelated problems require cojoined solutions. The collective impacts on both the planet's eco system and society cannot be overstated. Environmental degradation and inequality are different sides of the same coin.

We are approaching planetary tipping points which may be irreversible; global warming is triggering devastating impacts such as major ice melts and disrupted wind and ocean currents. Mitigating these

¹ Assigning a financial value to something so it becomes marketable.

² The act of removing dependence on the market

effects will require radical transformation. Recent reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change ([IPCC](#)) conclude that unprecedented transformation and implementation is required within this decade, and that a system change is now required. Urgent climate action is still worth doing. The time is now.

The cost of climate transition is already being felt more by those who can least afford and who least contributed to the problem, hence the need for transitional justice and welfare state intervention at a global level. Neither technological adjustments nor carbon pricing mechanisms will achieve such transformation, whereas a post-growth orientation offers a potential pathway to decommodification.

Inequality

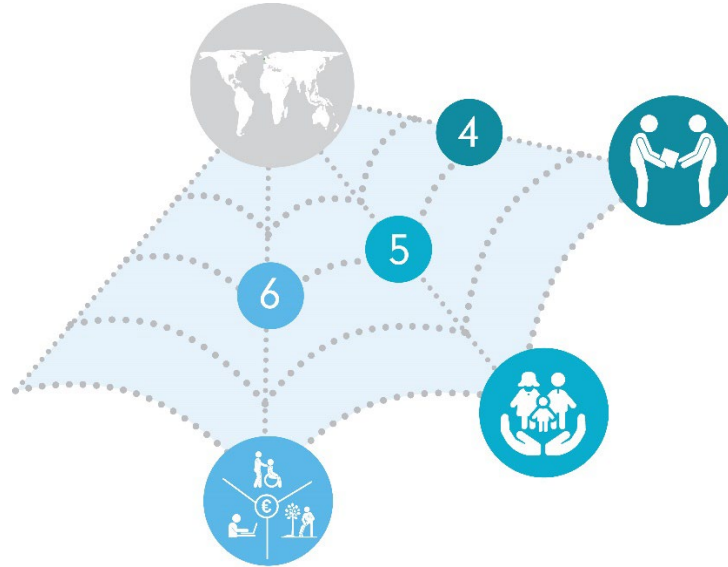
A parallel focus on inequality, itself unequally experienced across different groups in society and between nations, highlights its intersectional nature. The contemporary global model of financialised capital not only leads to environmental destruction, loss of biodiversity and global warming, but also, without doubt, leads to greater inequality. Such inequality intersects with the ecological crisis, increasing wants and fueling consumption in the Global North, while leaving countries and people in the Global South vulnerable to poverty and ill-equipped to meet the challenges that climate change is already presenting. This is particularly true for women and girls who bear the worst impacts of both inequality and climate change. The tensions at the heart of welfare policy in the Global North highlight how inappropriate contemporary welfare regimes are when it comes to meeting societal challenges. A less conditional and more enabling and flourishing form of careful social policy is needed to resource the scale of active citizenship required in an eco-social state. The challenge is to redistribute and support work, income, time and democratic participation in a post-growth society and economy. So far, the argument is that the contemporary capitalist political economy's destructive impacts on both environmental sustainability and society highlights the urgent and compelling need for transformation. The case for change is altogether stronger from the multiple perspectives of equality and ecology and demands a comprehensive politics of transformation embracing recognition, redistribution, representation, *and* sustainability.

WHAT

It is crucial to recognise and support the interdependence between people's agency 'to do and be' and the societal, culture and structural institutions that mediate their lives. An anthropological view of humanity illuminates how survival and flourishing are generated through three functions: distribution/production (the market economy); redistribution (the state); and reciprocity (society, community, kin). A reimagined welfare system needs to address these three roles. What kind of welfare reform is consistent with the urgent need to decarbonise the economy and pursue other environmental goals including biodiversity? Three primary policies can underpin transformation.

- I. An enabling institutional infrastructure can enhance the eco-system of people's lives and limit our collective dependence on the market to deliver our core services and supports.
- II. An economy that has as its foundation a network of provisioning systems for satisfying basic and essential needs can meet collective needs through a system of universal basic services.

- III. A minimum income guarantee, a form of participation income, can enable participation in socially useful activity and life choices consistent with a post-growth world that values and supports care, reciprocity, mutual interdependence, and democracy.



“Reducing collective consumption not only helps reduce emissions and safeguard natural resources, it also promotes equality and inclusion”.

Enabling institutions

While market production and purchase are the primary vehicles of survival in capitalism, reciprocity and redistribution remain embedded features of contemporary societies and imaginative reform can draw on mechanisms to integrate welfare into the tissue of social interdependence. Institutions are ‘the formal and informal rules, norms, precedents, and organisational factors that structure behaviour’ ([Pomey et al, 2010](#)). As humanly devised constraints and enablers, they structure our political, economic and social interactions ([Folbre, 2021, p 23](#)). They influence our opportunities to be and do what we value, while also enabling and constraining our agency, and unequally impacting on different social groups, often exacerbating social divisiveness.

A new ecosocial paradigm needs to resituate freedom and liberty and generate substantive equality through collective reciprocity and mutual aid. New institutions need capacity to promote new norms, or revive old ones, that can counter behaviours and beliefs that maintain myths of individualism, competition, consumption and selfishness, traits that are counter to a balanced eco-social settlement. Enabling institutions can creatively balance reciprocity, freedom and our collective interdependence. Local institutions are vital in reimagining work and care, in enabling or facilitating autonomy, and in working through a culture of co-production, collaboration and participation. This rebalancing requires a re-thinking of activation policy as a tool for just transition; enabling institutions are needed to facilitate socially useful and environmentally sustainable work, enabling social inclusion policy and employment in the care and social economies. It also requires thinking differently about institutions such as tax and

welfare, these are not only practical supports and sources of revenue but also building blocks for nurturing values ([Leicester, 2020, p 108](#)). Taxing wealth, for example, is a way of promoting fair reciprocity, and a way of viewing resources as collective concepts that support our mutual interdependence. This is consistent with underlying values of many world religions and belief systems, including Christianity which cautions against misuse of privilege and wealth, and against destructive selfishness ([Linney, 2023](#)).

Universal basic services

How can a new welfare settlement best meet people's basic non-substitutable needs collectively and in ways that enable ecological and societal wellbeing? Some needs, for example, clothing, can likely be met within the scope of the market, but many needs are best provided through state, social or collective mechanisms. Reducing collective consumption offers the best potential to reduce emissions and safeguard natural resources, while also being key to more equal outcomes. Universal Basic Services (UBS) are central to reducing reliance on the market to satisfy essential needs and are a key building block of a more decommodified eco-social state. Seeking to rebalance over reliance on market provision, it makes the case for reciprocity, and state, society, and economic democracy, all of which can be promoted through UBS ([Coote 2022](#)). The role of the state is an important enabler of such services providing a regulatory framework and funding for a plurality of providers across public, social and private sectors. Care services are a priority but so too is health, education, housing, while environment, transport and recreation have much to offer in terms of sustainability.

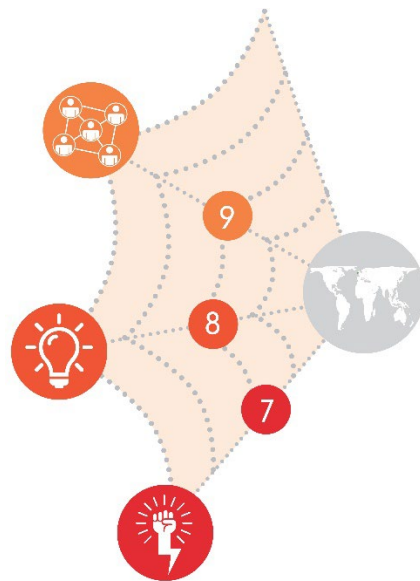
Participation Income

An ecologically oriented social model demands a fundamental overhaul of existing welfare trajectories. Income support needs a transformative focus to transition sufficiently to a decommodifying support. This means shifting away from institutions and policies that 'commodify' labour and prioritise productivity growth and employment as the primary mechanism to social citizenship. This necessitates practical changes in supporting institutions and UBS. Decommodification requires that policy and practice promote greater varieties of participation beyond the labour market and reciprocal interdependent care relationships throughout our life cycles. The income support system needs to complement principles of an enabling and facilitating welfare system that primarily works through UBS to meet collective needs. A spectrum of income support options include universal basic income (UBI), minimum income guarantees (MIG), Participation Income (PI) and means-tested conditional payments. PI is an example of a state income support system that can de-emphasise production, consumption and employment, but enable and socially value other forms of work, recovering time for activities that have social and ecological value such as providing care, democratic participation and sustaining the environment ([Hiilamo 2022](#)). Some pandemic era income supports offer interesting examples for income support reform.

HOW

The process of creating an ecosocial welfare future requires engaging with the democratic challenges of social transformation. Social change happens through imagination, ideas and language, and through mobilization, and new forms of transformative power. Various political strategies are therefore needed

to achieve the scale of transformation required for an ecosocial state. Theories of change and transformation translate into strategies for action. Our imagination and ideas influence what we think is possible and how we approach 'strategies for change' or 'making it happen'. Democratic engagement of active citizens requires collective mobilisation across different interests and joining the dots across relevant political and civil society campaigns and programmes. Ever mindful of the agency/structure dichotomy, agency needs to be of sufficient scale to thwart the obvious power of vested interests who gain from and so defend the status quo. This requires transforming political opportunity structures in democratic institutions and policy processes into a high-energy democracy.



An ecosocial solution to climate change and inequality needs to be generated through the interaction a mobilised people and democratic institutions; a high energy democracy is needed to enable a new economic and social settlement.

Mobilising for Transformation

The old welfare state came about because of a post-war settlement, the question now is how might an ecosocial welfare state emerge? Polanyi ([1944](#) [\[2001\]](#)) understands that social protection emerges as the response of a double movement from society pressuring the state to re-regulate the disembedded or deregulated economy to better serve the needs of society. How might various movements, including those seeking gender, climate and economic justice, coalesce to pressure for a new form of ecosocial welfare? Here we begin to tease out the politics of transformation and how the concept of ecosocial can offer a focus for a wider struggle for transformation. This requires being realistic about the strong structural power of those who benefit most from maintaining the status quo. Concepts of power, empowerment and transformation need to be unpacked. The power cube (Gaventa [2006](#), [2021](#)) offers a spectrum of power (over, to, with, within, and for) and different integrated forms, levels and spaces of power. Crisis needs to be interrogated as an opportunity for change, and we need to assess the role of ideas in orienting change during crisis. Crisis only offers such opportunity if people are ready to use it as such. This requires civil society to be ready now, with ideas and capacity to be a space for agency and

mobilisation. Understanding strategic logics of transformation assists us in identifying barriers to effective transformation and inclusive participation in collective action.

Ideas and Imagination

The greatest poverty we should fear is poverty of our imagination. This is a chicken and egg conundrum: mobilisation and alternatives are different sides of the same coin. Alternatives need not be highly developed; nor do they need to be policy blueprints or detailed maps, but they do need to be inclusively imagined and articulated before the crisis emerges. Our social and political imagination provides direction or compass points, while our institutional or programmatic imagination can articulate the first steps of travel. Arguments for policy imagination focus on the need to articulate alternatives in the tradition of ‘realist pragmatism’ or ‘real utopias’. Lessons point to the importance of framing alternatives in constructive, offensive rather than defensive, language capable of mobilising a wide range of actors. Uniting rather than dividing society offers hope as does being ‘for’ rather than ‘against’. This underscores the importance of who articulates alternatives and ‘vocabularies of our imagination’.

High energy democracy and coalition building

But what about the central theme of structure and agency. We organise collective decision-making through dominant forms of structural power and institutions that are often controlled by elites, while transformative change happens most often through the agency of people power, mobilisation, and collective action. The tremendous structural power of capital, corporations and elites must be taken seriously, but so too does our own capacity and power as a force for transformation. Key to this force is the relationship between mobilisation and democratic institutions ([Jones and O’Donnell 2017](#)). Institutional democracy requires deepening and widening the mean of participation. While there is no single pathway to making ecosocial welfare happen, all pathways require two dimensions: more democracy (more equalising structures) and mobilised citizens (more agentic power).

So, while we can never disregard the structural power of capital, corporations and elites, we have to realise the importance of engagement of people in ideational debate in rich forms of participatory and deliberative democracy or ‘high-energy democracy’ ([Unger 2009](#)). Strategies for collective mobilisation include coalition-building and mobilisation around gender and social reproduction, environmental and traditional distributional concerns about income equality and public services, inspiring a new politics or a triple movement of various constellations of actors, and clusters of mobilisations.

WHERE

An ecosocial solution to climate change and inequality flows from a global agenda with capacity to unite poor and rich countries in a new economic and social settlement, the financial responsibility for which must be borne by the Global North, and those who profit from fossil fuel and other extractive industries. The more detailed discussions in the book, *Creating an Ecosocial Welfare Future* ([Murphy 2023](#)), apply predominantly to developed nations’ welfare state reform. The same principles, but not the same policies, may be relevant for the Global South, while global distribution of resources is essential.

Future welfare policy must develop in this international context but will be implemented in national contexts. Everyone can imagine an ecosocial welfare state in their own national context, on how their

national political economy impacts negatively on local and global ecological sustainability and biodiversity as well as social inequality, cohesion and well-being. While models of welfare regimes exist, every welfare state is also hybrid and will require its own transformative strategy, albeit we can enable each other and learn from each other's experiences.



