A well-being network approach to Covid-19 recovery: The approach of 4theRegion



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Regional development

This paper explores well-being as a basis for regional development in the post-Covid recovery. Regional development covers a wide range of issues. Definitions of local and regional development have historically been discussed in relation to economic growth, income and employment (Armstrong & Taylor, 2000; Pike et al., 2007), and the vast body of literature on regional development discusses a range of strategies, including networks (Huggins and Thompson, 2015), clusters (Porter,

1998), and entrepreneurial ecosystems (Isenberg, 2011). Additional literature points to the Triple Helix model, cooperation between universities, government authorities, and industrial firms aimed to stimulate new innovations (Etzkowitz, 2003), and smart specialisation (cf. McCann & Ortega-Argilés, 2016; Pugh, 2018), which aims to boost growth and jobs by enabling a place to identify and develop its own competitive advantages. A more comprehensive recent definition of regional development is offered by the OECD (2021), as "…a general effort to enhance well-being and living standards in all region types, from cities to rural areas, and improve their contribution to national performance and more inclusive, resilient societies". This definition aligns well with more recent attention on well-being, which is gaining traction in regional development research (Fudge et al., 2021). In regional economic terms, well-being is considered a more comprehensive understanding of human well-being aligned with traditional economic interpretations of the foundations of human welfare (Stiglitz et al., 2018).

As well-being has emerged more recently in this context, more research is necessary in understanding the role it plays in supporting regional development, especially in different research settings and contexts, and particularly at a time of recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. As such, this paper investigates a case study of Swansea Bay in west Wales, UK (see Figure 1), where a well-being network-based approach to regional development is promoted through 4theRegion. This case study looks at the unique approach of 4theRegion based on community engagement and the close cooperation of a range of stakeholders in a local network, underpinned by the influence of well-being. The paper is based on two phases of interviews, firstly with the 2 directors of the case study organisation, 4theRegion, followed by a second phase of interviews with 10 representatives of member organisations. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data, based on the Braun and Clarke (2006) process.

Well-being

Well-being is being increasingly seen as a more suitable measure of development compared to growth, with countries such as Iceland and New Zealand promoting this. Within academic literature, there is growing recognition of the intersection between well-being and regional development, with both concepts having their roots in welfarism (Fudge et al., 2021). Well-being is defined as "a state of being with others and the environment, which arises when human needs are met, when

individuals and communities can act meaningfully to pursue their goals, and when individuals and communities enjoy a satisfactory quality of life" (Fudge et al. 2021, p144). This definition underlines links to ecosystems (Breslow et al., 2016), which is a notable concept within regional development literature. Some Governments and industries are looking at well-being at different scales to understand how people may be impacted by industrial development in some regions (Breslow et al., 2017). In 2015, Wales became the first country to pass an act on well-being, the Well-being of Future Generations Act, in which policies should align with 7 principles of developing prosperity, resilience, health, equality, cohesive communities, cultural vibrancy (including the Welsh language), and global responsibility (see Figure 3). Similar legislation has more recently been seen in New Zealand, where the Living Standards Framework underpins national policy, and the state of Victoria, where local well-being plans have become a statutory requirement in guiding regional development through the Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan (MPHWP). In Iceland, the government published indicators for measuring Well-being in 2019, as a means of evaluating the prosperity and quality of life of its citizens. These policies underline that some governments position well-being as a desirable state and aspirational goal, with some private sector organisations also aligning with well-being goals as part of social responsibility and productivity agendas (Fudge et al., 2021).

A Well-being approach to Regional Development: 4theRegion

4theRegion is a membership organisation of regional businesses, community groups and stakeholders aimed at achieving asset-based change and development across the Swansea Bay City Region (Figure 1). 4theRegion has a unique approach to regional development, due to its place-based focus and underpinning on well-being, and in particular, the Well Being of Future Generations Act (2015). 4theRegion connects people within the region through events, projects and forums, and has a focus on six key areas, one of which is "the well-being region". Due to this unique business model, a detailed case study was undertaken of the 4theRegion in order to understand their approach and analyse its benefits and possible ways in which it could be improved. The networking approach of the case study bridges links between the public, private and third sectors to develop and support opportunities for purposeful business, well-being, community-based asset development and sustainable growth within the region, based on social purpose.

Figure 1: Map of Swansea Bay City Region within Wales



Source of the Map

Findings underline the unique approach taken by 4theRegion, centred on an asset-based local development grounded in social purpose. This approach is influenced by well-being and seeks to engage with a wide variety of community stakeholders to derive holistic flourishing. The region is significant as a largely rural area, based around the regional city of Swansea, and findings contribute to wider knowledge about the impact of regional development on places with similar

demographic and geographic characteristics. These findings could support organic sustainable growth within communities, which is recognised as an important aspect in the post-Covid recovery.

Findings suggest that 4theRegion are instrumental in bringing together the ecosystem of South West Wales towards a focus on purpose and well-being, with Figure 2 conceptualising this approach. The figure outlines that the approach is based on cooperation between various stakeholders from across the region, which includes local businesses of all sizes, local authorities from all councils associated with the region, the city region, local community groups including charities and social enterprises, educational institutions including schools, colleges and universities, and all individuals in the regions who could play a role in local development. Another actor not shown in the figure is 4theRegion, who play an important role as an enabler, organising events, leading discussions and engaging the various stakeholders in order to achieve impactful outputs. All the actors are linked by a social purpose in achieving sustainable development and well-being, which also stems from the overarching focus on the Well-being of Future Generations act in Wales, and states that decision-making should be based on the various pillars of well-being. The principles of well-being, as well as the structure of this approach, could provide a valuable model for other regions to seek regional development, particularly as part of the recovery following the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 2: Conceptualisation of the 4theRegion approach



Well-being of Future Generations Act Wales

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 aims to improve the social, environmental, economic and cultural well-being of Wales (www.gov.wales) This is the first Act of its kind, with Wales leading the way in its approach to protecting future generations. The Act sets out seven well-being goals which are embedded into law. The goals include *a healthier Wales, a globally responsible Wales, a more equal Wales, a resilient Wales, a Wales of cohesive communities, a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language and a more prosperous Wales* (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: The Well-being of Future Generations Act



Source: Welsh Government (2021)

Hailed as a leading example in policy development (Davies, 2016; Messham & Sheard 2020), the Act provides a legally binding framework for the way in which public bodies within Wales must work, including the way in which they work together for the good of Wales. Emphasis is placed on public bodies to achieve all of the goals set out in the Act, which are monitored through the use of 46 indicators. The vision for Wales is ambitious and aims to address not only the challenging economic landscape but key global challenges such as climate change, poverty and health and well-being. These challenges have been further exasperated by the global pandemic. The commitment of the Welsh Government to embedding these principles is demonstrated in the development of the independent Commissioners Office. Keen to ensure accountability, a Future Generations Commissioner for Wales was also appointed. The aim of the

Commissioner's Office is to challenge public bodies to ensure they are embedding the principles of the Act within all that they do. A series of well-being objectives are set out by the public bodies to ensure they are contributing to each of the goals, with a requirement for them to demonstrate undertaking reasonable steps to meet these goals.

Supporters of the Act have called on the UK Government to legislate in the way the Welsh Government has to meet these global challenges. However, there has been some criticism of the measurements, interpretation and the ability to enforce the Act (Davies, 2016). A further criticism is that the Act only applies to the public sector. Many believe that meeting these challenges requires a commitment from both the public and private sectors. 4theregion comments that the Act should be embedded into communities more widely in order to enable and encourage "A Nation behind an Act". Findings from the case study of 4theregion suggest that the membership base is passionate about embedding these principles more widely in order to contribute to 4theregion's aim for the South West Wales region to become the first well-being region in the world.

Recovery from Covid

The sudden changes that occurred in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, notably national lockdowns, meant that many businesses were impacted, either having to pause their business activities or diversify the business model in order to survive. This was particularly felt by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), where resources are often limited, notably among rural SMEs, leading to a more challenging recovery (Cotterell and Bowen, 2021). The effects of the pandemic underline the need for greater resilience in businesses where possible. Regional development could play a significant part in the post-Covid recovery, ensuring that local economies can develop sustainable growth, particularly regions with lower levels of economic development, such as rural areas. This coincides with increasing debates about environmental sustainability, following the COP26 summit in Glasgow and increasing awareness of a global climate emergency. As such, the principles of well-being can provide a clearer direction towards more holistic opportunities for sustainable economic development.

The findings from the case study of 4theRegion underline the value of cooperation among relevant local stakeholders to identify, conceptualise and seek solutions to specific issues that impact the local economy. In the context of West Wales this

includes limited infrastructure, such as reliable broadband access or transport; and a lower concentration of businesses, leading to fewer opportunities for spillover effects, and fewer universities, with fewer opportunities for knowledge transfer. The cooperation of local stakeholders, such as businesses, community groups, government and higher education institutions, means that the focus of regional development activities focusses specifically on the issues that are prominent within the region. This aligns with a bottom-up approach to regional development that is promoted within more recent literature, advocating networks and clusters through entrepreneurial ecosystems, and engagement across the triple helix of industry, government and education.

The unique focus of 4theRegion on well-being in its regional development activities is notable in ensuring that their actions align with the principles of the Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015) in Wales. The Act emphasises the need for policy to be founded on the seven principles of a prosperous Wales, a resilient Wales, a healthier Wales, a more equal Wales, a Wales of cohesive communities, a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language, and a globally responsible Wales (see Figure 3).

The emphasis on prosperity, resilience, health, equality, cohesion, cultural value and global responsibility represent important aspects in ensuring sustainable economic development that could have a positive impact on everyone. These principles could provide a valuable foundation for a more inclusive recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, supporting opportunities for businesses to develop resilience, promote environmental sustainability and enhance productivity through a better work-life balance. Countries such as Iceland have been exploring 4-day working weeks as a means of supporting well-being among employees and developing greater productivity through a better work-life balance. This emphasis on well-being was highlighted during the Covid-19 pandemic by increasing capabilities to work from home, and a greater awareness of how work stresses impacted employees before the pandemic. While discussions on well-being and regional development gain traction, further research is needed to explore this in different contexts, however, the example of 4theRegion and Welsh Government policy implies that the principles of well-being could support more inclusive regional development in the post-Covid recovery.

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