

A time for new beginnings: Can health or wellbeing trump the national economy as our number-one policy priority?

It is traditional to start the New Year by looking back over the past and reflecting on how we might like to do things differently. This seems particularly apposite with the developing economic crisis. For many, this has already brought the loss of jobs and the repossession of homes. No one would want to deny the misery such events cause but, nevertheless, perhaps we should grasp the opportunity that crises often bring to be more creative in imagining how we might like the future to be.

In the UK, that the national economy is the number one policy priority has long gone unquestioned, often tending to subsume other priorities (with the exceptions of war and peace). This became particularly apparent to me in a recent project which involved exploring the relationship between health inequalities research and policy in the UK¹. Not only did many of the policymakers and academics I interviewed seem to find it difficult to talk about their work in anything other than economic terms, but several policymakers told me that the best way of persuading their colleagues that it was important to tackle health inequalities was to present the issue as one connected to the success of the national economy. For example, a senior civil servant in Scotland explained that s/he 'sold' the need to prioritise tackling health inequalities to his/her policy colleagues in the following manner:

'By delivering a healthier Scotland, we're ultimately delivering a wealthier Scotland. [...] My argument is, yes, I want better educated children because I know that they will be healthier children and I want them there because I want them to pay my pension, because this will create a wealthier economy, a more sustainable economy, one... that fits well with everybody else.'

This extract reveals the clear assumption that it is somehow obvious and indisputable that securing economic wealth at the national level constitutes the key, motivating factor for policymakers. This raises some important questions: why should it be so much more motivating to improve health as a means of creating a wealthier economy than the other way around? And why did none of the policymakers I spoke to feel that moral, ethical or human rights-based imperatives to tackle health inequalities would suffice? There is no logical reason why the pursuit of national economic growth should be more appealing to policymakers than the pursuit of a healthy population. However, it is possible to understand the interviewees' accounts, if we conceive of the focus on national economic success as a 'meta-narrative' (see¹). Once established, 'meta-narratives' can seem self-perpetuating and difficult to challenge; they are ideas that have been institutionalised, shaping both the organisations we operate in and the language we use. Such traits make meta-narratives extremely hard to extricate. Nevertheless, some of the most popular theories about the policy process suggest there are times at which meta-narratives *do* crumble and fall, moments in which they *are* replaced by new (and, initially) innovative ways of thinking. Both Baumgartner & Jones' claim that policy develops through a series of 'punctured equilibriums'² and Hall's theory of 'policy paradigms'³ suggest that radical shifts in policy thinking can and do occur relatively suddenly.

Accurately predicting the factors required in order to secure such a shift seems impossible but most theorists agree that one important ingredient is a growing dissatisfaction with existing narratives. There can be little doubt then that at least one of the core requirements for achieving a paradigm shift is now in place. Last year, Will Hutton was one of many social commentators to argue that the current economic crisis points to the need to build an entirely new financial system⁴. Even the governor of the Bank of England, Mervyn King, conceded that

'a willingness to contemplate radical change' was required⁵. Whilst Hutton and King focused on what we might need to change in our approach to governing the economy, others were more ambitious. Shortly before Christmas a group of senior Anglican clergy joined calls to use this crisis as an opportunity to entirely re-think our national obsession with the pursuit of wealth, with the Bishop of Manchester emphasizing that this is '*not just an economic issue but a moral one. It's about what we value*'⁶.

There are, however, plenty of people (especially in the government and the financial sector) who believe the best approach to the current crisis is to attempt to resuscitate our existing system. The possibility for change is, therefore, far from guaranteed. If a paradigm shift is to occur, we need to do more than criticize; we need to openly discuss and more imaginatively envision potential alternatives. The Final Report of the *WHO Commission on the Social Determinants of Health*⁷ provides one possible starting point; it positions health as a human right and argues that social and economic policies ought to be more clearly orientated towards the protection of human rights. Other possibilities include Amartya Sen's capabilities approach⁸. Now that the current paradigm is showing signs of strain, perhaps we should use 2009 to invest more time reflecting on what rights-based, capabilities or other approaches to policy might involve.

¹ Smith, K.E. Health inequalities in Scotland and England: the translation of ideas between research and policy. 2008 University of Edinburgh: Ph.D thesis.

² Baumgartner, F., & Jones, B. *Agendas and instability in American politics*. 1993 Chicago: University of Chicago Press

³ Hall, P.A. Policy Paradigms, Experts and the State: The Case of Macro-Economic Policy Making in Britain. 1990 In Brooks, S. and Gagnon, A-G. (Eds.) *Social Scientists, Policy and the State*. New York: Praeger: 53-78.

⁴ Hutton, W. 'This terrifying moment is our one chance for a new world' in *The Observer* on Sunday 5th October 2008. URL:<http://tinyurl.com/3q7qbg> (last accessed at 22.15 on 07/01/09)

⁵ Conway, E. 'Mervyn King warns of 'radical change'' in *The Telegraph* on 1st April 2008. URL: <http://tinyurl.com/ku4bqp> (last accessed at 18.26 on 07/01/09)

⁶ Taylor, P.R. 'Bishops defend attack on ministers' in *The Manchester Evening News* on 29th December 2008. URL: <http://tinyurl.com/mohjhh>

⁷ WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health. Final Report: *Closing the gap in a generation - Health equity through action on the social determinants of health*. 2008 URL: http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2008/9789241563703_eng.pdf (last accessed at 23.17 on 7th January 2009).

⁸ Sen, A. *Commodities and Capabilities*. 1999 [1987] New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

If you wish to work with PoHG on this or any other public health issues please contact Debbie on contact@pohg.org.uk

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