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# Towards a Publicly Acceptable Postgrowth Social Policy? Thick, Eudaimonic Need as the Basis for a Sustainable Wellbeing State and Society

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**Abstract**

It is now widely accepted among sustainability scholars that only a postgrowth future, involving a voluntary, democratically negotiated, equitable downscaling of societies' physical throughput can succeed in addressing the environmental crisis. A significant challenge for proponents of such a change is the maintenance of human wellbeing in postgrowth Global North societies, where welfare systems are closely tied to economic growth. Policies, like Universal Basic Income (UBI) and Universal Basic Services (UBS) have been proposed using needs-based criteria to operationalize wellbeing but face political resistance due to financing concerns—their requirement for significant redistributive taxation reducing affluent groups' consumption. This article explores a potential solution to this problem: a broadening of need conceptualizations beyond thin approaches, associated with Doyal and Gough's work, to systematically incorporate thicker eudaimonic understandings. These highlight more fully non-material needs affecting a broader cross-section of the population. The article focuses on the world of paid and unpaid work to show that such an approach can successfully highlight non-material needs affecting a wide range of the population. However, using illustratively the popular postgrowth social policy option of working time reduction (WTR), it also shows that responding to such needs could generate significant trade-offs with other wellbeing goals and is likely to require a much broader postgrowth social policy agenda, if strongly entrenched growth and consumption norms are to be challenged. This would involve more detailed consideration of the wellbeing role of provisioning system elements other than the traditional welfare state.

**Keywords:** postgrowth; social policy; welfare state; eudaimonic need; well-being; working-time reduction



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## 1. Introduction

An important challenge for proponents of a postgrowth socio-ecological transition in Global North countries is the maintenance and promotion of human wellbeing given the inter-dependencies identified between economic growth and mature welfare states [1–4]. If the institutions considered primarily responsible for wellbeing in growth-oriented societies cannot be decoupled from economic expansion, postgrowth scenarios could become associated with 'contraction, parsimony and deprivation' [5] (p. 2). Popular concerns about this situation are already viewed as deflating political support for change, e.g., [1,5,6].

Eco-social policy scholars' efforts to address this challenge have focused on a range of social policy changes and innovations using needs-based criteria to operationalize human

wellbeing. Reforms associated with greener social policies have been considered, such as Universal Basic Income (UBI), including variants like a participation income, and Universal Basic Services (UBS) [7–12]. Work on more preventive policies and working time reduction (WTR) [12–15] has also been undertaken, but it gives less systematic attention to wellbeing (see below). Bohnenberger justifies the focus on UBI and UBS, together with her inclusion of Universal Basic Vouchers, by suggesting that these policies in combination are the most important part of welfare states' contribution to provisioning systems [7]: the means by which societies transform resources into social outcomes, incorporating households, labor and product markets, the third sector, and the state [16].

In general, assessments of UBI, UBS, and similar innovations conclude they could be the basis for sustainable welfare, meeting needs within planetary boundaries [17], particularly if operated complementarily. However, strong doubts remain whether the proposed reforms would be publicly acceptable, e.g., [18–22]. Buchs and Koch, for example, highlight the general limitations of needs-based approaches to convert 'generations who are expecting ever increasing levels of life expectancy, living standards and wellbeing' [1] (p. 161). This is particularly the case for those large parts of existing populations who currently perceive their wellbeing as maintained by consumption [23]. Strong doubts exist whether they would be reassured by reforms primarily designed to satisfy needs far below their present situation. One important problem in this respect is financing. The expansive nature of the proposed reforms, and likely postgrowth resource constraints [12] (p. 186), imply much greater levels of redistributive taxation. Indeed, the concomitant reduction in income inequality is for many essential for sustainable welfare [2]. However, notwithstanding strong environmental and social arguments in its favor, significant redistribution away from middle- and higher-income individuals would involve a reduction in their consumption to pay for universal provision from which they might derive little improvement in wellbeing. This is politically difficult [6,24–26].

One response to these issues has been to downgrade need as the basis for postgrowth social policy by, at the least, complementing it with other wellbeing measures (e.g., subjective wellbeing) or replacing it entirely, e.g., [5,6,27]. However, the problem with this approach is that need has important strengths over alternative concepts. First, it facilitates an important distinction between a minimum threshold of wellbeing and that which exceeds this level [1]; see also [8,28]. Secondly, it is normatively at the root of justifications for welfare states based on social rights [29]. Finally, need is not subject to some of the technical difficulties identified with the measurement of subjective wellbeing [1] (p. 156).

Given these strengths, what is required, this article argues is not the replacement of need but a fuller exploration of how its various components might contribute to an understanding of wellbeing capable of encompassing the requirements of a broader range of citizens. Specifically, this exploration considers whether need conceptualization for sustainable welfare has been understood, following Doyal and Gough's work [30], too thinly [31,32]. Doyal and Gough's approach [30] was based on reasonable concerns to inoculate need conceptualization from claims of paternalism, relativism, and coloniality. This led them to emphasize universalism across time and place derived mainly from abstract, philosophical reasoning. They argued that only need *satisfiers* should be contextually determined based on a 'dual approach' of expert opinion and citizen consultation [30,33], not essential need *components*.

Yet, as will be seen, a strong case can be made for a more pragmatic, less foundational, context-dependent and participative conceptualization of need, particularly given the temporally and spatially limited intention to use it to guide Global North welfare state transformation, e.g., [34]. This approach thickens out need's essential components, embracing positive approaches more definitely influenced by eudaimonic thought, particularly

with respect to the non-material aspects of human existence. Eudaimonia is understood here, influenced by ancient ethics (especially Aristotle), as fundamentally concerned with the quality of individual lives: the satisfaction and meaningfulness derived and the steps taken to secure this [35] (pp. 265, 269). Such conceptualizations are already in development, e.g., [36–39], highlighting to a greater extent non-material needs affecting a broader cross-section of the population. These use a range of participative methods, mixed with expert opinion, to construct or test thicker need conceptualizations (see below). However, while they have had some impact on considerations of postgrowth social policy proposals, as will be seen, the emphasis has been on thinner approaches.

The article uses as its analytical framework a synthesis of the most influential and relevant thicker need conceptualizations, particularly their identification of the most important non-material needs. This framework is used illustratively to explore the wellbeing impact of the world of work, paid and unpaid, in Global North societies. Ideally, the article would have tested participatively this synthetic conceptualization, but resources were not available to do this. Work was chosen as a suitable illustrative case because it is experienced by a wide cross-section of Global North populations for long periods of their lives, meaning that its wellbeing impact, and how this is managed, is crucially important to most citizens, more so for many than state welfare systems. How work operates is central to how a range of material and non-material needs are met (see below). Consequently, addressing the wellbeing impact of work as part of a postgrowth transition is likely to be a major determinant of the public acceptability of the social policy proposals associated with such a change.

The article focuses particularly on WTR, given its popularity with eco-social policy scholars and the identification of working hours as a major wellbeing issue by thicker need conceptualizations [36–39]. Its central question is the following: Can a thicker conceptualization of need, focused more on non-material needs affecting a broader range of the population, provide the foundation for a more publicly acceptable postgrowth social policy? In response to this question, the article argues that, while such an approach has promise, it is likely to generate significant trade-off challenges with respect to how material and non-material needs are met and requires a significant broadening of existing postgrowth social policy agendas to address strongly entrenched growth and consumption norms. The latter would involve greater consideration of the wellbeing role of provisioning system elements other than the traditional welfare state.

The article begins by explaining the theoretical and conceptual basis for thin need conceptualizations before detailing their influence on postgrowth social policy proposals. It then details the developing critique of this approach and outlines its approach to identifying the essential components of a thicker need conceptualization, focusing particularly on non-material needs. This wellbeing approach is then applied to the world of work in the Global North. In the final section, issues requiring further discussion and research are identified and discussed.

## 2. Thin Need Conceptualizations and Their Limitations

In *A Theory of Human Need*, Doyal and Gough [30] argued for a universal and objective conceptualization of basic human needs refuting neo-liberal claims that the concept was paternalistic and subjective. Their starting point was human beings' universal concern to avoid 'serious harm', experienced if they were 'significantly impaired in pursuit of goals', which they deemed valuable [30] (p. 51). This was contextualized to suggest individuals must have opportunities to 'participate as a full member of society in its way of life' [30] (p. 52).

Doyal and Gough's emphasis on life goals suggests similarities between their conceptualization and thicker, eudaimonic approaches. However, their engagement with this concept or Aristotle's work was largely absent, and the thinness of their approach was revealed by their reticence to specify the detailed components of a life of quality [30,32,40,41]. The authors focused instead on the requirements for any human action, inspired more by Kant than Aristotle. Physical survival and autonomy were thus Doyal and Gough's basic human needs providing individuals with the '*ability to make informed choices about what should be done and how to go about doing it*' [30] (p. 53, italics in the original). All further specifications of a life of quality was left to individuals. Autonomy meant the facility to choose [On the implications of this limitation see Soper [32] (p. 121) and Gasper [40] (p. 26)].

However, as the authors recognized, this thin conceptualization was rather abstract. To address this problem, and enhance policy relevance, Doyal and Gough proposed a list of 'universal satisfiers' required to meet basic human needs in any setting, temporal or geographic. These were (a) adequate nutritional food and water; (b) adequate protective housing; (c) non-hazardous work environments; (d) non-hazardous physical environments; (e) appropriate healthcare; (f) security in childhood; (g) significant primary relationships; (h) economic security; (i) safe birth control and child-bearing; and (j) basic education [30]. Doyal and Gough proposed the 'dual' use of expert and citizen input to determine the specific contextual delivery of these satisfiers [30]. However, this dual strategy had clear conceptual limitations: it did not facilitate a thickening of the authors' need conceptualization to specify the broader components of a life of quality. Rather, it enabled the *operationalization* of the authors' thinly derived need *satisfiers* in different cultural settings [32] (pp. 361–362). In this respect, it has a different purpose to a similar method used by proponents of thicker approaches (see below) [41] (p. 192).

Doyal and Gough's universal satisfiers [30] are also noteworthy in primarily emphasizing the material requirements for meeting basic human needs: they mainly focused on the provision of tangible goods and services to meet what have sometimes been referred to as 'physiological and safety needs' [40,42], the satisfiers required to maintain physical sustenance and avoid physical harm. This focus on material needs is a definite strength of thin conceptualizations because it highlights the importance of providing minimum requirements, a priority has sometimes under-played in discussions of sustainable welfare, e.g., [43]. However, in contrast, Doyal and Gough [30] say little about satisfiers that meet non-material needs. These needs relate more to human emotions and feelings, such as the need for belonging, self-esteem, and meaning and generally require more than the provision of goods and services for their satisfaction; they are also affected by the quality of an individuals' social relationship and participation [40]. The only reference to human relationships by Doyal and Gough [30] was to 'primary relationships', and only childhood and basic education satisfiers obviously stemmed from the inclusion of autonomy, alongside physical survival, as a basic need (see below).

The influence of thin need conceptualizations is clear in scholarly work most concertedly focused on social policy reforms to maintain wellbeing in postgrowth scenarios [7,8,11,12]. These sometimes allude to broader understandings of need, but with respect to the purpose, target groups, and delivery mechanisms for a postgrowth social policy, most emphasis is placed on thinner need conceptualizations as the foundation. Such work thus targets reforms of traditional welfare state instruments, benefits, and services, proposing their transformation into a UBI and/or UBS, with systematic attention given to how such options would meet the basic material requirements of disadvantaged groups. Thus, based explicitly on Doyal and Gough's need satisfiers, Gough [12,33] highlights the importance of identifying and meeting necessities using consensus-based poverty

studies to ensure all households reach an 'acceptable minimum standard of living' [12] (pp. 154–155). Guaranteeing a 'minimum income floor' would be facilitated by greater 'sharing of income and wealth' [12] (p. 179). Similarly, in assessing the respective merits of a UBI and UBS, Büchs [8] (pp. 3, 5, 6 and 8) strongly emphasizes their redistributive purpose, to re-direct resources to low-income households by progressive taxation; see also [7] (pp. 3, 4, 14–16; [12] pp. 78–79). Similarly, while Dukelow's and Murphy's work [13,14,44] either in collaboration or alone, focuses on postgrowth policy interventions with respect to work and employment, their various recommendations are nevertheless primarily concerned with how traditional welfare state institutions might be reformed to ensure material needs are met; see also [10]. Thus, the main purpose of their twin proposal for a participation income complemented by a job guarantee would be reassurance about income maintenance should a postgrowth transition generate lower employment levels.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding this focus on thin need, broader understandings of need are also given some attention. Gough [12] occasionally refers to need conceptualizations not accounted for in his underpinning theory [40] (pp. 25–26). For example, as part of his proposed shift to more 'upstream', preventative policies, he proposes WTR, justified because of its 'beneficial effects on the health of workers and more general improvement in wellbeing and quality of life' [12] (pp. 167, 187). Similarly, Büchs [8] (p. 4) extends Doyal and Gough's restricted approach to autonomy to emphasize how UBI and UBS 'would make people less dependent on the labor market, increase their bargaining power in the workplace, and free them up to pursue activities that they value'. Bohnenberger [7] (p. 39) suggests in turn that sustainable welfare will likely entail a greater emphasis on 'conviviality, a relational paradigm-shift and non-materialistic visions of the "Good Life"'; see also [12] (p. 99). Finally, Dukelow and Murphy discuss the broader impact of labor markets on wellbeing using Vail's work on decommodification and Illich's and Gorz's on autonomy within and outside work [13,14]. To this end, they briefly argue that a participation income and jobs guarantee would generate greater leverage in the labor market, increasing autonomy and improving job quality [14].

Even so, overall, thin conceptualizations of need remain dominant as the basis for postgrowth social policy. For the most part, little is done to systematically explain and justify policy recommendations ostensibly directed to non-material needs in relation to the features, scale, and impact of these needs. Nor is much consideration given to possible trade-offs in meeting these needs with policies focused on material needs and/or environmental imperatives [7–14]. Consequently, while existing postgrowth social policy proposals are very strong in explaining how the material wellbeing of the least disadvantaged groups would be maintained and promoted as part of the postgrowth transition, they have three important limitations with respect to the broader population which raise serious doubts about their public acceptability. First, by focusing most on 'deficit-oriented' approaches to material need, existing proposals largely neglect more positive components [5]. Crowded out almost entirely are salutogenic visions of humans' potential [5,39,45], an approach that can only be justified by reverting to a Maslowian hierarchical understanding of needs [38,40,41,46]. Secondly, on policy targeting, postgrowth social policy proposals focus most on disadvantaged groups, leaving largely unexplored the wellbeing requirements of the majority of the population. These groups currently perceive their wellbeing mainly in relation to the utility derived from consumption and the perceived status gained by acquiring positional goods [1,5,24]. Materially, it is well above the levels required to satisfy thinly conceptualized basic needs. Unsurprisingly, in such circumstances, there is little evidence that existing postgrowth social policy proposals reassure many Global North citizens about their wellbeing under such scenarios. Finally, on policy instruments, existing postgrowth social policy proposals focus most on traditional welfare state services

and benefits. Limited attention is given to the wellbeing role of other parts of provisioning systems and, when this has occurred, it does not concertedly consider the broader wellbeing justifications and implications of the various initiatives proposed (e.g., WTR).

## 3. Thicker Need Conceptualizations and Postgrowth Social Policy

Problems with thin conceptualizations of need, particularly their limitations as a guide to policy development, have been raised by scholars [23]. Commentators working on socio-ecological transitions have called for fresh popular conceptions of wellbeing and the good life [5,21]. At a theoretical level, these concerns reflect longstanding debates in public and social administration about the validity and value of abstract, foundational reasoning as the basis for policy intervention, compared with practically based approaches, which regard conceptualization as an ongoing, experiential, and participative process [47]. Interest in the latter has grown, based on renewed attention to its pragmatic philosophical roots, as events like the COVID-19 pandemic exposed problems with applying 'knowledge' derived separately from experience, e.g., [48,49]. These problems, it is suggested, reflect the fallibism of abstract conceptualization and, thus, the necessity of ongoing, abductive interpretation, revision, and criticism [50]. Such an approach might not maintain the 'immune monastic impeccability' [51] (p. 90) of foundational conceptualization but can nevertheless generate reliable knowledge useful in context-based problem solving [34].

With respect to need, as this section will show, considerable efforts have been made to develop pragmatically derived conceptualizations using approaches consistent with this model. The most promising and persuasive use collaborative, participative, and/or experiential input to thicken out need conceptualizations founded on a strong philosophical base. These approaches are both 'theoretically and empirically defensible' [36] and more specific both about autonomy's role as a basic requirement and relational and expressive need components and satisfiers. Much of this work is associated with the Capability Approach (CA), the Aristotelian foundations of which are particularly strong [52]. However, other approaches, based on different philosophical foundations, have used similar methods to reach similar conclusions, e.g., [38] (p. 50).

The CA, founded and developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, is explicitly inspired by Aristotelian thought. Sen's ideas stemmed from criticism of resource-based approaches, which he argued focused on goods and services rather than the use individuals made of them to live lives they valued [52]. This focus on life aspirations, most commentators agree, means that the CA is fundamentally built on the concept of need [40,53]. Sen used the Aristotelian-derived concept of functionings to describe components of a good life. This referred to the various things a person may value doing or being [54]. The range of functionings individuals were free to undertake, their capability set, ultimately determined their quality of life. Crucially, Sen argued for a 'permissive' approach to such functionings, having initially suggested a focus on material requirements (e.g., to be well nourished). Assessments of capabilities should thus consider all aspects of a life, for example, knowledge, relationships, self-confidence, and contentment [55] (p. 27). This approach meant that, while still quite abstract, Sen's CA was more expansive at a fundamental level than Doyal and Gough's need conceptualization [41].

Nevertheless, Sen was reluctant to make his framework less abstract. Consistent with pragmatic reasoning, though not explicitly relying on this foundation [56], Sen argued for contextual, democratic, and participative input to more fully specify the components of a life of quality [34]. Nussbaum [57] demurred suggesting a list of 'Central Human Capabilities' strongly inspired by Aristotle's eudaimonic thought, but her top-down approach renewed concerns about foundationalism, paternalism, and coloniality. More pragmatic approaches followed, based on the philosophical underpinnings of the CA, but developed

in consultation with actors in particular contexts to fully conceptualize the minimum components of a life of quality, e.g., [34,37]. Robeyns, a leading CA proponent, strongly defends this 'pragmatic approach' [36] (p. 29), arguing it offers a sensible and 'predominantly objective' [36] (p. 52) way to determine what a life of quality entails in the context of 'political, social, or economic discussions' [36] (p. 29). Burchardt and Viz's work [37] on equality and human rights monitoring in England, Scotland, and Wales is one of the best examples. They deployed a two-stage procedure, firstly generating a 'minimum core' capability list from recognized international human rights standards and secondly refining and expanding the list through an extensive, deliberative research exercise. Robeyns and Van der Veen [36] endorsed a similar method for work on quality of life in The Netherlands, but this ultimately only engaged with stage one of the above process.

Other influential need-based approaches have used similar methods to thicken their conceptualizations [38,39]. For example, the starting point for Di Giulio and Defila's Theory of Protected Needs [39] was Doyal and Gough's need conceptualization [30]. However, their commitment to positive, salutogentic understandings of quality of life, together with the influence of Soper's work [32], led to a thicker conceptualization than their inspirations. Methodologically, this work relied on a detailed literature review of previous wellbeing scholarship, concerted engagement with an international and inter-disciplinary academic advisory committee, and a social survey undertaken in Switzerland [39] (p. 121). Finally, Guillen Royo established a framework for understanding sustainable wellbeing based on Max-Neef's Human Scale Development (HSD) approach [38]. The theoretical basis for Max-Neef's approach is ambiguous and undeveloped [40], relying partly on Aristotelian thought, partly on humanistic economics [46], and partly on a non-hierarchical version of Maslow [38]. However, as Alkire [41] suggests, his list of axiological needs (see Table 1) is strongly consistent with other thick need conceptualizations, and Max-Neef and colleagues saw their approach as complementary with the CA [46] (p. 2025). Crucially, central to the HSD approach is the importance of participatory methods to amend and develop the 'provisional' nature of the original conceptualization [38]. Guillen Royo [38] (pp. 37,40–43, 50) commits fully to these methods; however, although she highlights their potential role in modifying Max-Neef's list of needs, she mainly uses them to identify satisfiers.

**Table 1.** The components of a thick, eudaimonic conception of need and their sources.

| | **Physical Survival and Security** | **Autonomous (in)Activity** | **Personal Growth, Self-Expression** | **Family and/or Community Relations** | **Political Participation and Power** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Burchardt and Vizard** [37] | Life<br>Physical security<br>Health | Productive and valued activities | Identity, expression and self-respect<br>Education and learning | Individual, family and social life | Participation, influence and voice |
| **Robeyns and Van der Veen** [36] | Physical health<br>Mental health<br>Security | Recreation<br>Labour | Knowledge and intellectual development | Social relations | Political participation |
| **Di Giulio and Defila** [39] | The material necessities for life<br>Protection by society | To perform activities valuable to them | To develop as a person<br>To realize their own conception of daily life | To be part of a community | To have a say in the shaping of society |
| **Guillén-Royo** [38] **following Max-Neef** | Subsistence<br>Protection | Idleness | Creation<br>Identity<br>Understanding | Affection | Participation |

Source: Author's construction based on identified sources.

Important debates are ongoing about the various foundations for these different conceptualizations and the success of their methodological approaches in inoculating them against claims of relativism. There are differences too in how they deal with the need/satisfier divide, with the CA being less definite in this regard. Gough [33] is skeptical, particularly on relativism. He continues to argue for a universal approach, based on a thin, foundational specification of basic needs, with collaborative, context-dependent

operationalization confined to decisions on satisfiers. However, while this approach is appropriate when one's concern is, like Doyal and Gough's, with the broadest possible application of need theory to all contexts [33], its limitations are clear as a guide to postgrowth social policy development in the more restricted context of Global North welfare states. In these circumstances, to maximize policy relevance, a thicker approach is philosophically justified, particularly to more expansively identify and specify non-material needs and their potential satisfiers. The rest of the article will explore whether such an approach can provide the basis for a postgrowth Global North welfare state transformation, one that addresses the wellbeing requirements of a broad range of current populations and thus has more chance of securing broader acceptability.

## 4. The Method for Establishing a Thicker, Eudaimonic Need Conceptualization

As outlined above, the best method for identifying a set of common components of a thicker, more eudaimonic conceptualization of need applicable to the wellbeing of citizens in the Global North would involve a combination of expert opinion (scholarly and/or governmental) and participative engagement with the citizens whose needs are being identified. As a number of scholars have found, the problem with the latter part of this method is that it is very resource-intensive [36]; it is relatively rare that the whole method has been undertaken. Similar resource constraints were encountered in establishing in this article a framework to test the potential of thicker need conceptualizations as the basis for a publicly acceptable postgrowth social policy. Reliance was thus placed on the four strongly influential studies summarized above as the framework's foundation [36–39]. Three of these studies establish and/or test thicker need conceptualizations using the full application of the above method [37–39]: they test abstractly derived need components against the input received from a range of participatory exercises involving a selection of relevant citizens. The fourth [36] (see also [34]) is based on extensive expert knowledge of the need literature by a leading authority on the application of the CA. As can be seen from Table 1, the common components of the need conceptualizations from the four chosen studies were identified as the basis for the five dimensions of this article's thick need framework. These dimensions were as follows:

1. Physical survival and security;
2. Autonomous (in)activity;
3. Education, personal growth, and self-expression;
4. Family and/or community relations;
5. Political participation and power.

In establishing these categories, consideration was given to Robeyns' [34] concerns about the validity of choosing similar components of wellbeing derived from a variety of lists, the foundations for which are based on different underlying conceptual and practical assumptions. This was not the case with the lists used in this exercise: their conceptual assumptions were all grounded on thicker approaches to need, as outlined above, and practically all were envisaged for application to the wellbeing requirements of Global North citizens, though not always exclusively so. Moreover, the coherence of the identified need categories is evident based on a comparison with Doyal and Gough's specification of basic and intermediate needs [30]. Starting at the broadest level, it is clear that, whereas Doyal and Gough [30] specified only two 'basic needs', physical health and autonomy, thicker conceptualizations result in a much more expansive list, which includes relational and expressive needs as fundamental to a life of quality. The implications of this thicker approach become clear when consideration is given to authors' more detailed specification of basic needs, particularly with respect to categories 2–5 of this article's

framework (Table 1). Thus, with regard to autonomous (in)activity, as seen while Doyal and Gough [30] include autonomy as a basic need, it is very thinly specified. Consequently, at the level of satisfiers, they say little, for example, about employment and work, focusing on the importance of non-hazardous environments and employment to gain economic security. Thicker approaches, in contrast, regard work features and their impact as essential need requirements. Robeyns and Van der Veen [36] (p. 60), for example, suggest in their detailed specification of necessary capabilities that individuals must be 'put in a position to use and develop their talents, to feel useful and to perform decent, challenging and meaningful work'. Similarly, Di Giulio and Defila [39] (p. 122), in thickening their conception of need components, argue that individuals' wellbeing at work requires them to 'carry out activities that match their personalities and in which they can unfold their potential'. On autonomy outside work, such as leisure and recreation, Doyal and Gough [30] are silent. In contrast, thicker approaches specify sufficient time away from work as an essential need component. Di Gilulio and Defila [39] (p. 122) argue individuals must have the opportunity to 'allocate their time for their different activities according to their own preferences and to have time for idleness'. Similarly, Robeyns and Van der Veen [36] suggest that 'opportunities to develop [recreational] activities are part of the quality of life'; see also [37] (Appendix One). With respect to personal growth and self-expression, Doyal and Gough [30] simply specify 'basic education' as a satisfier, mainly to meet their curtailed basic need for autonomy. In contrast, thicker approaches regard education as one aspect of a broader concern about personal growth and self-expression, treating these as essential need components. Thus, Burchardt and Viz [37] (Appendix One), for example, in detailing 'core capabilities', specify the 'highest possible standard of knowledge, understanding and reasoning' to facilitate an individual's intellectual and creative stimulation and fulfillment. Similarly, Di Giulio and Defila [39] (p. 122) regard education as the basis for individuals to 'develop their potential (knowledge, skills, attitudes, feelings, and so forth) and thus their individual identity'; see also [38] (p. 97). On family and community relationships, as seen, Doyal and Gough [30] only specify the need for 'significant primary relationships' as a satisfier. Thicker approaches, such as Burchart and Viz [37] (Appendix One), suggest that essential to wellbeing is the 'capability to enjoy individual, family and social life . . . including, for example, being able access emotional support, form intimate relationships, friendships and a family . . .'. De Giulio and Defila [39] (p. 122) similarly specify that to live a life of quality, individuals must be able to 'maintain social relationships with other people (private, professional, during training, and so forth). . .'; see also [38] (p. 97). Finally, and briefly with respect to political participation and power, Doyal and Gough [30] regard this as a 'societal precondition' for the fulfillment of intermediate need satisfaction not an inherent requirement for a life of quality. In contrast, thicker understandings include it as an essential component of human need, e.g., [37] (Appendix One).

It is clear then that a robust and theoretically justifiable thick need conceptualization is attainable which, through its additional emphasis on the non-material aspects of wellbeing, encourages a broader consideration of the wellbeing impact of current economic and social arrangements, in turn, extending the focus to a greater range of citizens than those at the lowest end of the income distribution. Doyal and Gough's thin need conceptualization [30] does not address these wellbeing considerations.

However, how operational is this framework, and what are its implications for post-growth social policy? What evidence is there that conceptualizing wellbeing on this basis could more substantially reassure Global North populations about their wellbeing in a postgrowth world, rendering such a transition more publicly acceptable? In the next two sections, these questions will be addressed focusing on the world of work, paid and unpaid. This case has been chosen because work is experienced by a wide cross-section of Global

North populations, with important implications for citizens' wellbeing. Its full incorporation as part of the development of a postgrowth social policy is thus likely to be a major determinant of such a policy's public acceptability.

## 5. Paid and Unpaid Work, Thick Need, and Wellbeing

This section operationalizes the thick need conceptualization outlined above to identify the wellbeing impact of work-based developments in the Global North over recent decades. Based on a full review of the relevant literature, it shows that these developments have had significantly negative wellbeing effects affecting all components of need, material and non-material. Basic requirements, such as income and health have been affected, but also non-material needs, individuals' autonomy, relationships, and self-expression. A broad range of the population has been impacted, not only the most disadvantaged groups.

Changing experiences of work have been blamed mainly on structural changes in the world economy (e.g., increased global competition in manufacturing and a concomitant growth of service sector employment), which have generated or complicated four interlinked developments: increased non-standard, precarious paid employment (such as short-term or casual employment, part-time work, and others; see [58] on definitional debates; [59]); more paid workers undertaking long hours and/or feeling under time pressures; greater difficulties balancing paid work and caring responsibilities, particularly for women entering the workforce given still-dominant gender norms, e.g., [60]; and developing indications that these changes affect the meaning workers derive from paid work. The focus below is on the impact of these developments on non-material needs.

On non-standard employment, while this varies between Global North countries, recent work suggests it accounts for more than 50 per cent in most European countries [61], with women and workers in Southern and Eastern Europe being the worst affected [62,63]. Initially, scholars emphasized that it mainly affected 'outsiders', rather than core paid workers in dualized labor markets, particularly younger workers [64]. However, the recent impact of information technology, combined with intensified competition in skilled and professional labor markets [65], has heightened pressures on skilled paid workers increasing recourse to non-standard employment [63,66]. Information technology has increased automation in some sectors, making jobs more routine at low-skill and mid-skill levels [67].

Some non-standard paid employment involves long working hours, the second main change in Global North labor markets, but these also occur in standard employment. Burger shows that in nine out of ten countries for which there is Luxembourg Income Survey data (Belgium, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Italy, Germany, Austria, UK, Canada, and the USA), the proportion of full-time paid workers working more than 49 h a week in the last three decades has risen compared to the 1970s/1980s (2020), reaching around 20 per cent of the sample. These developments have affected all parts of the income distribution [63]. Only France, which legislated to limit working hours in 2000 bucked the trend [68]. More generally, the hopes of the 1960s and 1970s, that citizens in the future would have more free time, have not been fulfilled [69]. Average working hours have been falling in Europe, mainly because of the increase in part-time work [70]. However, at best, levels of free time, understood as the time available after 'carrying out "obligatory" activities such as paid work, unpaid work and personal care' [71] (p. 11), have plateaued [69]. Perceptions of time pressure have increased [72]. All types of Global North citizens have been affected [73], but particularly women, working parents (especially when single), carers, and high-income professionals [72,74]. This phenomenon highlights, in turn, the important impact unpaid work, particularly caring, has had on citizens, especially women, over recent decades. The combined impact of more women entering the labor force while still undertaking most

domestic tasks, demographic aging, and welfare state retrenchment has generated a 'crisis of care' affecting carers as much as the cared-for [60,74].

This combination of longer working hours, time pressures, and greater caring responsibilities makes unsurprising evidence of increased burnout in recent years. For example, McKinsey Health Institute's 2023 survey of workplace health among 30,000 workers in 30 countries reported that around 20 per cent of workers in each of the included Global North countries suffered from symptoms of burnout, with Australia, Canada, Japan, and Sweden recording 24 per cent or over [75]; see also [76]. Similar burnout symptoms are also increasingly evident among informal carers [77].

Finally, recent work-based developments also appear to have affected workers' sense of autonomy and meaning in paid work, e.g., [78,79]. Evidence on perceptions of social uselessness in work vary—between a low of 4.8 per cent in EU28 countries [80] and a high of 37 per cent in the UK [81]; see also [82]. However, significant numbers of Global North citizens are affected. Causal links are suggested to the broader structural changes described above. Thus, perceptions of social uselessness have been linked to worker alienation, explained by increased routinization [80,82] and diminished autonomy in the face of shifting power relations [80]. Negative work perceptions, related to stigma and powerlessness, have also been linked with fewer social interactions [82], a well-known product of non-standard employment e.g., [83].

In short, viewing the current world of work in the Global North through the lens of a thicker need framework helps highlight the broad wellbeing impact of a less secure, more intensified, and more socially casual labor market. The significant shifts outlined above have implications for a wide cross-section of Global North populations not just those at the lower ends of the income scale. They negatively affect paid workers' autonomy at work and, in combination with other developments, the experience of informal caring and free time outside work.

## 6. Postgrowth Social Policy and the World of Work: Trade-Offs and Challenges

Incorporating in postgrowth social policy development greater attention to non-material work-related needs thus has, on the face of it, the potential to offer more affluent Global North populations reassurance about their wellbeing as transition occurs—some compensation for diminished levels of postgrowth consumption. But what policies are most suitable for this purpose, and what challenges do they raise? Can non-material needs be satisfied without threatening the meeting of material needs and environmental imperatives? Can strongly entrenched consumption norms [1] be undermined?

Extending the pragmatic method outlined above, the most suitable way for determining possible policy responses to the work-related non-material needs identified in the previous section is by further participative consultation. This would establish in the first instance, the scale and precise nature of the relevant needs and plausible satisfiers for meeting them, as a prelude to policy development. However, as mentioned, such processes are resource-intensive [38] and also pose potential challenges in measuring non-material needs. They were not feasible in the preparation of this paper. Instead, this section focuses illustratively on WTR to highlight the challenges for policy design in extending postgrowth social policy to focus on work-based non-material as well as material need. This case has been chosen because it is a popular option among eco-social scholars with respect to the world of work, often as a complement to basic income or services guarantees. It is also included because long working hours have been identified as a major wellbeing issue by the thicker need conceptualizations outlined above [37–39]. Despite this, little detailed

attention has been given to the policy design challenges this option involves, particularly to identify possible trade-offs and how they might be resolved.

Beginning with WTR's wellbeing impact, most evidence suggests it can have a positive impact on non-material needs, increasing free time leading to improvements in family life. The French national reduction in hours, for example, resulted in 60 per cent of one study's sample reporting an improved work/family balance [84]. Improvements in family relationships were also reported by workers taking part in WTR experiments in Finland [85] and Sweden, e.g., [86]. Significantly, in some cases these improvements have involved a more equal sharing of domestic caring responsibilities. This was reported after recent four-day-week pilots in the UK and elsewhere [87], including Sweden [86] and Iceland [88]. With respect to recreation, increased free time was spent undertaking valued non-work activities and volunteering [85,86].

However, while WTR is generally viewed quite positively by those who have experienced it [89–91], popularity among the general population is lower when citizens consider possibly negative effects on personal and/or national income, and there are important variations between different demographics. For example, a 2019 YouGov poll showed 50 per cent of its sample for seven countries (Britain, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Norway, Sweden) favorable to a four-day-week, with support highest in Finland (65 per cent), Britain, and Sweden (both 63 per cent) [92]. However, support declined to below 27 per cent for all nations when a possibly negative impact on national prosperity was suggested. Overall, these results are consistent with repeated findings that a significant proportion of Global North workers favor fewer hours, e.g., [93], but that backing is much greater when pay is protected. Given these findings, it is unsurprising that middle- to higher-income workers, particularly male and older ones, are most favorable. Lower-income workers' support is particularly contingent on wage compensation (see below), reflecting concerns about meeting material needs. Women's lower support seems to be due to their greater caring role, which means they already work fewer hours than they would prefer with lower pay rates [93]. There is also evidence that support for WTR is deflated by concerns about feasibility and 'ideal worker' norms within firms [93].

There are thus evident and potential trade-offs with WTR concerning both the respective satisfaction of material and non-material needs, and its consistency with environmental imperatives [94]. These trade-offs particularly concern wages, which in turn affects public acceptability. On trade-offs between material and non-material needs, wages are important because, while WTR generally has a positive impact on non-material needs, if wages are not protected, disadvantaged groups might struggle more to meet their material needs. WTR's impact on employment levels is also important in this respect. Most evidence suggests that job and, thus, wage sharing has occurred when WTR has been tried at the national level, but knowledge remains fragmentary. On wages and environmental trade-offs, while there is strong evidence WTR could substantially reduce GHG emissions and broader environmental degradation by lowering economic output [95], wage protection could cause possible rebound effects due to increased leisure-related emissions, for example, [96].

In short, while wage protection is essential for meeting the material needs of lower income groups, WTR's environmental impact is greater when wages are reduced, particularly for those on middle and higher incomes. Existing postgrowth social policy proposals suggest a universal basic or participation income and/or universal basic services could operate in tandem with WTR to reassure citizens about their material needs [11,14]. However, if such options are not to undermine WTR's environmental purpose—a reduction in consumption, via lower incomes, by more affluent groups—direct state income supplementation could not be set too high, probably no higher than required to ensure the populations' material needs were met. If provided universally, even this would provide some cushion-

ing with respect to affluent citizens' incomes. It would also be expensive [97], as would universalization of public services, costs that would need to be met from a smaller tax base given lower incomes following the introduction of WTR. An obvious solution to these trade-offs is more targeted interventions directed to the material needs of lower-income groups rather than the universal ones currently proposed by postgrowth social policy scholars. This could be complemented by an increase in the minimum wage [98]. However, if this approach were taken, recognized problems with selective income provision (e.g., stigma, take-up, and others) would arise.

In addition to these trade-offs, WTR also has clear limitations in meeting work-related non-material needs. Most particularly, it does little to improve autonomy at work. Workers' experience might be improved by fewer hours, but WTR does not immediately affect alienation drivers in the workplace: the monotony of routinization, powerlessness, and low levels of social interaction. Indeed, WTR could exacerbate the last of these. Some scholars thus suggest the WTR should be accompanied by a broader set of labor market interventions designed to transform the workplace, e.g., [19,99], such as greater workplace democracy. This would entail the introduction or revitalization of 'a system of checks and balances' on workplace power and workers' rights to actively participate in firm decision-making [100] (p. 564). Proponents of such a change suggest that it addresses the need for autonomy in work by, for example, boosting protection of basic rights (e.g., work hours, pay arrangements, and others) and protecting rights of dissent and participatory rights [101] (pp. 103–209). It has also been suggested that it could increase support for WTR by (i) challenging 'ideal worker' norms in firms, thus disarming an important impediment of workers' preferences for WTR and (ii) its potential to equalize company wage structures, particularly controlling executive pay, thus reducing the material impact should WTR not include wage protection [100]. Finally, there is some evidence organized labor will support sustainability initiatives where they have the power to do so [102]. However, much of this evidence is fragmentary and, while workplace democracy is an entrenched feature already of continental countries, such as Austria, Germany, and Denmark [103], workers' institutional power is constrained and has faced increased challenge in recent years [97]. Moreover, in liberal states, there is less tradition [104] of such institutions, particularly in the USA [99].

Finally, the decline in support for WTR when wages are reduced highlights the continuing challenge that strongly entrenched growth and consumption norms [1] present for the development of a publicly acceptable postgrowth social policy. While a greater focus on relational and expressive needs offers in theory a means to reassure affluent Global North populations about their postgrowth wellbeing, work on WTR provides little general evidence these groups will accept diminished levels of consumption in return for a greater consideration of their non-material needs; they are currently unprepared to trade income for more time. Such findings are not surprising. As social practices' scholars [105] suggest, it is very difficult for workers and citizens embedded in growth societies to separate themselves from the structural logics these imply, or to imagine a postgrowth world that meets their wellbeing requirements in different ways. It is promising that workers who have experienced WTR seem more likely to see its benefits, often based on a reconceptualization of what their wellbeing constitutes. However, what findings on WTR highlight is the limited potential in shifting entrenched consumption norms of standalone policy proposals. A more broadly based postgrowth social policy agenda is likely to be required, encompassing a range of proposals designed to promote relational and expressive needs as an alternative to consumption; see also [23].

## 7. Conclusions

This article has shown that most current proposals for a postgrowth social policy focus primarily on the material needs of the most disadvantaged groups. This limitation is largely because they conceptualize need thinly, influenced most by the work of Doyal and Gough [30]. This thin conceptualization means that the non-material needs highlighted by thicker approaches are neglected, as is the potential wellbeing role postgrowth of elements of provisioning systems other than the traditional welfare state. The article suggested that this approach is unlikely to reassure electorates about their wellbeing during and after a postgrowth transition because the majority of Global North populations currently enjoy wellbeing levels well in advance of the level of need targeted. Their perception of wellbeing is linked much more to consumption, which is likely to be significantly curtailed as part of postgrowth transitions. Current proposals provide them with little to gain and a lot to lose, which is a problem given that they make up the largest part of Global North electorates.

The article explored thicker need conceptualizations as a way to address this problem. It showed that robust, theoretically, and empirically justifiable conceptualizations are available as frameworks for identifying population needs and responding to them. Examples of such approaches were detailed. These were developed using methods consistent with pragmatic philosophy, involving the thickening out of the essential components of a life of quality in Global North contexts using participatory and experiential input. In doing so, they highlight, to a greater extent than thin approaches, the non-material needs of populations, needs which are felt to a greater extent by more affluent groups than the material needs upon which thinner conceptualizations focus. Four of the most influential lists of thick needs were used to construct a synthesized set of thick need components. These provided the analytical framework for an exploration in the second half of the article of the potential of thicker need conceptualizations as the foundation for a more public acceptable postgrowth social policy. This exploration was undertaken focusing on the world of paid and unpaid work, crucial sites of wellbeing generation. It was shown that thicker need conceptualizations helped highlight a range of widespread, unmet non-material needs affecting a broad range of the population, a consequence of structural changes in Global North labor markets over recent decades. WTR was investigated as a policy option for addressing these needs, and it was shown that it faced significant trade-offs in policy design. Most importantly, Global North workers show little willingness so far to trade income and consumption for a greater focus on their non-material needs. Such an outcome is particularly unsurprising for lower-income workers, given that their priority is meeting material needs, but it could at least partially be addressed by improvements in minimum wages. However, more general wage compensation would seriously undermine the WTR's environmental objectives, which are predicated on reductions in consumption caused by lower incomes.

Overall, therefore, while thicker conceptualizations of need have promise as the foundation for a publicly acceptable postgrowth social policy, this article raises important challenges for such an approach. First, there are practical concerns about the broadening out of postgrowth social policy development to include non-material needs based on the methodological approaches outlined above. The resource-intensiveness of these approaches has been highlighted, and brief allusion has been made to potential measurement issues concerning non-material needs. These matters seem capable of resolution but require much greater consideration than has been possible in this article.

Secondly, the material/non-material need trade-off identified with respect to WTR raises important general concerns. Might such trade-offs be a consequence of all or most efforts to meet non-material needs, that is in parts of societies' provisioning systems other than the labor market? Much would depend in this regard on the precise nature

of the policy mix adopted in different policy areas and settings, but without doubt, the inclusion of non-material needs as an additional eco-social policy goal complicates the process of policy integration [94]. More positively, the relationship between material and non-material wellbeing goals is unlikely always to entail a zero-sum game: policy synergies are possible and trade-offs can sometimes be resolved [9]. It is clear from the WTR example, for instance, that meeting work-related non-material needs related to work intensification could benefit less advantaged parts of the population as much as affluent groups, perhaps reducing the former's material needs. After all, the health impact of insecure and intensive workplaces is broadly experienced and associated in some countries with the rise in welfare payments to sick and disabled people of working age [106]. This example highlights in turn the possible potential of a more preventative focus as part of postgrowth welfare system transformation. While such a shift has been discussed briefly in existing work (12), there is scope for much greater consideration, particularly with respect to how such a focus could work synergistically to meet upstream material and non-material need before they had downstream effects. Moreover, what requires reiteration with respect to material/non-material need trade-offs is that, while existing postgrowth social policy proposals focus almost exclusively on material needs, their lack of public acceptability makes their introduction unlikely. An important argument for the use of thicker need conceptualizations is that their incorporation of non-material needs provides affluent groups with wellbeing gains less reliant on consumption, potentially increasing the public acceptability of redistributive taxation to finance at least some of the postgrowth social policy reforms proposed so far.

This brings us finally to the issue of public acceptability, the primary concern of this paper, particularly the question whether a broader range of social policy proposals, generated by thick need conceptualizations, could help reassure affluent citizens about their wellbeing in the face of diminished consumption. This paper has shown, using the case of work, that a greater focus on non-material needs can be successful in identifying a broader range of wellbeing effects that impact a wide cross-section of Global North populations. However, it has also shown that much more work is required by postgrowth social policy scholars to develop policies capable of encouraging affluent populations to re-conceptualize their wellbeing in relation to non-material needs rather than consumption. WTR is a promising start, notwithstanding the trade-off challenges outlined above, but only a much fuller set of complementary policies involving all aspects of societal provisioning systems seems likely to challenge the grip exerted by growth norms. Some postgrowth commentators question this emphasis on policy, e.g., [6]. They emphasize instead the role of bottom-up interstitial pressure, perhaps due to generational changes [6], as the main motive force for shifts away from consumption. Yet, there seems little reason to focus exclusively on one theory of change, excluding symbiotic approaches more reliant on reforms of existing institutions [107]. Increasingly, theoretical work on the political economy of postgrowth transitions is emphasizing the interactions between state and civil society as a likely engine of change [107,108], particularly the ways in which the instabilities and limitations of existing policy approaches can offer opportunities for change agents and movements [109]. More general work on paradigm shifts has highlighted the central role of ideas as a mobilizing force [110]. What this paper has highlighted is the central role a more expansive understanding of wellbeing could play in such a process. At the least, a thicker conceptualization of need offers a way of generating the interested policy engagement of a broader cross-section of current electorates. This, in turn, could create intellectual and institutional space for the development and acceptance of the novel, innovative, and flexible policy interventions required. Such processes will be essential for navigating and

negotiating the many challenges presented in seeking to maintain and promote wellbeing in postgrowth economies and societies.

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