

Cross-Party Group on Wellbeing Economy

Wednesday, 7th June, 6:30-8:00 pm

Minutes

Present

MSPs

Maggie Chapman MSP, Emma Harper MSP

Invited Guests

Joanne O'Neill, Natalia Rodriguez, Jessica Mandanda, Tusayiwe Sikwese, Zoe McKendree, Lucy Hughes, Ashley Mclean, Catherine Murphy, Mishita Khurana, Margaret Douglas, Anne Marte Bergseng, John Todd, Claire Duncanson, Nikki Archer, Loren Turner, Ruth Boyle, Chad Morse, Bryce Goodall, Charlotte Millar, Rahim Cham, Paul Gilhooley, Daniel Foulds, Kara Brown, Iffat Shahnaz, Stuart Brown, Katia Mackley, Kerrie McCrae-Morton, Geraldine Wooley, Eilidh MacDonald, Amanada Lake, Lyn Jardine, Alex Turner, Naomi Clark, Michael Heffernan, Kirsty Connell-Skinner, Laura Salazar, Charles Durojaye, Frances Guy, Allan Faulds, Elisabeth Loose, Denya Findlay, Vaila Cameron, Catriona Spaven-Donn, Chris Johnston, David Skene, Carmen Martinez, Emma Sedgewick, Lesley Dunbar, Rebekah Holden-Avard, Beth Cloughton, Aileen McLeod, Joanne Smith, Lydia K, Robert Scott, Maria Dandoulaki, Kate Graham, Daniela Fernandez, Kelly Eagle, Julie Metcalfe, Laura Rayner, Jennifer MacKenzie, Rozina Spinnoy

Non-MSP Group Members

Anita Aggarwal (Carnegie UK), Jamie Livingston (Oxfam Scotland), Lewis Ryder-Jones (Oxfam Scotland), Heather Williams (Scottish Women's Budget Group), Louise Davies (Scotland's International Development Alliance), Dani Trudeau (Tribe Party), Gemma Bone Dodds (WEAll Scotland), Lukas Bunse (WEAll Scotland), Frances Rayner (WEAll Scotland), Alex Turner (WEAll Scotland)

Apologies

Maurice Golden MSP, David Somervell

Neil Gray MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, who had originally planned to attend the meeting also sent his apologies.

1 Welcome

Welcome from Maggie Chapman MSP and Emma Harper MSPs, co-convenors of the Cross Party Group on Wellbeing Economy.

2 CPG Business

Maggie Chapman MSP announced that she and Emma Harper MSPs had been acting as co-convenors of the group since Paul McLennan MSPs departure and sought the group's approval to continuing. The proposal was approved without objections.

Maggie Chapman MSP proposed Maurice Golden MSP to be deputy convener of the CPG. The proposal was approved without objections.

Maggie Chapman MSP proposed to approve the minutes from the meeting on the 7th of December as accurate, which was approved without objection.

3 Summary of key discussion themes

1. The impact of neoliberalism on women and girls

The negative effects of neoliberal economic frameworks in Malawi, specifically how these systems exacerbate inequalities and limit access to essential services for women and girls. Call to action to address the structural barriers that perpetuate gender inequality.

Jessica Mandanda highlighted the negative impact of neoliberal macroeconomic frameworks on Malawi, particularly on women and girls. Malawi's economic model, influenced by institutions like the World Bank and IMF, has led to unsustainable debt, underinvestment, and cuts to public services. The push for privatisation has limited access to essential services for the majority of the population, exacerbating the public health crisis. Quality public services are particularly important for women and girls in that they can reduce and redistribute the unpaid care work of women and girls to the state. Privatisation of public services also disproportionately impacts women since they make up the majority of workers in health and education services.

2. Debt distress and tax injustices

The challenges facing Malawi as it is burdened with debt – there is a need for fair and transparent debt restructuring or cancellation. The role of tax injustices, including tax havens and non-payment by multinational corporations, in hindering the provision of public services.

Tusa Sikwese emphasised the issues of debt distress, tax injustices, and the impact on women and girls in Malawi. She called for international institutions to stop interfering in Malawi's governance and provide grants without imposing conditionalities. Tax havens and non-payment of taxes by multinational companies

further hinder the delivery of public services. Tusa advocated for debt cancellation or restructuring to prioritise the well-being of the people and the planet.

3. Systems change and the feminist wellbeing economy

A systems perspective is needed to reimagine the economy, recognising the centrality of, for example, care and domestic work, and challenging the dominant narrative of capitalism. The importance of integrating feminist perspectives into mainstream economic thinking to reconsider economic success beyond GDP.

Gemma Bone Dodds discussed the need for a systems approach to the global feminist wellbeing economy. She highlighted the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham, who challenged the dominance of capitalism and emphasised the unrecognised contributions of women in economic activities. Gemma called for reframing and integrating feminist perspectives into mainstream economic thinking, recognising the care and domestic work that sustains society.

4. Integrating gender analysis into decision-making

The need for gender analysis in decision-making processes, addressing the undervaluing of care and promoting accountability. Call to action to challenge attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate gender inequality and create safe spaces for women and marginalised groups.

Heather Williams focused on tackling gender inequalities and integrating gender analysis into decision-making processes. She drew attention to the undervaluing of care and the need to depart from siloed thinking. Heather called for accountability in addressing inequality, incorporating gender budgeting recommendations, and challenging attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate inequality and make spaces unsafe for women and marginalised groups.

4 Presentations

Jessica Mandanda - why Malawi is involved in the discussion on building a global feminist wellbeing economy

Jessica began by explaining that Malawi's involvement in the discussion on building a global feminist wellbeing economy is driven by the negative impact of neoliberal macroeconomic frameworks on the country, particularly on women and girls. While Malawi has made commitments to women's and girls' wellbeing and rights, its current economic model, influenced by loans and advice from institutions like the World Bank and IMF, has led to unsustainable debt, underinvestment, and cuts to vital public services such as health and education.

As a result, there has been a push for privatisation of public services, limiting accessibility for the majority of the population living below the poverty line. With public services now in the private sector, most Malawians cannot afford to access them, and the cost for basic services, like clean water, has increased significantly. This worsens the public health crisis, including a spike in cholera cases, as clean water is essential for its management. Additionally, Malawi is facing a debt crisis,

with its debt reaching 66.7% of GDP in 2022 and predicted to rise further in 2023. The country has also experienced inflation, currency devaluation, and an ongoing economic crisis worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. The current economic framework lacks mechanisms to alleviate the impact on the population and fails to provide solutions for the wellbeing and rights of women and girls.

The economic model promotes a regressive tax regime, burdening the poor while accommodating tax havens for the wealthy. As such the tax system disproportionately affects basic needs like food, cooking oil, and fuel, exacerbating the poverty situation. Malawi loses a significant amount of money through these tax havens, equivalent to more than 30% of the country's health budget, further reducing funding for essential public services like health and education.

In response to these challenges, Jessica highlighted that the Feminist Macro-economic Alliance in Malawi aims to raise awareness, empower women to share their experiences, and ensure that women's and girls' voices are heard. They advocate for transparency, accountability, and the understanding that any political and economic decisions, as well as the support provided by foreign governments, must consider the impact on women and girls.

The Feminist Macro-economic Alliance Malawi calls for relief and development support through a feminist wellbeing economy, prioritising people over the current economic model that favours individualism and neoliberalism. Jessica concluded by emphasising the importance of transformative leadership that challenges patriarchal norms and campaigns for debt cancellation and progressive taxation to reverse the impact of the current economic model on the lives of women and girls in Malawi.

Gemma Bone Dodds - a systems take on the global feminist Wellbeing Economy

Gemma introduced her involvement in feminist political economy and her interest in systems change, highlighting the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham, feminist political economists who questioned the dominance of capitalism in our imaginations and examined the connection between political economy and feminist and queer theories. J.K. Gibson-Graham challenged the notion that the economy is separate from other aspects of life and presented the iceberg model to illustrate that what we perceive as the economy is just a small part of a larger system of provisioning and value creation.

As Gemma revealed, the book "Who Cooked Adam Smith's Dinner?" by Katrine Marçal emphasises the unrecognised contributions of women in economic activities. Gemma stated that rethinking the economy involves recognising the care and domestic work that supports and sustains society, challenging the idea that these activities are secondary to the capitalist economy. She quoted Amanda Janoo from WEAll Global: the economy is fundamentally about caring for one another.

Gemma also highlighted the need to reframe and integrate these perspectives into mainstream economic thinking, rather than treating them as separate or peripheral, and empathises the importance of considering the impact on women and girls when

reimagining the economy, calling for a shift in how economic success is measured, moving away from solely relying on metrics like GDP.

Heather Williams - tackling existing gender inequalities and integrating gender analysis into decision-making

Heather argued for the need for a gender analysis when making decisions regarding how money is raised and spent, recognising the impact of gender stereotypes and expectations on individuals' lives.

She criticised the lack of consideration for care in the National Strategy for Economic Transformation, emphasising the undervaluing of care despite its essential nature, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. She stressed the need for a departure from siloed thinking, where equality is treated as separate from financial considerations, and instead advocates for integrating equality into all decision-making processes.

She identified accountability as a significant issue in addressing inequality, with a lack of impact from the public sector equality duty and equality impact assessments. Heather called for making individuals accountable for ensuring equality is central to decision-making processes. She also supports making gender budgeting recommendations statutory, with an emphasis on incorporating accountability measures.

While recognising that a gender equal economy and a well-being economy are interconnected, Heather highlighted that they are not synonymous. Addressing underlying beliefs and attitudes that perpetuate gender inequality is essential as legislation alone cannot solve these issues. Prevention and challenging attitudes and behaviours are crucial, especially in creating safe spaces for women, girls, and marginalised groups.

Ultimately Heather is calling for a comprehensive approach that integrates gender analysis into decision-making, addresses the undervaluing of care, promotes accountability, and challenges attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate inequality and make certain spaces unsafe for women and marginalised groups.

Tusa Sikwese – on debt distress and gendered austerity

Tusa Sikwese, Policy Officer and Coordinator for ActionAid Malawi, raised key points regarding debt distress, transparency, tax injustices, and the impact of the global economic system on women and girls in Malawi.

Tusa explained that Malawi, as a poor country, accumulates debt due to its economic situation and the conditions attached to loans. She emphasised the need for international institutions like the IMF and the World Bank to stop interfering in the country's governance and to provide grants without imposing conditionalities. Tusa criticised the government for prioritising individualistic thinking over the welfare of the population, particularly women and girls living in poverty and highlighted how a

significant portion of the funds, which could have been directed towards public services, end up being pocketed by the government, leading to a lack of investment and limited transparency and accountability.

Tusa spoke about tax injustices and tax havens for the wealthy, citing an example of a mining company enjoying tax holidays and not contributing to the government's revenue. This lack of tax payment by multinational companies affects the delivery of public services, especially for women and girls. Tusa further connected the issues to climate change and the recent cyclone that hit southern Malawi, exacerbating the region's vulnerability and lack of access to public health services. She shared about the scarcity of health workers, low wages, and the negative impact of IMF-mandated wage bill cuts on the healthcare system (in particular to women and girls).

Tusa advocates for debt cancellation or debt repayment restructuring to prioritise the well-being of people and the planet rather than focusing solely on GDP, sharing a story of a pregnant woman impacted by the devastation wrought by Cyclone Freddy. With no health care access and damaged infrastructure, she was faced with cycling to be picked up by an ambulance, and giving birth en route to a safe place.

5 Audience questions

What actions can be taken to encourage governments in the global north to bring about necessary changes in debt, taxation, and fiscal space to foster a feminist well-being economy?

Claire Duncanson, Uni of Edinburgh referenced previous workshops on developing a feminist approach to foreign policy for the Scottish Government, and sought insights on what actions can be taken, what to lobby for, and how to encourage governments in the global north to bring about necessary changes in debt, taxation, and fiscal space to foster a feminist well-being economy.

Panel answers

Gemma emphasised the interconnectedness of debt cancellation and the current economic model, drawing on her knowledge of economic theories to argue that debt is not separate from the economy but a significant part of it. She expressed concerns about the impact of the current economic system on real lives, using the example Tusa gave about the difficulties faced by individuals in labour. Gemma referenced the significance of debt cancellation at Gleneagles in 2005 but reflected that it mainly allowed countries to continue paying their debts rather than addressing the root causes. Gemma underlined her stance which is to prioritise avoiding harm, and challenging the extractive nature of the economy through debt structures. She very much advocates for a shift in perspective on international aid, urging governments to listen to the people and address the structural issues rather than perpetuating the cycle - as both Jessica and Tusa spoke to.

Emma Harper MSP highlighted silos and siloed work, also mentioned by Heather. She referenced the National Performance Framework which includes recognition of

unpaid care and domestic work, but Emma questioned if it is effectively implemented. She also flagged that the recent review on Violence Against Women lacks mention of the That Guy campaign. Emma suggested taking action by writing to relevant ministers like Neil Gunn to raise awareness and examine existing silos to ensure that gender budgeting is considered.

Jessica drew attention back to the importance of recognising that all development work is macroeconomic, and economic decisions have a direct impact on the ground. She underlined the need to move away from the perception of the economy as a closed-room conversation among men in suits and instead consider the functioning of public services as an indicator of economic decisions. Jessica also stressed the need for intentional and purposeful support that improves public services and invests in sustainability. Unsustainable development has been prevalent in Malawi due to reliance on projects and external support, which has allowed the government to evade responsibility and perpetuate corruption. This is why Jessica advocates for international support to be viewed through a feminist macroeconomics lens, addressing gendered impacts and ensuring sustainability in all developmental efforts.

Heather argued for the need for a more holistic and coordinated approach. She provided an example in Caithness about decisions made by NHS Highland that have unintended consequences on other services and people in the area - in particular provision of air ambulance and lifeboat services for pregnant women during inclement weather, and how women are deciding to either not have pregnancies or to be induced so that they can have a planned birth in Inverness. She also referenced the lack of joined up thinking when changing the provision for school transport, and the impact that decision has on individuals' ability to work or children's access to school transportation.

Heather also flagged the importance of monitoring and measuring the impact of decisions, particularly in areas like care and unpaid care. She calls for greater clarity and transparency in how the government addresses inequalities and utilises funds for international development within Scotland. Her response also raises concerns about the lack of progress in improving public services and addressing issues faced by vulnerable individuals, despite the existence of reports like the Christie Commission. Heather advocates for a shift away from fragmented thinking and towards a more interconnected and comprehensive approach to policy making and service provision.

How can women in Malawi empower themselves and influence the economy through farming and climate change initiatives if they are provided with resources and given a voice?

Bai Ibrahim Cham, environmental journalist from the Gambia, asked about the role of women in the economy, particularly in relation to farming and climate change. He highlighted the challenges faced by women in accessing resources and having their voices heard in decision-making processes and asked how women in Malawi can empower themselves and influence the economy through farming and climate change initiatives if they are provided with resources and given a voice.

Panel answers

Tusa acknowledged the significant contribution of women in farming in Malawi (60%), though their voices are often marginalised due to cultural norms. ActionAid is working with partners to create safe spaces for women to voice their concerns and has women counsellors who can advocate for them. This work is about working with women on realising their economic rights – including the value of their work and the need for fair compensation.

Tusa shared an example of a woman who did all the farming work while her husband was sick, but he later took control of the harvest without acknowledging her efforts. ActionAid and its partners aim to work with women on realising their economic rights and ensure they are paid fairly for their work. Tusa reinforced the importance of social protection and fair labour practices in the agricultural sector.

Jessica agreed about the importance of promoting women's economic justice and highlighted the issue of land rights in Malawi and its impact on women's economic participation in agriculture. She raised the question of how international support can be engaged to reverse the impact of particular governments decision making, and gave an example of how previously women did not have access to land in Malawi which prevented them from benefiting from their agricultural work. Jessica spoke about a campaign that was launched pushing the government for a Land Rights Bill that would protect women's rights to land and ensure they receive fair compensation for their work. The campaign involved championing support from external governments and organisations, and after five years of international campaigning and pressure, it eventually led to the successful amendment of the Land Rights Bill in Malawi to allow women to own land.

“Those who are in power have a responsibility to empower others.” How do we get those who are in power to really take seriously a feminist wellbeing economy, and not see it as outside the neoclassical model of the economy?

Panel answers

Heather talked about the importance of lived experience, and empowering individuals and ensuring their voices are heard in decision-making processes. She highlighted the need to define and understand what empowerment and lived experience mean in different contexts, but expressed concerns about who is being heard and who is being left out in consultations and decision-making, citing examples of marginalised groups like women in the Sikh community. Heather is calling for inclusive and well-resourced processes that lead to tangible changes and improvements, rather than just collecting opinions and experiences, stressing the importance of enabling people to actively participate in transforming systems and structures that create barriers for them.

Emma Harper MSP mentioned that she is a member of the Standards Committee that is currently examining the gender balance within Parliament. She highlighted the

importance of engaging with local authorities to ensure inclusive decision making around budgeting.

Lived experience

The final question goes back to lived experiences but expresses concerns about its limited accessibility and inclusivity. They propose a shift towards a consultancy model that values the expertise and insights offered by those with personal experience. They suggest that instead of paying large sums to external consultants, the focus should be on compensating individuals with lived experience for their valuable insights.

6 Final thoughts by panellists and convener

Jessica's closing remarks emphasise the global impact of neoliberalism on every country's economic framework, including Malawi. She highlights the need for collaborative and joint solutions to address these issues. Jessica views the feminist Wellbeing Economy as a potential pathway forward and encourages a shared understanding as action points are developed.

Tusa's closing remarks highlight two key points. Firstly, she emphasises the importance of building awareness and understanding around the concept of feminist wellbeing, as it is still relatively new and unfamiliar to many, but she reminds us that patience is needed as this process of building critical mass and gaining acceptance will likely take time. Secondly, Tusa calls for international organisations and governments to acknowledge their responsibilities and contributions regarding the existing economic system. She reminds us that current economic challenges are not solely the burden of certain countries, but a shared responsibility.

In closing, Heather emphasises the importance of constantly questioning the purpose and impact of our actions. She repeated the need to address inequality in all aspects of decision-making, whether it involves raising or spending money, and asks that if we cannot clearly see how our actions are addressing inequality, we should question why we are undertaking those actions in the first place. If we fail to critically examine and challenge our approaches then only perpetuate existing inequalities.

Gemma closes by introducing the concept of Berkana Institute's two loops model of systems change. She explains that the model visualises the current system on the top loop, which gradually declines over time, and the emerging next system on the bottom loop, which eventually overtakes the current system. Gemma emphasises that this transition is not guaranteed or predetermined, but it requires connecting and visualising the individuals and initiatives building the new system. Gemma also stressed the importance of recognising our roles within the system, acknowledging that we may not sit only in one place, and that competing roles might stifle innovation or create silos. Gemma proposes that forming collaborations between pioneers and making these connections visible can help shape a new narrative and influence policymakers. She mentions the significance of collaborative methodologies for participatory leadership and systems change which will be explored by WEAll Scotland.

Emma Harper MSP thanked everybody for coming and especially the speakers for their contributions and answers to questions. She highlights the work that the Health, Social Care and Sports committee has been doing on health inequality and that the committee is now looking into women and girls in sport. She suggests that the group finds a way to take the themes of this meeting forward in terms of advocating for actions.

7 Useful Links

ActionAid's work on a feminist Wellbeing Economy:

[ActionAid's working on transitioning to a feminist wellbeing economy in Malawi](#)

[ActionAid's research on feminist economic alternatives](#)

2-loops model shared by Gemma:

["Two Loops"](#) in *After Now* by Bob Stilger

[Two Loops](#) audiovisual explanation (YouTube)

Links shared in the chat:

<https://youtu.be/BIQ-IFG7kGs> - A lot of the discussion has brought to mind the lack of ethics within economics, this short interview is a good place to start on that topic.