

MERGE

MEASURING WHAT MATTERS

Policy pathways to sustainable and
inclusive wellbeing

Deliverable 4.1

Survey report on the perceptions on beyond GDP approach

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1. Executive summary

Achieving the 2030 Agenda and the EU's policies on environmental and social sustainability requires a comprehensive measure of human progress that does not focus solely on GDP but goes beyond it. To address this challenge, many competing indicators and policy frameworks have emerged. Broadly speaking, 'beyond GDP' refers to an approach advocating the use of alternative indicators and accelerating a sustainability transformation to move away from the current dominance of GDP growth. It suggests adopting alternative metrics that better capture wellbeing, social equity, and environmental sustainability. As an approach that brings together diverse stakeholders, it is rich in concepts and ideas for alternative metrics and future pathways. To enhance the uptake of this increasingly popular approach, it is important to better understand stakeholders' awareness and perceptions of beyond GDP concepts and metrics.

This report presents the findings of survey and interview data collected by MERGE in June-October 2024. The online survey explored the significance of GDP in policymaking, the use of metrics, datasets and models, awareness of beyond GDP concepts and the barriers and drivers of moving beyond GDP. The survey was answered by 132 individuals representing researchers, policymakers, NGO actors and others (e.g. people working in the media and business). Interviews with eight EU level policymakers were conducted to deepen the understanding of policymakers' views on the survey topics.

The results are not representative due to the small sample size, but they provide an overview of the field from the perspective of active stakeholders who are already familiar with the beyond GDP approach. The results will inform future MERGE tasks on prioritisation of indicators and beyond GDP policy frameworks and on the development of communication strategies to enhance their appeal. The results will also contribute to guidance material aiming to support the development and use of beyond GDP metrics, models and policies.

Summary of the key findings:

Awareness of beyond GDP approaches

- Almost all survey respondents state that they are aware of the beyond GDP approach and the majority are also actively working on this topic. This reflects the distribution of the survey to MERGE stakeholders.
- The respondents are familiar with many beyond GDP concepts. Sustainable development, wellbeing economy, green growth and degrowth are among most well-known concepts.

- Sustainable development, wellbeing economy, sustainable and inclusive growth and sustainable and inclusive wellbeing are the concepts many survey respondents use in their daily work.
- Postgrowth, beyond growth, doughnut economy and ecological economy are more often used by researchers than policymakers while policymakers are slightly more likely to use the concepts of green growth and net zero economy/growth.

Drivers and barriers to beyond GDP approach

- Survey results show that important drivers include growing acceptability among general public, improved scientific knowledge, growing global momentum for moving beyond growth, and pressure from grassroots initiatives. Interview results support that the views of general public are key for pushing change towards beyond GDP.
- Researchers see simultaneous efforts at all levels as a bigger driver than other actors. Policymakers consider growing acceptance among political actors as a slightly more influential driver than researchers.
- Survey and interview results show that barriers related to structural factors in governance and policymaking are considered as the most difficult to overcome. These include path dependencies in governance systems (e.g., consolidation of GDP), short-termism and prioritization of urgent issues in policymaking, and an unfavourable political context.
- Policymakers see the problems associated with short-term policy cycles as a more important barrier than other actors. Researchers seem to consider postgrowth thinking having marginal support within government systems as a relatively bigger barrier than policymakers. NGO actors see the lack of practical implications and benefits of beyond growth approaches as a less important barrier compared to other actors.

Use of data, indicators, and models

- The majority of the respondents use indicators/ indicator dashboards to track progress and raise awareness of policy issues. They also collect or update datasets and develop indicator dashboards.
- EUROSTAT databases are the most popular datasets. Data from national statistical offices is the second most popular dataset, followed by SDG indicators. The results show that decisionmaking is tied to traditional, institutional datasets and specific raw data. Furthermore, datasets are slightly preferred over composite indicators or dashboards.

- Legitimacy is the main reason for preferring specific indicators and models, especially among policymakers. Many survey respondents only use data, indicators and models that are produced by organisations that are seen as legitimate in their field. The interviews confirm that EU policymakers are only authorised to use the metrics that are considered legitimate, which tends to refer to official and conventional sources, such as EUROSTAT. Moreover, many respondents actively search for alternative metrics and prefer to use original data, and regularly updated and public datasets.

Perceptions of GDP and beyond GDP metrics

- The survey and interview results show that the pursuit of GDP growth has a strong influence on the design of government policies, and this has not changed over the last five years.
- The results demonstrate that the most common reasons to use GDP connect to its current status and widespread use. Comparability and public familiarity with the concept are also common reasons. Conversely, fewer survey respondents and interviewees use GDP because they see it as an overarching number that can tell powerful stories.
- The results highlight that the biggest flaws of GDP are that it does not measure the quality of life, does not distinguish between sustainable and unsustainable economic activities, ignores social inequalities and excludes the informal economy and care activities. The majority of the respondents consider these to be significant flaws.
- A significant majority of the survey respondents would like to include additional data or indicators in their work. Data and indicators on both social and environmental issues are requested.
- Overall, the biggest flaws of existing beyond GDP metrics and models include the difficulty of interpreting multidimensional indicators, the lack of timely enough data and the limitations of cross-country comparisons. Most respondents agree that Beyond GDP indicators and models cover relevant topics.
- For policymakers the biggest flaw of beyond GDP indexes and models is that they do not have a legitimate status within their organisation, while for other actors this is not as important a shortcoming.

Opportunities for effecting change

- The implementation of the European Green Deal is seen by the majority of respondents as an important opportunity to integrate a Beyond GDP approach into

policy design, assessment and evaluation. Strategic foresight, the European Semester and Social Europe are also seen as key opportunities.

- Policymakers responding to the survey see competitiveness as a more important opportunity than other actors and as important as Social Europe. Researchers see Social Europe, Better Regulation and integrated assessment tools as more significant opportunities than other actors.
- Policymakers interviewed consider that the European Green Deal, the European Semester and the European Commission's better regulation guidelines offer possibilities to integrate a beyond GDP agenda into EU-level policy frameworks.

2. Background: moving beyond GDP

MERGE is a Horizon Europe project that builds on the scientific work of Horizon Europe consortiums including [WISE Horizons](#), [ToBe](#) and [SPES](#), and a European Research Council funded project, [REAL](#). These projects provide improved knowledge on indicators beyond GDP, alternative and more sustainable policy options, and scenarios for a sustainable future. MERGE aims to create synergies between these projects to build a strong science-based forum for further developing beyond GDP policies and indicators. To inform the beyond GDP agenda, this report reflects MERGE stakeholders' perceptions on beyond GDP metrics and concepts.

A better understanding of the stakeholders' perceptions is important because the ongoing debate on beyond GDP is rich with diverse and sometimes competing understandings. One strand of the debate is narrowly focused on complementing GDP as a hegemonic measure of progress. It focuses on advocating more comprehensive wellbeing and sustainability metrics. Another strand goes further by questioning the dependence on economic growth. While the first positioning is focused on the technical discussion, the latter represents a 'beyond growth' approach that "needs to be framed on a more fundamental level" (European Parliamentary Research Service S023, 1). It raises the question of whether economic growth brings the expected benefits or whether it is one of the root causes of current environmental and social problems. In this report we understand 'beyond GDP' as a combination of both strands. In the data collection phase, the beyond GDP approach was framed as a comprehensive approach advocating the use of alternative indicators and a sustainability transition that moves away from current dependence on economic growth.

The beyond GDP field is also rich with diverse concepts that seek to destabilise the current status quo. Alternatives to a GDP-oriented economy have been advocated for with different labels and adjectives reflecting their specific focuses or goals. Different positionings can be situated, for example, in the spectrum of green growth, a-growth, degrowth, and post-development in terms of their relationship with economic growth: whether it can be decoupled from environmental impacts, whether there should be an agnostic attitude towards growth while focusing on the important end goals, or whether we should more fundamentally question the hegemony of growth (Angresius et al. 2023). According to a study by the European Parliamentary Research Service (2023), three main strands in the growth debate can be summarised as green and inclusive growth, post-growth, and degrowth. Associated to these strands, many different concepts have emerged (e.g. circular economy, wellbeing economy, and doughnut economics).

In MERGE, we are interested in the potential of converging different concepts into a common approach that can be shared by as many actors as possible. Recently, it has been suggested that the field is converging towards using ‘sustainable and inclusive wellbeing’ as an umbrella term (e.g. European Commission 2024a; Hoekstra et al. 2024). Sufficiency has also been suggested as a point of convergence for degrowth, wellbeing economy, and doughnut economics (Laurent 2024). Moreover, many actors use the concept of post-growth as an umbrella term for growth-critical approaches, and it has been suggested that wellbeing economy postulates an effective and widely shared basis for specific post-growth policies (Fioramonti et al. 2022). Last but not the least, the Sustainable Human Development paradigm is grounded on a similar convergence by focusing on the process of enlarging people's freedoms and opportunities and improving their wellbeing while maintaining environmental integrity and ensuring that these conditions also be attainable for future generations (Biggeri et al. 2023).

For many decades, research discussions have highlighted various flaws of GDP and reasons to replace it. Extensive research discussion on the topic (e.g. Costanza et al. 2009; Stiglitz et al. 2010; Hoekstra 2019; Bleys & Thiry 2022) has shown how GDP fails to acknowledge the importance of issues such as environmental sustainability, wellbeing, job security, and inequality. Many factors crucial to wellbeing such as health, social relationships and education are overshadowed by GDP. It also tends to ignore the needs of future generations and does not account for environmental harm (e.g. pollution or carbon emissions) as a negative factor of GDP (Biggeri and Mauro 2018). It also ignores social inequalities and household or caregiving work that is done in an informal economy. Recently, it has been criticised that GDP does not measure production that involves free internet services (such as

Facebook, Google, and Wikipedia) (Hoekstra 2022). In addition, GDP per capita is increasingly less associated with health outcomes, education and quality of life, as a report "Economic Policy-Making Beyond GDP" published by the European Commission (Terzi 2021) shows.

One challenge of the broader uptake of beyond GDP approaches relates to the limited availability or use of alternative data sources, metrics and models. To further develop the field, it is thus crucial to better understand how different stakeholders use metrics, why they favour certain metrics, why they use GDP, what they perceive to be its flaws and how they perceive beyond GDP alternatives. Alternative metrics and models already exist but their uptake has been slow (Costanza et al. 2024). When reviewing eight existing transformative indicator initiatives across the world, Dethier and Roman (2024) found that overall, new initiatives met quality criteria adequately (e.g. reliability, robustness, coherence, comparability, accessibility and clarity of indicators) but were not always reaching wider impacts in policymaking. For example, there was a significant lack of integration of indicator initiatives into budget allocation rules and missing enforcement mechanisms that would have improved the adherence to new commitments.

A previous EU-funded BRAINPOOL project (2011-2014) focused on bringing alternative indicators to policy has identified three categories of barriers to alternatives. First, political barriers include lack of democratic legitimacy, lack of a strong narrative that engages the public and lack of a clear political imperative. Second, there are indicator barriers related to data problems, conceptual confusion, lack of a beyond GDP indicator with the salience of GDP and confusion of language and politics associated with beyond GDP. Third, different processes and structural barriers hamper uptake due to a lack of a well-structured process of integrated and innovative economic policy making. Institutional resistance to change, lack of cross-silo practices and connections to existing work programs of organisations, as well as conservatism and risk aversion hamper progress. In addition, there are views that beyond GDP is redundant. BRAINPOOL project (n.d.) also found that even if GDP is questioned as a good proxy for welfare, it needs to be retained because growth has such important objectives in policymaking that it cannot be replaced.

Previous research has also identified factors explaining the use of beyond GDP metrics and models and the drivers for moving beyond GDP. According to the findings of the BRAINPOOL project (n.d.), salience for both decision-makers and for a broader audience is important. Indicators should be shown to be relevant for policymaking. Credibility and legitimacy also increased the use of alternative indicators. Participation and relationship building also seem to be crucial factors especially in the case of local-level indicator

initiatives. When studying beyond GDP indicators as policy tools at the EU level, Widuto (2022) found that methodological robustness can positively influence the use of beyond GDP indicators. The indicators are also more openly received if they are framed as technocratic efforts to improve statistics rather than efforts that include some broader political goals.

Corlet Walker et al. (2020) interviewed civil servants in UK to scrutinize their views about measuring societal wellbeing. They found three different discourses. The first warned about the consequences of ignoring natural, social and human capital and thus favoured the development of beyond GDP indicators. The second discourse emphasized opportunities and autonomies as key determinants of wellbeing and was thus more favourable for using subjective indicators when measuring wellbeing. The third discourse was mainly focused on the technical conditions of measuring societal wellbeing and was critical towards one number capturing the essence of societal wellbeing. Corlet Walker et al. (2020) also found a common view among civil servants stating that economic growth is not the foundation of societal wellbeing. The civil servants agreed that GDP alone cannot reflect the standard of living among citizens, but alternatives are needed. The study suggests that end-users should be more engaged in the development of new indicators, which reflects the need for co-creation as highlighted in MERGE.

Besides using new metrics and models, the beyond GDP approach would entail new kinds of policy frameworks for making the approach a political reality. As the link between economic growth and the "things that matter" has weakened, the discussion on beyond GDP approach has gained wider acceptance also in EU policymaking. Prominent milestones include three conferences in the European Parliament: Beyond GDP conference in 2007, Post-growth conference in 2018 and Beyond Growth conference in 2023. Following the conference organised in 2007, the European Commission published a communication "GDP and beyond: Measuring progress in changing world" (Commission of the European Communities 2009). In 2019, European Council published Council conclusions on the Economy of Wellbeing (2019/C 400/09) in which it promoted the economy of wellbeing as a policy orientation and governance approach aiming to "put people and their wellbeing at the centre of policy and decision-making". This had an influence on the content of the 2020 Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy published by the European Commission as part of the 2020 European Semester cycle. In its opening, it stated that "Economic growth is not an end in itself. An economy must work for the people and the planet" (see Terzi 2021, 5). More recently, DG RTD launched the GDP+3 study to find 3 additional indicators to complement

GDP. One of the options envisaged was to have one indicator for wellbeing, inclusion and sustainability respectively (European Commission 2024b).

The European Pillar of Social Rights is an example of an initiative setting headline targets related to employment, skills and reduction of poverty and social exclusion. Policy processes based on the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) have also widened the scope by introducing new indicators to assess the performance in various policy areas across the EU, which have also been integrated into the European Semester process. Even though European Green Deal is called a new growth strategy for Europe, its focus on reducing net carbon emissions has shifted the focus from narrow GDP to climate, environmental and, to a lesser extent, social objectives and resulted into the development of new key indicators.

In addition to the development at the EU level, there is a need for a broad global consensus alliance among the most relevant international organizations and supranational institutions, including the UN, the OECD, the European Union and the top experts to coordinate convergence efforts and make the final decisive step to go beyond GDP (Ottaviani et al. 2024). A new “Pact for the Future”, adopted by world leaders in the UN Summit of the Future in September 2024, is a recent example of such efforts. In it, the member states agree to “develop a framework on measures of progress on sustainable development to complement and go beyond gross domestic product” (United Nations 2024).

As academia and institutions increasingly seek alignment, akin to the historical evolution of GDP measurement, consensus on broader beyond-GDP metrics becomes imperative. Given the complexity of this policy area, there is a need to better understand how different stakeholders perceive the opportunities for integrating the beyond GDP approach and new metrics into policy design, assessment and evaluation.

3. Data and methods

The findings of this report are based on survey and interview data collected by MERGE. The survey data was collected via an EU survey through an online survey-management system. The survey was open for 7 weeks in June and July 2024. We distributed the survey by sharing it with persons belonging to MERGE's policy and technical stakeholder networks. It was also distributed by MERGE partners through different methods (e.g. personal emails and social media). We also distributed printed handouts of the survey to the participants of the Conference of the European Society for Ecological Economics/International Degrowth Conference held in June 2024. The choice of distribution channels led to receiving data from

respondents who are mostly aware of beyond GDP approaches and/or are actively working in that direction.

132 individuals responded to the survey. Table 1 presents background information about the survey respondents. They come from 17 different EU countries and 5 non-EU countries. The biggest groups come from Belgium, Italy, and Spain. 65 respondents are male, 61 are female, 1 is non-binary, 1 is transgender and 4 prefer not to say. The respondents are aged between 18 to 72+ years. Out of the respondents 59 are researchers (in academia, research institutes or think tanks), 45 policymakers (at local, national or EU-level, or in international organisations including the OECD and UN, mainly officials and experts) and 15 NGO actors (NGOs/Citizen initiatives). We grouped the rest of the respondents (13) into a group of “other” stakeholders, featuring business actors, media and respondents who identified themselves to be part of more than one stakeholder group.

The survey questions are available in appendix A. The respondents were able to skip questions that they regarded as outside of their expertise, which explains the questions having varying number of respondents (as is shown in the figures 1-12.)

Background information of the survey respondents							
Actor group	Policymaker		Researcher		NGO actor		Other
	45		59		15		13
Gender	Female		Male	Transgender	Non-binary		Prefer not to say
	61		65	1	1		4
Age	18-28	29-39	40-50	51-61	62-72	73+	Prefer not to say
	17	38	35	30	8	2	2

Table 1: Background information of the survey respondents.

The interviews were conducted in July-October 2024. We interviewed eight officials/experts from different EU bodies and agencies including European Commission, European Parliament, European Economic and Social Committee, European Parliamentary Research Service, Eurostat and European Environmental Agency. Interviewees seniority and positions range between leading positions to other expert positions. To protect the interviewees’ anonymity, we do not share their detailed background information. We refer to the interviewees with anonymized identifiers P1-P8.

The interview questions are available in appendix B. We conducted seven interviews via Teams calls and one interviewee answered to the interview questions in writing. The Teams interviews took 32-44 minutes, and they were transcribed by utilizing Microsoft Teams’ AI-

based transcription feature. We analysed the interviews using qualitative content analysis, to complement the survey results with qualitative insights.

The survey data was collected, and interviews were done in line with ethical guidelines and GDPR regulations. Participation in the survey and interviews was voluntary and the respondents could skip questions if they wished to do so. The survey respondents and interviewees received a privacy notice describing the collection and use of data prior to participation. No sensitive information was collected, and the data has been fully anonymised.

4. Results

4.1. Awareness of beyond GDP approach

In this section, we present results on the awareness of survey respondents of the beyond GDP approach, including their familiarity with beyond GDP concepts and their use of these concepts in daily work. Almost all survey respondents stated awareness of beyond GDP approaches. This reflects the distribution of the survey in MERGE stakeholder networks and as such is not surprising. Over half of the respondents (79 out of 132) are fully aware of beyond GDP approaches and actively work on that topic. 41 respondents are aware of beyond GDP approaches, but do not know how to implement them in practice. This is interesting result for the MERGE project and other similar initiatives as it points towards a need for guidance to implementing beyond GDP approaches. Seven are aware of beyond GDP approaches but are not convinced by the reasons for them. Only four are not aware of beyond GDP approaches or what they entail, and one respondent left this question unanswered. There are no major differences in the awareness of beyond GDP approaches between respondents in different stakeholder groups.

All policymakers we interviewed are also aware of the beyond GDP approach. However, according to some, the familiarity of the concept is not very high within EU bodies and agencies. One interviewee describes that “in general the awareness of this topic is quite low” (P4).

“When you use the phrase beyond GDP, I would say most people really don't know very well what it is about. That's my perception. At least you know from talking to people on the inside, with the exception of conferences that are dedicated to this topic.” (P4)

Another interviewee describes beyond GDP more as a background issue at the moment. It is mentioned in some reports but not so much in day-to-day work.

“-- we have so many changes and we need so many changes. And among these changes -- one is to go beyond GDP. Very good. Next forgotten. Let's talk about things as we usually do.” (P1)

These statements suggest that our sample of survey respondents is not representative of the level of familiarity with the beyond GDP approach among (EU) policymakers, but rather gives insights into the views of policymakers who are familiar with the approach. However, one interviewee did note that "beyond GDP concept is gaining in importance" (P8)

"It was fantastic to see that this year's Nobel Prize for economics goes to Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson and James Robinson, who teach us that inclusive economic and inclusive political institutions play the decisive role for the level of prosperity of a country." (P8)

The survey respondents' familiarity with beyond GDP approaches is reflected in their familiarity with the key concepts around beyond GDP discussion. In the survey, we introduced 13 concepts that are typically used in the beyond GDP discussion and are relevant in the MERGE context. In addition to sustainable development and sustainable and inclusive wellbeing as encompassing concepts related to the policy goals, the list includes different types of economies (wellbeing economy, steady state economy, ecological economy, doughnut economy), and different forms of growth (green growth, inclusive growth, sustainable and inclusive growth, post-growth, degrowth, beyond growth, net zero growth). The list is not exhaustive: in addition to the concepts used in this MERGE survey, there are other prominent alternatives including, for example, social and solidarity economy, foundational economy, or community economies.

The results are presented in Figure 1. Overall, a clear majority of the respondents are at least somewhat/quite familiar with all the concepts: 70-30% (93-41) of the respondents are very familiar with the concepts. Only 1-17% (1-23) are unfamiliar with one or more of the concepts.

The respondents are most familiar with sustainable development, with 93 respondents being very familiar, 37 somewhat/quite familiar and only 1 unfamiliar with the concept. This is not surprising, as sustainable development has been discussed for decades and is operationalized through agreements in political sphere, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Approximately half of the respondents (65-70) are very familiar with wellbeing economy, green growth and degrowth, while only 1-4 are

unfamiliar with these concepts. Sustainable and inclusive wellbeing and sustainable and inclusive growth come just behind in terms of familiarity, with 58-59 being very familiar and 4-5 unfamiliar with them.

The concepts that are unfamiliar to the largest number of respondents are steady-state economy (23 respondents), doughnut economy (19 respondents) and post-growth (18 respondents). Interestingly, many respondents (62-41) are also very familiar with these concepts, suggesting that they divide MERGE stakeholders in terms of familiarity.

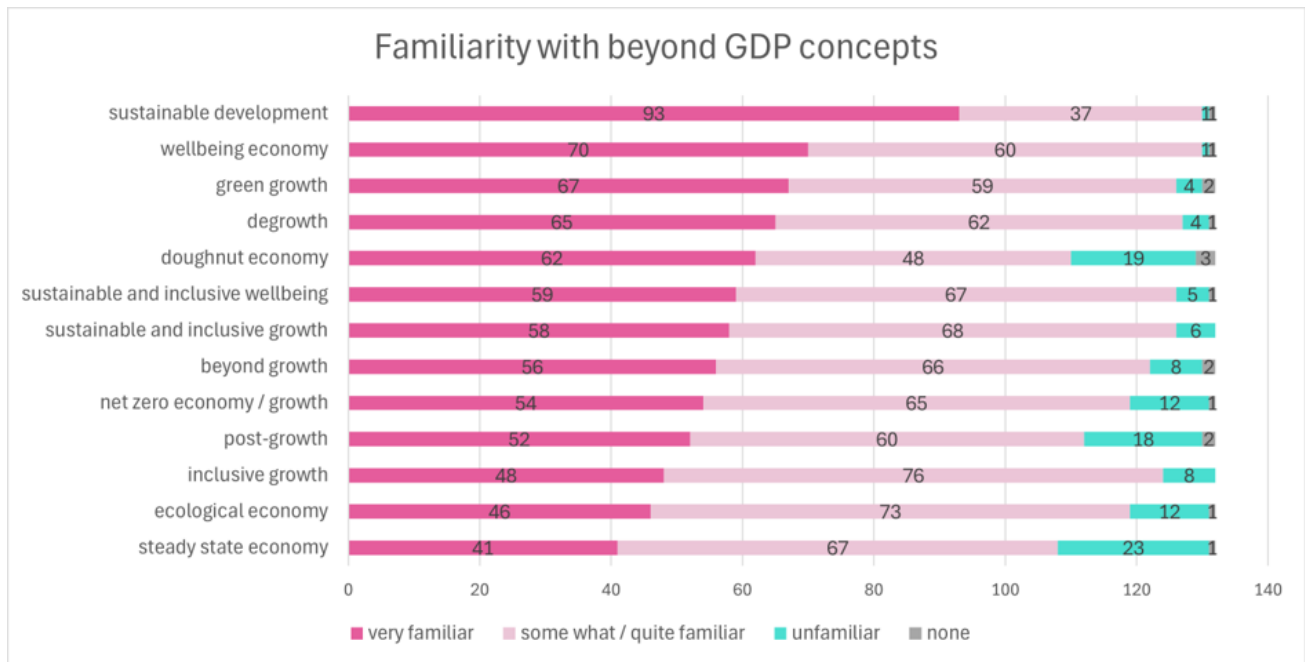


Figure 1. Q1: How familiar are you with the following concepts? On the flowing scale: unfamiliar, somewhat familiar, quite familiar, very familiar. None represents missing values. N=132.

Figure 2 shows respondents' use of the 13 beyond GDP concepts in their daily work. Sustainable development is the most used concept (used by 82 respondents), followed by wellbeing economy (67 respondents), sustainable and inclusive growth (52 respondents) and sustainable and inclusive wellbeing (50 respondents). Sustainable development and wellbeing economy are among both the most familiar and the most often used concepts. The comparison by stakeholder groups reveals that researchers use sustainable development more than other concepts in the list. Policymakers and NGO actors use wellbeing economy to a similar degree as sustainable development, an interesting and somewhat unexpected finding considering the widespread diffusion of the 2030 Agenda. Policymakers also use sustainable and inclusive growth and sustainable and inclusive wellbeing to a similar degree, followed by green growth and inclusive growth.

While most respondents are familiar with green growth and degrowth, these concepts are not used as much in daily work. Degrowth, in particular, is among least used concepts in the list, used by only 29 respondents, most of them researchers. The relative unpopularity of green growth might be due to the fact that many of the respondents are stakeholders who actively work towards beyond GDP. Steady state economy is both the least familiar and least used concept in the list.

The comparison by stakeholder groups also gives indications that postgrowth, beyond growth, doughnut economy and ecological economy are used more by researchers compared to policymakers. Green growth and net zero economy/growth are slightly more often used by policymakers than other actor groups. Only seven respondents answered that they do not use any of the listed concepts.

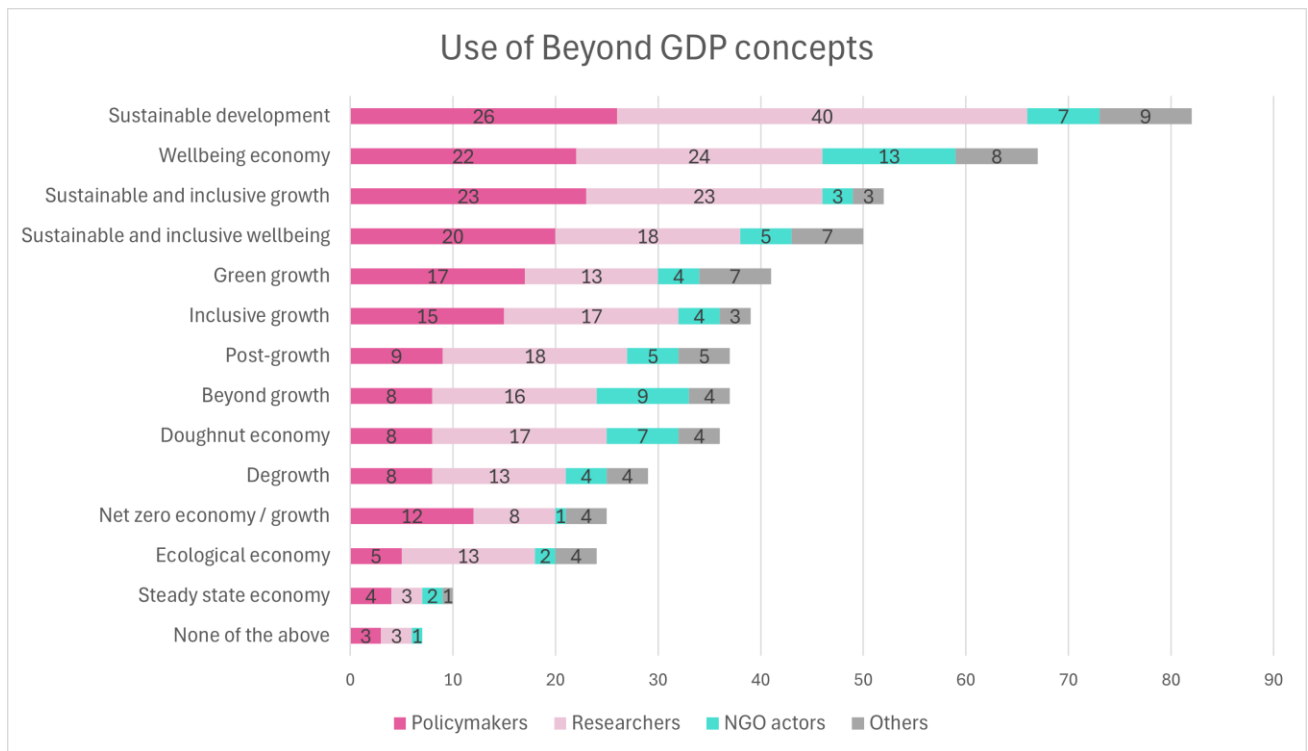


Figure 2. Q3: Which of these concepts do you refer to in your daily work? Respondents were asked to select all that apply. N=132.

In the interview data, policymakers also view that post-growth, beyond growth or beyond GDP are not the concepts that are much used in their daily work. One of the interviewees suggests that post-growth should be preferred over degrowth as it is more neutral towards growth.

“Post-growth is more neutral, saying it's more ignorant on growth and I think that is basically what is required. There are many academics also saying, we shouldn't care about it [growth]. We should care about the progress in our society. Reducing

inequality, making people better off in terms of not only financially, but in being happy with their lives basically. So that is a more neutral approach, which I think many embraces now.” (P2)

Another interviewee has noticed changes in the use of concepts. While sustainable development was almost the only concept used before, now wellbeing economy, sustainable wellbeing and resilience have begun to take over. The interviewee expresses concerns that the same policies will continue to be adopted despite the changes in terms used. The changes are mostly achieved by “repackaging” the same contents due to short-termism of policy cycles.

“I think sustainable development, it was a pretty big thing, I don't know in the 90s or early 2000's, and of course this includes social, environmental, institutional and other indicators. So, it was like a buzzword. Then there was wellbeing economy, for a moment we had sustainable wellbeing and then suddenly resilience popped up. And you know, this is a word that can mean everything and nothing. But you know, for me, from my perspective as a person who has been working on it for quite a long time, it's just repackaging of the same thing. And I think this is a bit due to the short-termism of policy cycles.” (P4)

Interviewees also mentioned that the choice of topics and words in daily work is related to what is accepted by the management of the organisation. This appears to be particularly true for big and complex institutions.

4.2 Drivers for beyond growth approach

In this and the subsequent section, we present results on the most significant drivers and barriers for moving beyond growth in policymaking. The survey respondents were asked to select what they considered to be the biggest drivers and barriers in the current situation from the list of 12 pre-formulated statements formulated on the basis of previous research (e.g., BRAINPOOL n.d., Corlet Walker et al. 2020). The respondents were able to select a maximum of five statements. They could also add additional drivers and barriers if they wished.

Figure 3 presents respondents' views on the biggest drivers pushing the political agenda to move beyond growth. Opinions are divided, with no single driver being considered as one of the biggest drivers by more than half of the respondents. Moreover, all 12 drivers are considered among the biggest ones by at least one fifth of the respondents.

According to about half of the survey respondents (61 respondents), one of the biggest drivers is growing acceptability among the general public. Other major drivers include improved scientific knowledge and influential publications (55 respondents), growing global momentum for moving beyond growth (51 respondents) and pressure from grassroots initiatives (50 respondents). Together, these factors suggest that respondents view the convergence of public opinion, scientific research, international collaboration, and grassroots activism as the most important catalysts for advancing the beyond-growth agenda.

The comparison by stakeholder groups shows some slight differences. Policymakers seem to consider growing acceptability among political actors as a slightly more influential driver than researchers. Researchers seem to consider simultaneous efforts at all levels as a bigger driver than other actors. Indeed, for researchers this is the biggest driver of the list, suggesting that coordinated actions at local, national, and international levels can facilitate the adoption of unified and shared frameworks. NGO stakeholders seem to consider growing global momentum as more important driver than other stakeholders.

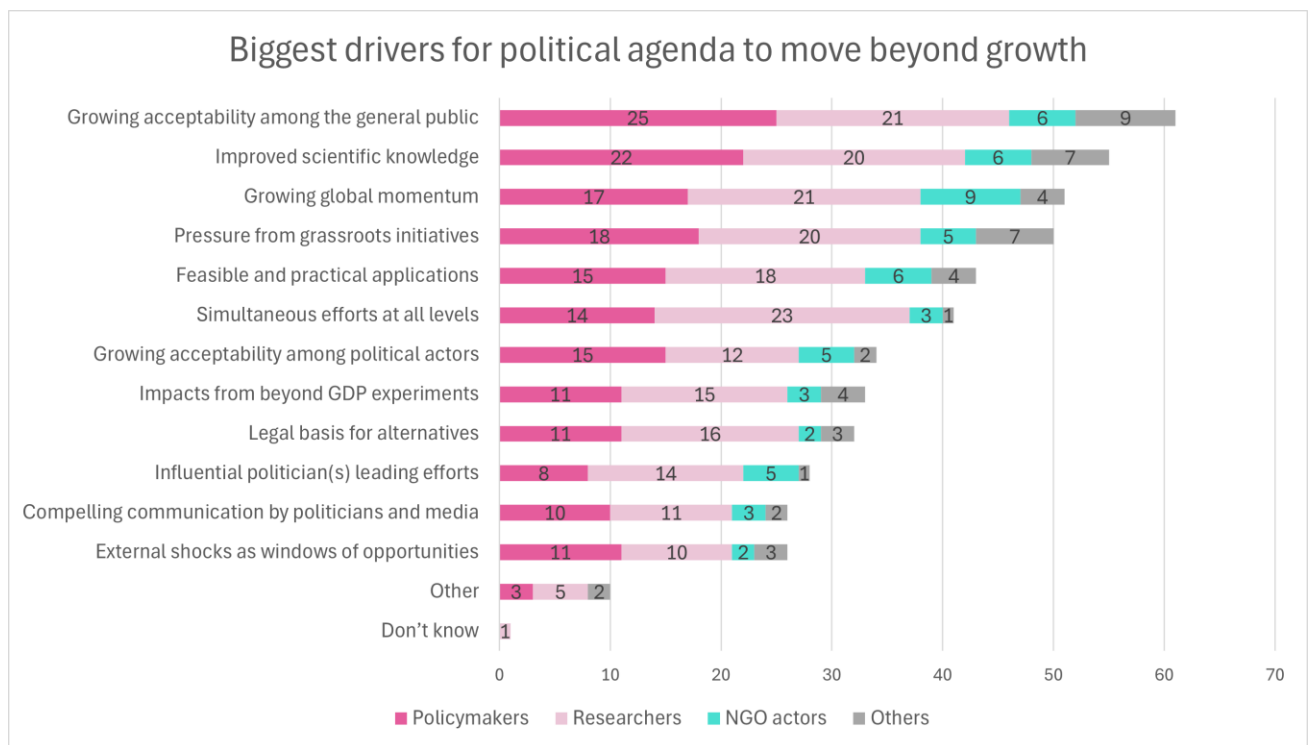


Figure 3. Q4: When thinking about the policymaking context in which you are most familiar and the current situation (rather than what could or should be the case), what are the biggest drivers pushing the political agenda to move beyond growth? Respondents were able to select maximum of five statements. The statements are shortened in the figure to enhance readability. Original statements are available in the appendix A. N=130.

The policymakers interviewed agree that the views of the general public have an important effect on policymaking. This can create possibilities to push beyond GDP approaches forward.

“One thing that I have seen here so far is that regardless of the organizational hurdles we might have and the political resistance, once something gets attention from the public it has a lot of power.” (P1)

One interviewee mentions especially young people getting their voices heard better as an influential driver.

“I think that there is this element -- that the public is asking for that -- particularly I think when we go to young people. Because the same way that we have obviously the big companies and conglomerates doing lobbying, we also have more and more young people saying, hey, we also have a voice, and we want to be heard. And I think they are getting more and more articulated and strong. Like relevant I would say to some extent.” (P1)

Pressure from NGO actors is also mentioned in the interviews. The interviewees see that the beyond GDP discussion is, in general, more prevalent in research than in policymaking. However, there are some strong civil society actors criticising GDP and accelerating the change.

“But then I see a big push from NGOs who want to go beyond GDP because they think it doesn't reflect what is really important to society. And yeah, that there are many things like social relations that are not included, or integration in the community.” (P7)

The interviewees also call for more research on concrete examples and best practices on the topic, as these could help convincing policymakers. Regarding global momentum, two interviewees mention ongoing developments at UN-level related to national accounting as a promising sign.

“At the UN level for the national accounts there is a driver to include for example, natural capital in national accounts. So, if you deplete natural capital, that would reduce GDP and also then there is this push to include unpaid work, for example. So, what I think -- there are some processes to go beyond the normal or existing GDP.” (P7)

The role of international commitments, "such as the Paris Agreement and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)" were also mentioned by an interviewee as a driver

to "push governments to integrate a beyond GDP approach into policy design and evaluation" (P8).

According to survey results, three of the least important drivers are influential politicians leading efforts, compelling communications by politicians and the media and harnessing windows of opportunity from external shocks, such as COVID-19 pandemic. Only 26-28 respondents considered them to be among the biggest drivers. However, interviews with policymakers indicate that while political leadership towards beyond GDP is not strong yet, it would be important to have political leaders who are willing to create change. To this end, one interviewee mentions The Greens/European Free Alliance and the Left as potential political groups in the European Parliament driving the change towards beyond GDP approach. Also, some policy initiatives, like Green Deal and European Pillar of Social Rights, are mentioned as potential ways forward.

"I would also say that in the European Parliament specifically, some parties could be seen as drivers, right? Like the greens or the left, they usually are more friendly towards those ideas, and they were more widely represented at this conference in the Parliament last year [referring to Beyond Growth 2023 Conference]." (P4)

"Yes, I would say, you know, there are always individual people who are pushing for this -- You could say I guess with the Green Deal von der Leyen, it could be seen that way. Although she would probably never use the phrase beyond GDP, but you know, it was kind of progressive on that front. Even Juncker had, I think it was under him that the Pillar of Social Rights was established, right? So, you have those very big initiatives then, which then have impact on EU policy." (P4)

"Green Deal has certainly been a major driver. It has made it clear that although economic growth can continue for a long time, it is often not sustainable. It can take a while for the consequences of unsustainable growth to become apparent." (P6)

Moreover, based on the interviews there is openness to drive beyond GDP agenda within EU bodies and work conducted in this direction. This is also visible in many survey respondents stating that they are actively working on this topic (see section 4.1). In EU policy assessment, there are some elements that point towards beyond GDP – even though that label is not always used. As one interviewee mentions, "a lot of it is already there" (P4). Indeed, many European Commission legislative proposals already require social and environmental impact assessments, showing the incremental integration of beyond-growth principles. A key step forward would be to create a coherent, unified system that resonates

with both policymakers and the general public, in order to help build a common language and avoid the dilution of these efforts across multiple, competing frameworks.

The interviews show that crisis can have different effects. On one hand, two interviewees point out that crisis can and have increased the relevance of other goals than GDP growth as, for instance “there's more focus on resilience, autonomy than GDP, so they say security is more important than price” (P5). COVID-19 pandemic opened room for beyond GDP agenda as “for a while there was a general reflection on what is really important” (P5). That was perhaps also the moment when these “beyond GDP questions got more attention” (P6). On the other hand, another interviewee points out that during crisis the pursuit of economic growth can get more influential due to the negative effects of economic recession, reflecting the mainstream economic thinking, which connects growth to prosperity. The interviewee sees that after the COVID-19 crisis, the ambition to restart growth became very important. In this context, policymakers paid more attention to “mainstream economic indicators” in order to “bring down unemployment, bring down inflation and increase growth” (P4).

Thirteen survey respondents replied to the open question on biggest drivers. The answers included the notions of growing research evidence and presence of beyond GDP concepts and data sets, including comparisons between countries. Also, pressure to find alternatives was mentioned, with growing evidence of incompatibility between GDP growth and environmental sustainability, worsening impacts of climate change and ecological problems and/or no-growth situations. One respondent added increasing demand for business accountability as a potential driver and another the pressure from the European Union and international commitments. Three respondents left open comments saying that they do not see that the political agenda would move beyond growth, all of them researchers.

4.3 Barriers to beyond growth approach

Respondents' views on the biggest barriers to moving beyond growth in policymaking are presented in Figure 4. Some 70% (90 respondents) consider the path dependency of existing governance systems and processes designed around GDP growth to be one of the biggest barriers. More than half see that the biggest barriers include short-termism where urgent political issues are being prioritized over the need for deeper economic systems' change (75 respondents) and an unfavourable political context with leading parties who are not in favour of moving beyond growth (68 respondents).

When looking at the barriers seen as less important, we can see that only 22-34 respondents see lack of resources, lack of support for postgrowth thinking within

government systems, siloed government structures, confusion from multitude of beyond GDP concepts and a pro-growth narrative in media and politics as one of the biggest barriers. Only 9 respondents view insufficient pressure from grassroots movements as hampering the change.

Comparing different stakeholder groups in the survey results shows that policymakers see the multitude of alternative concepts and siloed government structures as greater barriers than other actor groups. NGO stakeholders see the lack of practical implications and benefits of beyond GDP approaches as a less important barrier compared to other stakeholders. This might be due to them working with more practical examples of beyond growth compared to other stakeholders. Researchers seem to see the limited support of postgrowth thinking within government systems and unfavourable political context as a relatively bigger barrier than policymakers.

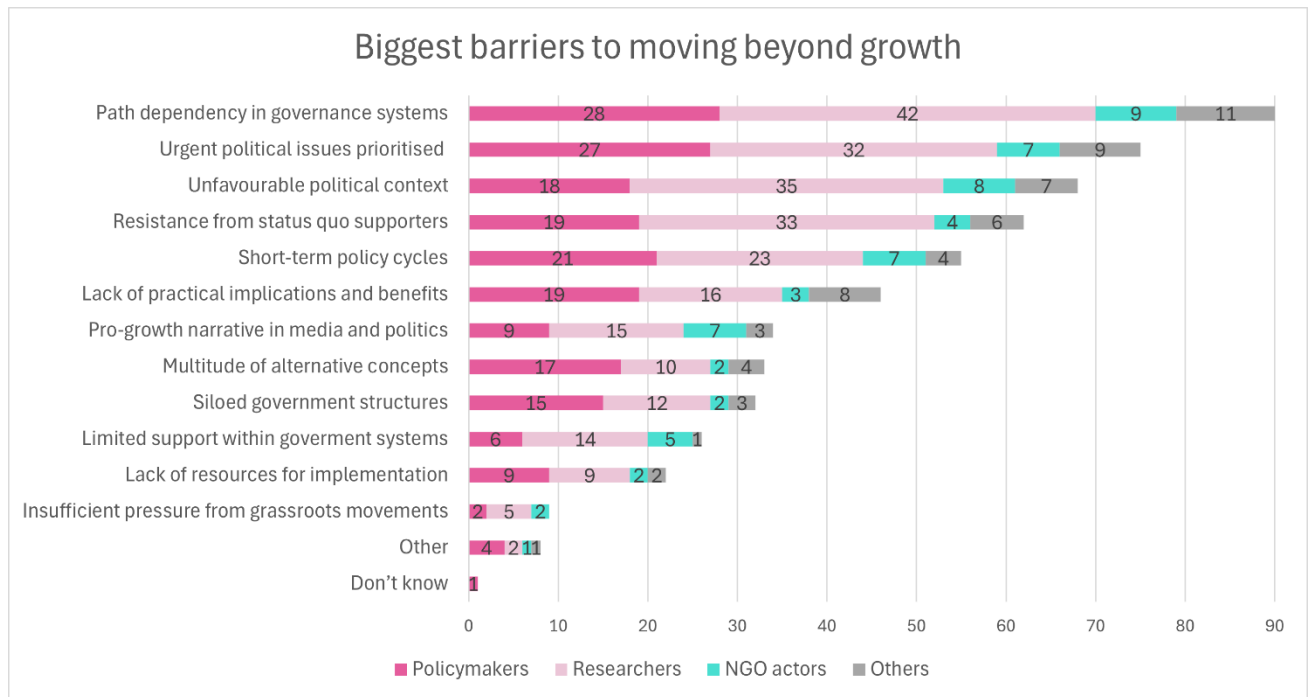


Figure 4. Q5: When thinking about the policymaking context in which you are most familiar and the current situation (rather than what could or should be the case), what are the biggest barriers to moving beyond growth? Respondents were able to select maximum of five statements. The statements are shortened in the figure to enhance readability. Original statements are available in the appendix A. N=129.

The results indicate that the biggest barriers to moving beyond growth are connected to challenges at system level. According to the responses, long-term path dependencies and the prioritization of short-term issues and an unfavourable political context hinder possibilities for extensive institutional reforms. Conversely, lack of resources for implementation is not considered as a main barrier – though an increase in resources could aid in bringing the agenda forward.

The interview data also include statements where the policymakers refer to the power of pro-growth narratives embedded deep in existing political structures. As long as the dominant narrative in the political agenda and media associates economic growth with positive outcomes, the general public is afraid of change, which makes it difficult for policymakers to move forward.

”I think the narrative of growth and that it helps everybody is very powerful -- it's still very strong and people just think it's true and they are anxious of what could happen. Because I mean if you change certain things, even though you're not happy with the current situation, you don't know what will come afterwards and so people have -- I think they fear that they will be suffering in one way or the other, losing jobs or you know. Even though this is not what we think will happen, we think things will get better.” (P2)

Fear of recession and post-growth economy among the general public is considered as a significant barrier to beyond GDP approach. As one interviewee mentions, this fear is felt amongst “the large group of populations or representative groups who are currently feeling they are at the bottom of the society” (P2).

The perception that economic growth is necessary for public finances makes it difficult to adopt beyond GDP metrics and policies. The development of alternatives can be seen as a risk for economic development, as is explained by one of the interviewees.

“People will feel alarmed as well, because then you might say that this is not important at all, economic development, GDP development. And then that for politicians it would make life only more difficult, also to improve the conditions for other fields that are really important. As I said, if there's lack of money, public money, tax revenues are decreasing. It's very hard to improve on the other fields of interest which are in the sense essentially more important, but that you cannot deal with it if the money is lacking. That's a very practical thing. They do not oppose the other figures, but they, if they are opposing it, it's because they fear that you might neglect other indicators that are as important for another purpose to obtain the overall performance of an economy.” (P3)

Moreover, interviewees agree that consolidation of GDP as an indicator is very strong, making it difficult to introduce alternatives.

“We keep talking about it, that we cannot just keep using GDP, but we're a bit stuck there because money is easiest thing. It's what people understand. And so, from my perspective, I feel we lack a good alternative.” (P5)

There are differences in opinions with regards to whether better alternative indicators are still needed or if they already exist (see also section 4.5). In general, interviewees perceive that many alternatives already exist, but that consensus on their use is lacking.

“You can always improve, but I feel like we already have the indicators that we need to have for really good policymaking. The thing is, we don't have the consensus on treating them as seriously as GDP and other economic indicators, and to me, this is the major barrier to beyond GDP going anywhere.” (P4)

Beyond GDP indicators are suggested a lot and used to some degree, yet they do not have an effect. The same interviewee explains that new indicators are “coming up every few years” so that “you have a dashboard on everything” (P4). However, their use in policy is “kind of mixed” (P4). It means that there are requirements to monitor with alternative sets of indicators but “then nothing happens with them” (P4). In this sense, “beyond GDP indicators have not gotten very far” (P4). While there are targets in the EU that could drive the beyond GDP agenda, the barrier is that there are no strict rules for non-compliance for them in similar way there are with economic targets that are connected to growth objectives.

“The thing is how seriously it is treated, because I would say that even the goals from the European climate law, which are the targets of emissions reduction for 2030 and 2050, I mean, if this is not reduced, nothing happens. There is not going to be a punishment for noncompliance. So that's the thing. Unlike for some economic indicators where you know the Commission will go after you and it will withdraw the funds or withhold the funds.” (P4)

Another significant barrier mentioned often in the survey and in the interviews is short-termism in policymaking. Political leaders prioritize their own legacy and typically react to urgent issues voiced by their voters.

“The short-term character of policymaking and the cycle, the election cycle, and also the fact that every new politician like the President of the Commission, they want to have their own legacy, right? So, they come up with a big program. There are some charismatic, important people that are kind of setting the tone of the discussion and this is very short-term because voters preferences change quite a lot. So, it's always

in response. I would say, you know, politicians always try to respond to what the population wants and what the mood is in general.” (P4)

The results reflect a need to link the beyond GDP agenda to the pressing political issues and enhance understanding of how the agenda might be better received by the main political parties and their voters.

While many survey respondents do not consider siloed government structures among the most pressing barriers, policymakers see it as a major barrier more often than other actor groups. Indeed, also interviews with policymakers indicate that lack of co-operation across departments is an issue. For instance, one interviewee mentioned farmer protests as an example of failure to integrate ecological and social aspects under the Green Deal. Another interviewee explained that there was a delay in integrating social and ecological aspects to Recovery and Resilience Facility, perceiving it as a result of the “sidelining” of these aspects by initial small “growth-oriented” group working on it (P6). Many interviewees also describe that clear overview and coordination of the use of datasets and indicator collections has been missing, but JRC and the Inter Service Working group on Sustainable and Inclusive Wellbeing are working to fill this gap.

12 survey respondents commented on the question with additional views on the biggest barriers. These include notions related to vested interests, corporate lobbying for profits and internationalization of the growth ideal among conventional economists and the society at large, including fear of job loss. Moreover, geopolitical issues and international competition and strong connections between the political system and short-term economic performance measures were mentioned. On the other hand, some comments point to uncertainties about what the alternative would look like in practice and the need for further development of alternative tools and approaches.

Some of these comments resonate with the interviews with policymakers, where lobbying, vested interests and the importance of profit making for mainstream industries are mentioned among the barriers. One interviewee explained how the importance of economic growth is linked to geopolitical issues and the EU’s strategic autonomy.

“To maintain a kind of strategic autonomy in Europe you need also a strong economy because that gives you a kind of leverage in negotiating -- gives you the power to make demands in terms of quality of products and that they should be safe for public use, for health, and so on. If you are losing ground economically, you're losing also ground in terms of bargaining power.” (P3)

In addition, the lack of science-policy interaction, know-how and culture of using scientific publications within EU organizations is mentioned as a significant barrier by one interviewee (P1). Consequently, the interviewee suggests that the EU should implement a law that would oblige policymakers to use scientific knowledge in decision-making.

4.4 Use of metrics and models

In this section, we present insights into how metrics and models are used among surveyed MERGE stakeholders, which datasets and indicators are the most popular and what reasonings are important in favouring certain metrics and models.

99 survey respondents use indicators, datasets or models in their work. Figure 5 presents how the metrics and models are used. Use of indicators/indicator dashboards to track progress and raise awareness of a policy issue (57 respondents), collecting or updating datasets (51 respondents) and developing indicator dashboards (50 respondents) are the most common ways of use. Use of macroeconomic models and developing monitoring and forecasting models are less common among the respondents.

There are only slight differences between stakeholder groups. Policymakers most often use indicators to track progress towards certain policy goals and to raise awareness of a policy issue or to demonstrate the prevalence of the issue. Researchers respond slightly more often that they collect or update datasets than policymakers. Only a small minority of policymakers use macroeconomic models.

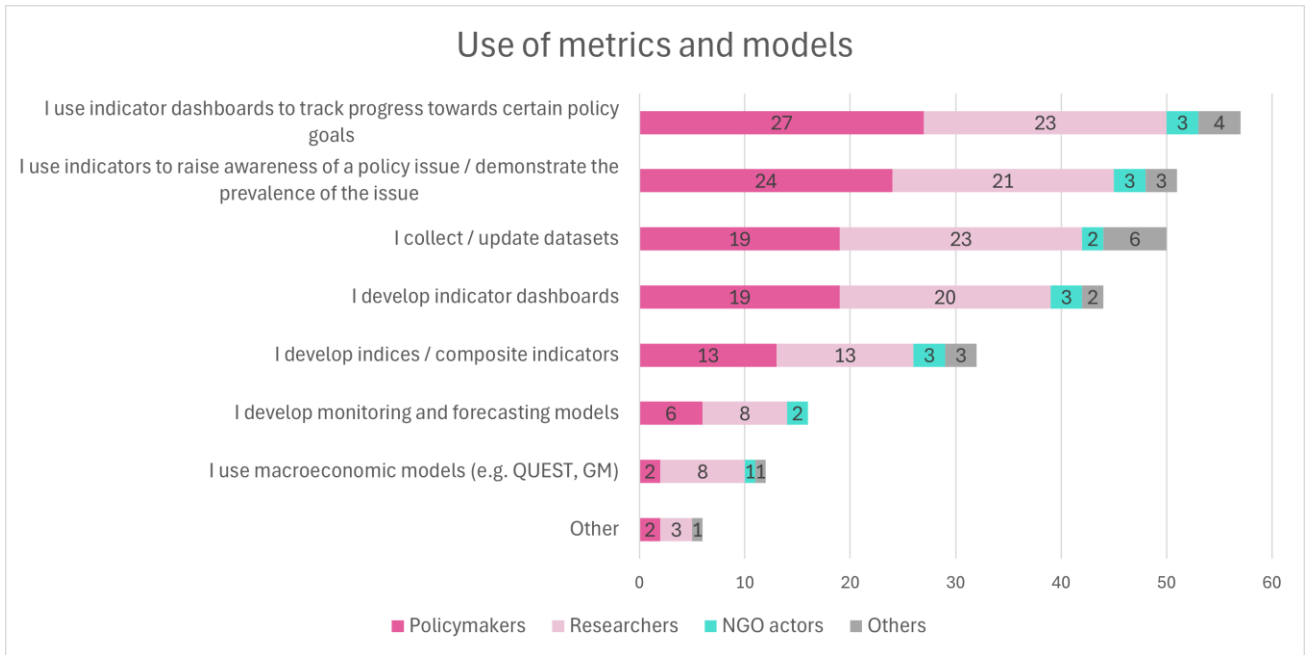


Figure 5. Q7: How do you use indicators/datasets/models in your work? The respondents were asked to select all that apply. N=99.

Figure 6 shows the most popular datasets and metrics used. EUROSTAT databases are the most popular, 81 out of 99 respondents using them. Data from National Statistical Institutes is the second popular dataset followed by SDG indicators. The least applied indicators (included in this survey) are Life evaluation index (LEI) and Comprehensive Wealth (CW). EUROSTAT is used both by those who collect and update databases and those who use indicators to raise awareness of a policy issue. The results show that decision-making is heavily tied to traditional, institutional datasets and specific raw data. Moreover, datasets are slightly preferred over composite indicators or dashboards.

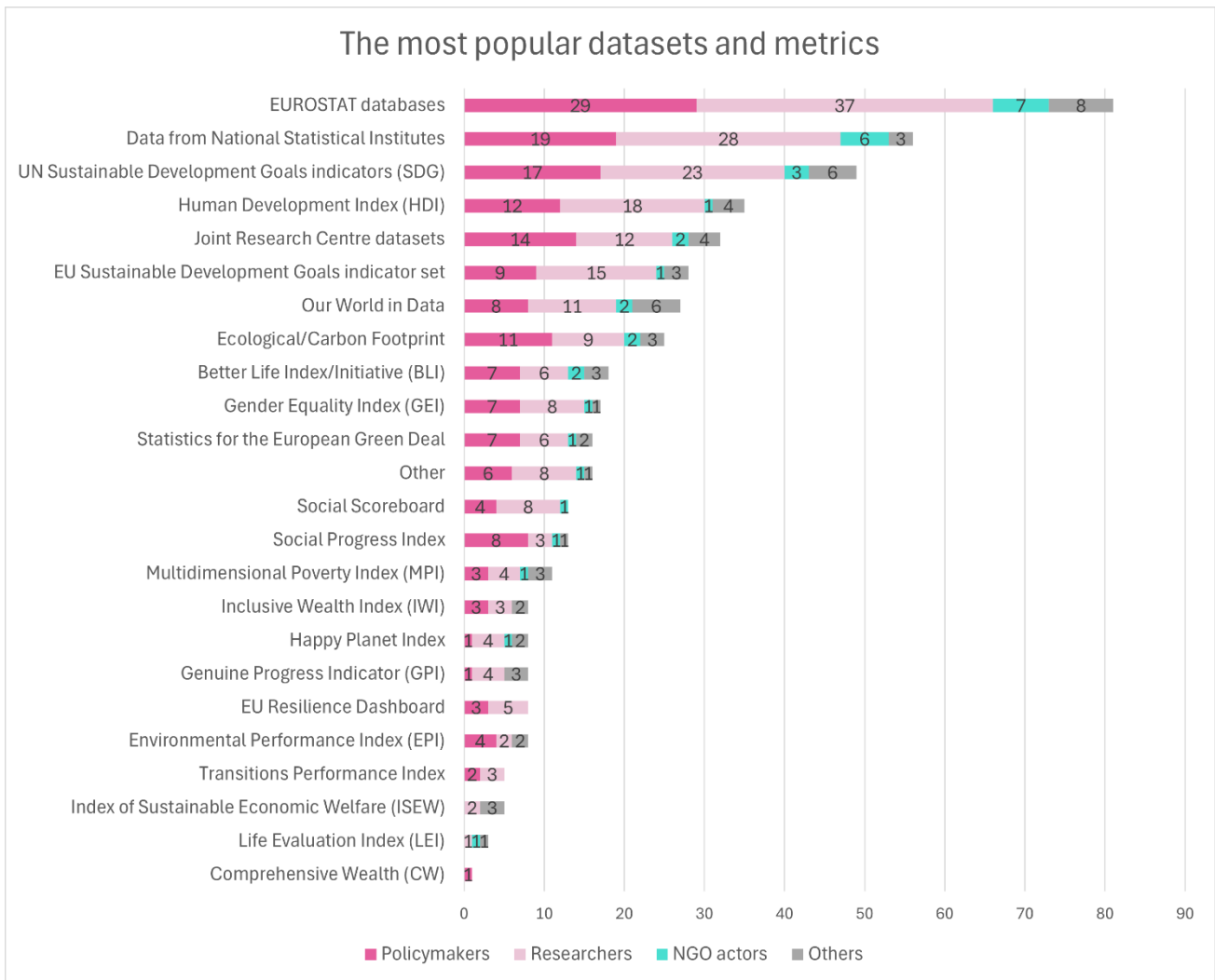


Figure 6. Q8: Which of these datasets and metrics do you typically use? Respondents were asked to select all that apply. N=99.

Figure 7 provides insights into why certain metrics and models are favoured. What stands out is the heavy reliance on metrics and models perceived as legitimate: 64 out of 96 respondents favour metrics that are produced by organisations considered legitimate in their field. Legitimacy is important across actor groups, but especially for policymakers.

Moreover, many respondents (44) are actively seeking alternative metrics. However, as already addressed in Figure 6, in practice there is a strong concentration on the use of specific datasets. So, while there is an interest in alternatives, this is not yet widely reflected in practice.

Researchers prefer looking at original data and use datasets that are regularly updated and publicly available slightly more than policymakers. Additionally, researchers expressed willingness to use models but indicated a lack of knowledge or capacity to do so (12 respondents), highlighting a skills gap that may be limiting the broader use of advanced

datasets and models. Policymakers seem to use the metrics and models that are favoured in their organisation for technical reasons more often compared to other stakeholders.

Four respondents left additional comments on their reasons for favouring metrics and models. One prefers to consider different indicators separately rather than use composite metrics due to incommensurability of different social and ecological dimensions. Other reasons mentioned in the data are the following: preferring to use monetary metrics, having data availability and coverage constraints that affect the selection of metrics and preferring datasets that are regularly updated, when available.

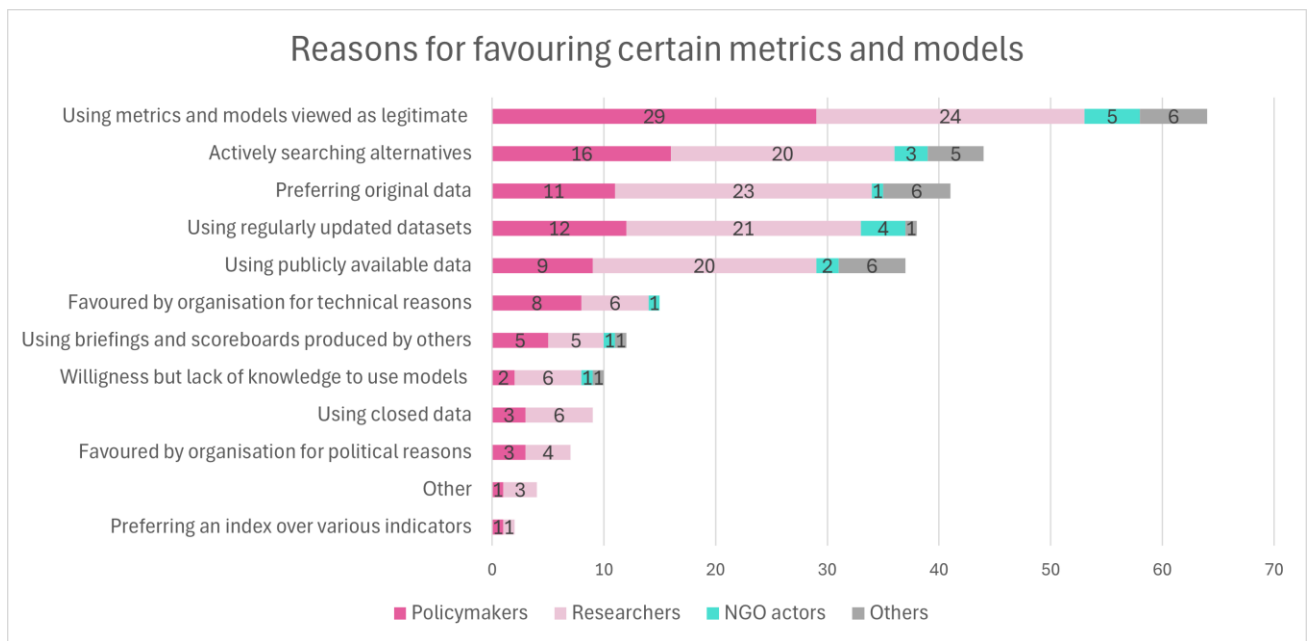


Figure 7. Q9: On what basis do you favour certain metrics and models? Which of the following statements do you agree with? Respondents were asked to choose as many as relevant. The statements are shortened in the figure to enhance readability. Original statements are available in the appendix A. N=96.

The interviews with policymakers support the survey findings on reasons to favour certain metrics and models. They emphasize that it is important for the source to be legitimate, internationally recognised and reputable. Not all sources are authorized in EU policymaking, as policymakers are restricted to using data and models provided by recognised institutions like Eurostat, the UN, and other reputable international organisations. As one interviewee mentioned, “we cannot just use anything we want” (P4) emphasizing the importance of adhering to established (and mostly official) sources.

“I think for us it is a matter of what is allowed -- there are a lot of models and statistics out there, but we are supposed to stick to the Eurostat, which is, of course, the European Commission service. We can use the statistics from international organizations, respectable ones such as the United Nations or I don't know,

International Labor organization and things like that. So, for us it has to be reliable and legitimate statistics that are just acceptable by our, you know, whoever is leading us hierarchy. So, I would say we also base ourselves mostly on EU institutions and international organizations. We also quote stakeholders like the EPC, sometimes think tanks that are considered reliable, so we are also allowed to use that in those sections that are more, let's say giving the background or giving stakeholders views or things like that." (P4)

Indeed, another interviewee describes a lack of "standard way or recommended way" (P5) to use alternative metrics as a barrier to their use while another noted that there is "no single alternative to GDP, and different countries or organizations have different frameworks and prioritize different indicators" (P8). Coverage over all EU countries is also mentioned as an important reason to use certain metrics by one of the interviewees, as is the timeliness of the data.

Based on the interviews there seems to be a lack of in-depth exchange between academics and policymakers working on modelling. Criticism from outside does not guarantee changes in approaches, but rather mutual understanding is needed to explore possibilities for better modelling. For example, one interviewed policymaker describes that despite some criticisms towards dynamic stochastic general equilibrium (DSGE) "we want to continue using DSGE models and improve them where necessary, for example in areas such as elasticity of substitution which is not stable over time and has to be set differently depending on the level of aggregation" (P6). The interviewee points out that "we should make it clear that different models have different strengths" and views running several macro-economic models side by side for impact assessments as a "healthy approach" (P6). The interviewee believes that the exchange between policymakers and researchers of Horizon projects that focus on modelling would be beneficial to explore different modelling approaches, if it goes deep enough.

4.5 Perceptions of GDP and beyond GDP metrics

This section presents results on the reasons for using GDP, its biggest flaws as a metric and the biggest flaws of existing beyond GDP metrics.

A total of 85 survey respondents indicate that they use GDP as an indicator to inform their work. Figure 8 presents reasons for its use. The most common reasons are comparability

and public familiarity with the concept, both chosen by 54 out of 85 respondents who have replied to this question. Legitimacy/credibility, coverage, frequency and habitual use are also reasons selected by about 30 respondents (36-27). Overall, the most important reasons to use GDP are connected to its current dominant status in the national statistics and policymaking and its widespread use. Conversely, only 16 respondents use GDP because they consider it to be an overarching number that can tell powerful stories, which seems to reflect the inclination of many survey respondents to work actively towards beyond GDP. This demonstrates that MERGE stakeholders could be supported in moving from GDP to other metrics by promoting alternative measures that have similar coverage and frequency, and by increasing public awareness of alternatives.

There are only minor differences between stakeholder groups in their responses. For policymakers, habitual use is a more common reason compared to other groups. Researchers select high level of disaggregation more often than other stakeholder groups, possibly reflecting the need for finetuned information on different social groups and regions in research work.

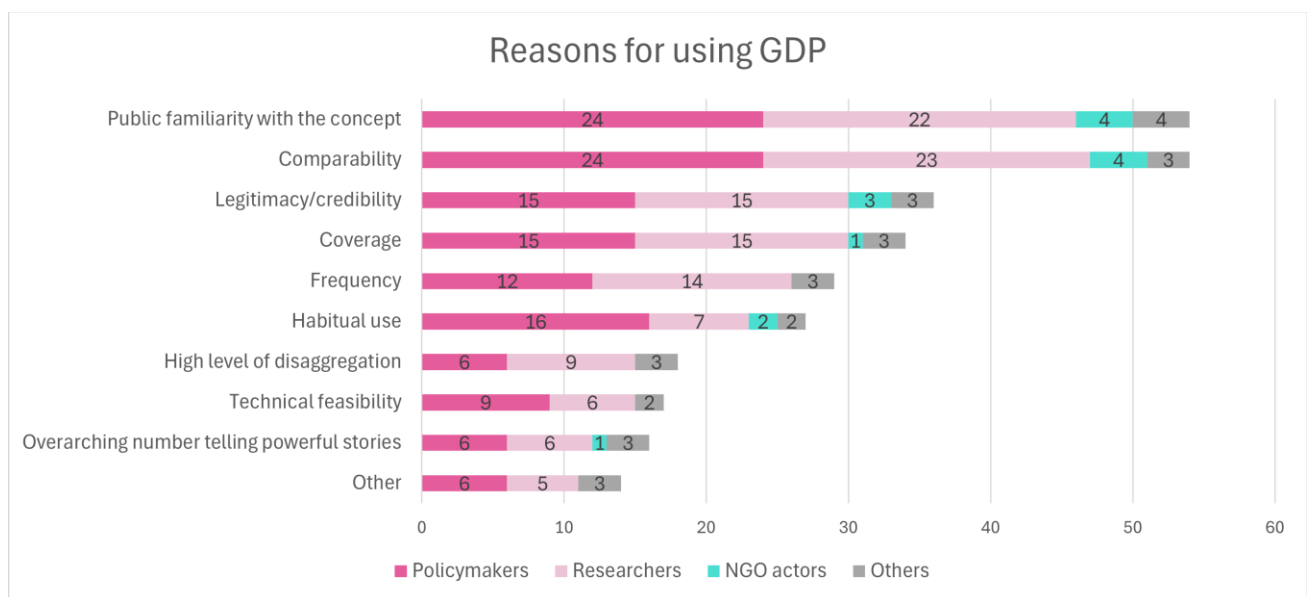


Figure 8. Q11: If you use GDP as an indicator to inform your work, why? Respondents were asked to select as many as relevant. N=85.

During the interviews, the policymakers describe how GDP is used despite its flaws due to its widespread global use and acceptance, harmonization, comparability and timeliness.

“Because abandoning GDP will not be possible. I think it's just something which is accepted by policymakers. And it's published quarterly and that's why it's very useful for many things. Although it's not perfect, it's a globally agreed concept. I think to have something which is comparable between all countries is a good thing.” (P7)

“It is an indicator that we should not abandon it because it's helpful to compare economic performance and of course economic performance is a precondition for improvement of in in other fields.” (P3)

One interviewee also defends GDP as a good measure for monitoring wellbeing: “it's always very highly correlated in the end -- it disregards many things but in the end it's quite a good proxy for wellbeing as well.” (P7)

The respondents' views of the biggest flaws of GDP are presented in Figure 9. The biggest flaws are GDP failing to measure the quality of life and not differentiating between sustainable and unsustainable economic activities, namely social and environmental externalities. Over 80% of the respondents (86-89 respondents out of 102) consider these to be among the biggest flaws. Other major flaws include GDP ignoring social inequalities (70 respondents) and excluding informal economy activities and unpaid care work (68 respondents). The differences between stakeholder groups are very small, suggesting that the views on the biggest flaws of GDP are shared across stakeholder groups.

The policymakers interviewed mention the failure to measure potential thresholds for economic growth in relation to wellbeing, inequality and environmental externalities among the major flaws. These reasons increase the urgency of moving beyond it.

“I find beyond GDP, it is necessary in a way. I mean the problems with having GDP as single, most important, only important indicator of how progress is measured has failed in a way. I mean we see that what is happening is not necessarily increased welfare for the people but increased inequity also. So basically, I think GDP as an indicator makes sense to a certain point in time. A certain level of wellbeing is required, but then it basically just disconnects. And what we're seeing is all the external effects on environment and climate on, on people's social wellbeing. So, it's clear that we need to have something different.” (P2)

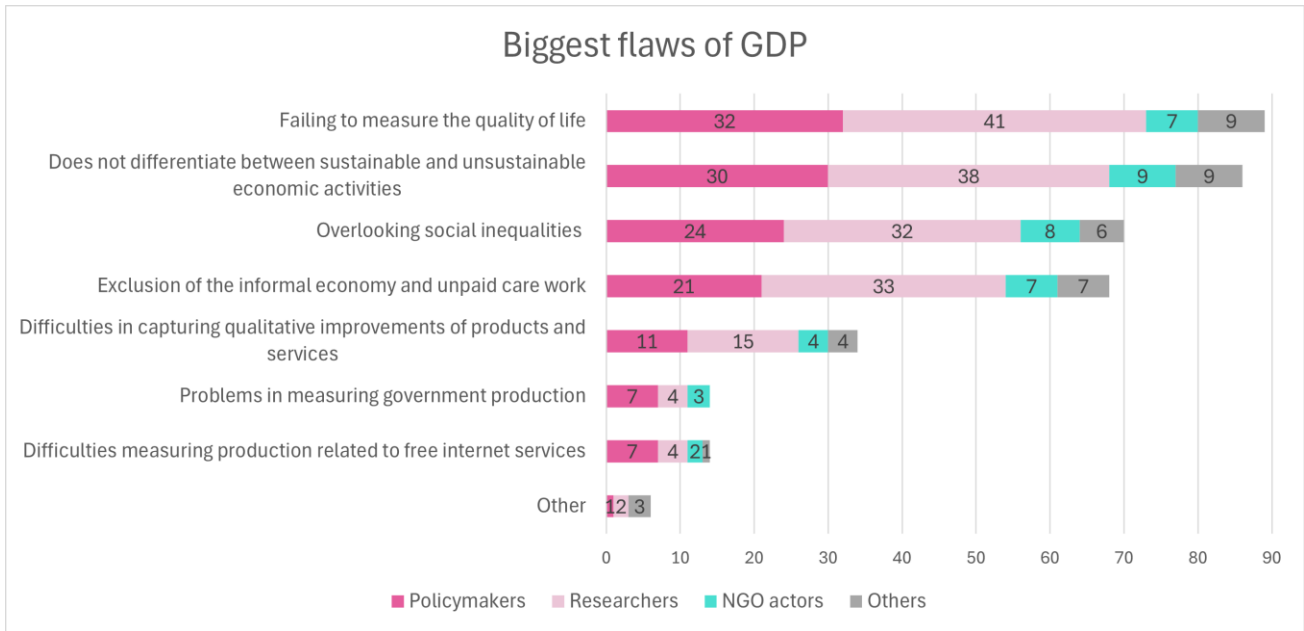


Figure 9. Q12: In your opinion, what are the biggest flaws of GDP? Respondents were able to select maximum of five options. The statements are shortened in the figure to enhance readability. Original statements are available in the appendix A. N=102.

Some two thirds of the survey respondents (97 out of 127) seek to integrate additional data or indicators into their work. Policymakers are slightly more inclined to need additional data or indicators compared to researchers, and NGO actors and others are the least inclined of the stakeholder groups.

Reasons for needing additional data or indicators were asked as an open question. Many respondents wish to look at dimensions not covered by GDP to have a comprehensive picture of development and wellbeing. Thus, they prefer data and indicators on both social and environmental issues. In addition, some mention a need for better data to allow comparability in different geographical scales. Some state that there is always a need for more data, especially to understand new complexities and systems change. Respondents also note that data and indicators are necessary for informed policymaking as well as to bring the beyond GDP agenda forward and to convince both policymakers and society of alternatives. The policymakers who participated in the interviews seem also to be generally interested in new possibilities for data and metrics.

Survey respondents were also asked to evaluate the biggest flaws of existing beyond GDP indexes and models. The results are presented in Figure 10. In this case, the respondents are less unanimous compared to the flaws of GDP. The difficulty of interpreting multidimensional indicators is considered as the biggest flaw by respondents, with 38 out of 96 respondents seeing it as a major flaw. Lack of timely enough data and limitations in terms of cross-country comparison are also seen as major flaws by 33 and 30 respondents

respectively. While comparability is the most selected reason for using GDP, lack of cross-country comparisons is only the third most selected flaw of beyond GDP indexes and models. Availability does not seem to be a major issue. Indeed, only 8 respondents selected it as a big flaw. Most respondents also consider beyond GDP indexes and models to cover relevant topics as only 15 selected the lack of relevant topics among the biggest flaws.

Comparison by stakeholder groups reveals that for policymakers the biggest flaw of beyond GDP indexes and models is that they do not have a legitimate status in their organisation, while for other stakeholder groups it is not considered to be an important problem. This possibly reflects the beyond GDP agenda not having as strong of a footing in policymaking compared to other fields, as legitimacy is an important selection criterion for models and metrics for all stakeholder groups (see Figure 7). Researchers consider metrics and models being insufficiently updated and not covering relevant topics as major flaws slightly more often than other stakeholder groups.

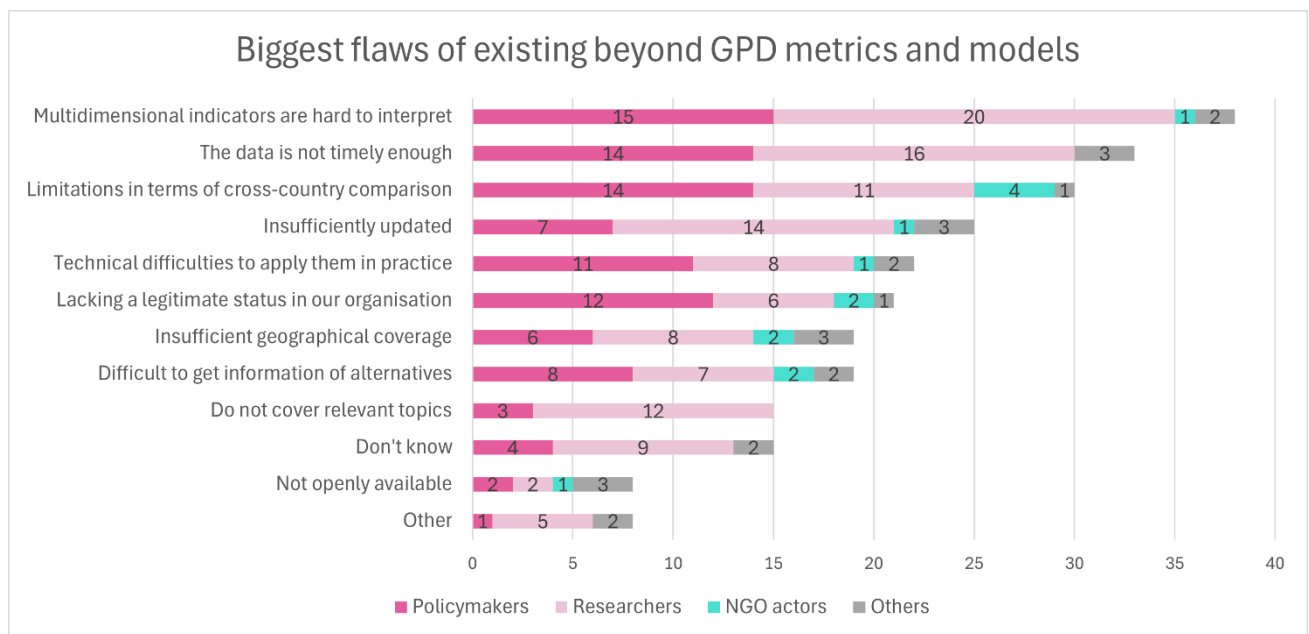


Figure 10. Q10: What are the biggest flaws of existing beyond GDP indexes and models (e.g. wellbeing dashboards, systems modelling, alternative welfare measures)? Respondents were able to select maximum of five options. The statements are shortened in the figure to enhance readability. Original statements are available in the appendix A. N=96.

The interview data also suggest that there is room for improvement beyond GDP metrics. For example, the issue of robustness is mentioned: when monitoring progress, it is a problem if data are not available for a country or if the data are not reliable. Only one interviewee states that though there are flaws, good quality metrics already exist. Others describe how a good alternative to GDP is still lacking. Some of the interviewees call for a metric that can be used across all policy areas. Indeed, one interviewee also discusses the importance of

expressing environmental factors in monetary units because otherwise “it's just not taken into account.” (P7).

The interview data also support the case for complementing GDP with other indicators, rather than replacing it altogether. In this context, GDP+3 was mentioned as a promising way forward. However, one interviewee sees the framing and focus on GDP, even having it as part of the beyond GDP concept, as a barrier and suggests trying to go beyond it by changing the “currency”.

“Energy, I think it's the currency that could replace monetary values, right? Because energy is everywhere. It's something that is an indicator that's easily reachable.” (P1)

The interviewees also mention overall complexities around measuring wellbeing and environmental footprints. Footprint calculations based on monetary extrapolation are questioned by one interviewee who argues that the users should be better aware of the assumptions behind different metrics and calculations. One interviewee especially discusses how wellbeing is a multidimensional concept that depends on social context and as such, it is hard to capture with one figure.

“So, I appreciate the efforts that are done to get better indicators of all those aspects that define quality of life. But the search for the one and only figure I don't support that.” (P3)

Moreover, one interviewee brings up the need to quantify the future to be able to advance long-term thinking.

4.6 Significance of GDP in policymaking

According to the survey respondents, the pursuit of GDP growth has a strong influence on the design of government policies. Figure 11 presents respondents' views on the influence of GDP. Some three quarters (79 out of 103) consider GDP growth to have a strong influence on policies, while 20 individuals assess the pursuit of GDP growth as somewhat influencing the design of policies. Only three policymakers and one researcher consider the pursuit of GDP growth to have little influence on the design of government policies. A comparison of the stakeholder groups shows that policymakers tend to be slightly less concerned about the impact of GDP growth than researchers (especially those in academia).

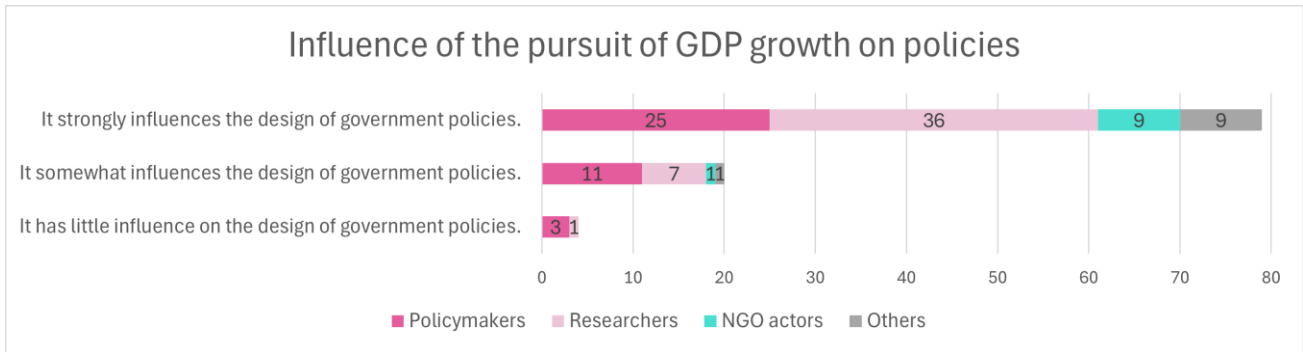


Figure 11. Q13: In your opinion, to what degree does the pursuit of GDP growth influence the design of policies? (select one). N=103.

Based on the interviews with policymakers, this difference between policymakers and researchers may be due to the fact that, in practice, politicians and policymakers do not always explicitly promote GDP growth as a primary goal. As one interviewee noted, it is not common to hear politicians mention GDP directly in their programmes or speeches. Instead, they tend to focus on issues they consider important, which may be indirectly supported by GDP growth. The distinction between GDP growth and the things that politicians want to finance with it may explain why some respondents feel that GDP has only a limited influence on policy making.

“And the idea is I think that, yeah, among researchers that indeed in policy matters, there is a focus on GDP. But in practice, I don't perceive that. I never hear a politician or a political program of a party, they don't put GDP on the first place. In fact, they hardly mention it. Of course, for politicians also it is attractive if you can have a rising GDP. If GDP is growing and it makes it easier for politicians to allocate money to the things that they think are important, but it comes to the things that they find important that is leading for political choices.” (P3)

Consequently, it is worth remembering that it is not GDP as such that politicians are interested in, but the things GDP growth can finance.

Moreover, the narrative around GDP is often “flavoured” with terms like green growth or sustainable growth, as mentioned by one of the interviewees. This framing indicates that while there is rhetorical support for new approaches, the underlying focus on growth remains intact.

“I think it's still very important. I mean the paradigm is still talking about growth, green growth, sustainable growth, social growth -- good that it's already flavoured, but it's still about growth. And so, I don't see policy in the moment being ready to get

rid of, to really make the next step. Some policymakers are starting to talk about it, but it's, I think still a minority.” (P2)

According to the survey respondents, the influence of GDP on the design of public policies has not changed within the last five years – a time frame addressed in the survey. Almost three quarters of the survey respondents (76 out of 103) believe that the influence of GDP on public policies has remained the same. Among those who see changes, respondents are divided: about as many respondents think its influence has decreased (12) as think it has increased (10). Five respondents did not give any opinion. The views are similar in all stakeholder groups. The stability of GDP's influence over the last five years, as reported by most of the survey respondents, contrasts with the growing discourse around alternative economic frameworks.

Some of the policymakers interviewed see changes in the influence of GDP. One views that the focus on GDP has decreased within the past five years as security and resilience have risen on the political agenda. Different crises have increased the relevance of other metrics and goals than GDP growth.

“I think right now I mean, but this is in the general, there's more focus on resilience, autonomy than GDP. So, they say security is more important than price. So, I think there's a demand for measuring this resilience as well and which is not captured in money. And also, the issue of equality -- the issue of access to essential services. So, ensuring access can be beneficial, not just having everyone on average, everyone going up, but how equal is access. And it's come up, it keeps coming up every time there's a crisis. But that's the direction things are going.” (P5)

Another interviewee also sees that there is more “openness” to beyond GDP within EU policymaking circles at the end of the mandate 2019-2024 compared to the beginning of it and “wellbeing is increasingly perceived as a multidimensional topic” (P6).

“Beyond GDP is nothing new. The term has been around for some time, as has the work within the Commission. But it has now become clearer that prosperity, however it is defined, is something different from monetary income and that GDP is only of limited use as an indicator of prosperity.” (P6)

However, the same interviewee also sees that while there is the willingness to supplement GDP with alternative measures, this does not necessarily translate into the willingness to replace it. Within the last year, there has also been a movement towards increasing the importance of GDP.

“A broader political question is whether Beyond GDP means that we don't care about economic growth as long as prosperity - in the sense of wellbeing - is guaranteed. So far, I have not seen any serious efforts to conduct this debate openly in political terms. Instead, we are seeing a movement towards more conservative ideas in which economic growth is once again perceived in the same way as it was in the Lisbon Agenda - as an end in itself, so to speak. This has become a stronger trend in the last year.” (P6)

4.7 Opportunities for effecting change

This section provides insights into opportunities for integrating the beyond GDP approach into policymaking. Finding windows of opportunities for integration of the beyond GDP approach is crucial to ensure it becomes a political reality.

The survey respondents' views on the most significant opportunities for integrating the beyond GDP approach into policy design, assessment and evaluation are presented in Figure 12. The implementation of the European Green Deal is seen as a significant opportunity by the biggest proportion of the respondents. Most of respondents (71 out of 124) consider it to be one of the most important opportunities. It is followed by strategic foresight (53 respondents), the European Semester (43 respondents) and Social Europe (43 respondents). On the other hand, strategic autonomy, demographic transformation and the Resilience Dashboards are seen as the most important opportunities by the smallest number of respondents (16-27) compared to other opportunities listed in the survey.

The comparison between stakeholder groups reveals some differences with researchers seeing Social Europe, Better Regulation and integrated assessment tools as a significant opportunity more often than others. They do not consider the European Semester to be as significant as other stakeholder groups. Policymakers consider competitiveness as a significant opportunity more often than other stakeholders, viewing it as equally important to Social Europe.

15 survey respondents also left written comments on the opportunities. Among them, some additional opportunities were mentioned, each by 1-2 respondents. These include the EU CAP (common agricultural policy), wellbeing budgets, risk assessments, the post-2030 UN agenda, G7 priorities, national Green New Deals, the UN Revision of the System of National Accounts, the European Commission's revised economic governance framework, impact assessments and Horizon Europe. One EU policymaker also pointed to the fact that there are contradictions in combining beyond GDP with EU strategies in which economic growth

is present; for instance, economic growth is one of the goals of the Green Deal. Four researchers indicated that they do not have sufficient expertise to assess the significance of listed opportunities.

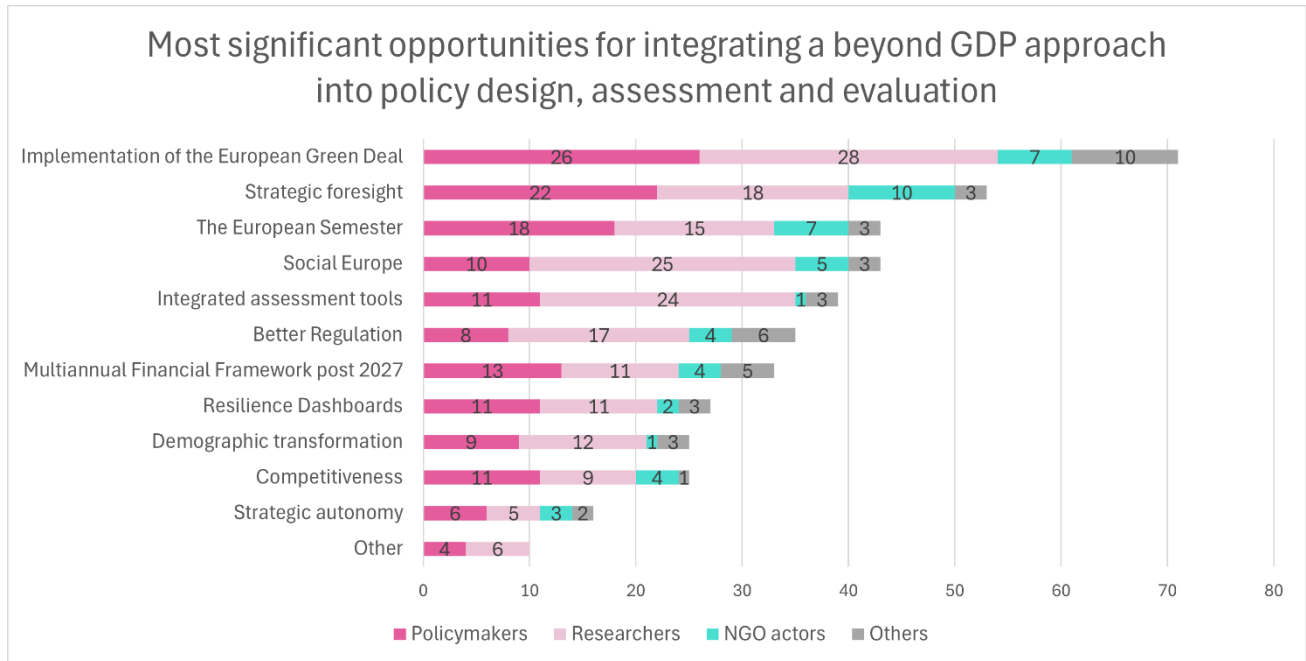


Figure 1210. Q17: Based on your expertise, what are the most significant opportunities for integrating a beyond GDP approach into policy design, assessment and evaluation? Respondents were able to select as many options as they wished. N=124.

Some of the surveyed policy opportunities were also discussed in the interviews with policymakers. While the Green Deal is generally not called a beyond GDP initiative in EU policymaking, it is viewed as “progressive in that front” (P4). Green Deal has raised awareness of sustainability issues related to economic growth and as such, one interviewee refers to it as a “major driver” (P6). The interviewee views that addressing the social component of the Green Deal offers potential avenues for promoting the integration of social and ecological indicators. However, another interviewee mentions a backlash against the Green Deal and believes that the focus could shift more towards industrial competitiveness. Moreover, the interviewees discuss that while the Green Deal is very cross-cutting on paper, policy coherence is still lacking in day-to-day work. Sustainability would require breaking silos in policymaking.

Some interviewees view the European Semester as creating opportunities to move beyond GDP as it is an important vehicle for long-term planning. The European Semester also includes sustainable development measures and The Social Scoreboard, which is seen as having the potential to bring these discussions together.

“I think it's the best we have in a way. And because there was also for some time, there was a discussion about the sustainability strategy and so on. And I think it's better to integrate it in something which is already existing.” (P7)

Another interview pointed to the fact that beyond GDP approaches are already used to some extent in the European Semester and that indicators can play a role in the country specific recommendations.

“The SDGs have been integrated into the European Semester process, but many of the Beyond GDP metrics are “hidden” in annexes and a thorough analysis of the performance of countries on these indicators and the reasons behind is missing. A few leading indicators capturing the social, environmental and institutional dimensions of prosperity can complement the analysis on GDP development in the narratives of the Country Reports and can inform also the country specific recommendations, should the analysis show a significant gap in one of the dimensions.” (P8)

However, the interviewees also note that the European Semester is still mainly about the economy. One interviewee explains this in historical terms: as the European Semester “has traditionally emerged as the annual cycle of economic and fiscal policy coordination within the EU, its focus remains therefore primarily on fiscal stability and structural reforms conducive to economic growth” (P8). Social indicators are being included and “this is already making some cracks in the system, but we are still far away from having it recognized on the same level as economic indicators” (P4). In addition, the social and environmental targets are not binding in the sense that there would be sanctions for non-compliance, and as such are described as being met more through peer pressure.

Nevertheless, country-specific recommendations under the European Semester are seen as an opportunity to bring sustainability into the debate. For moving forward, one interviewee suggests integrating “a few headline indicators for example those proposed in the GDP+3 study, to complement GDP and give a more holistic picture of the performance of a country, going beyond economic activity and fiscal sustainability, and capturing the social, environmental and institutional dimensions of prosperity” (P8).

Trying to influence the European Commission's better regulation guidelines and tools is also seen as a possibility by some of the policy makers interviewed. Long-term planning and foresight are called for as part of better regulation in the EU. Evaluation and impact assessment guidelines are cited as concrete examples that would benefit from change, as they are biased towards monetised costs and overlook potential benefits.

“When you look at the better regulation guidelines, there's a section, this chapter on impacts and it's just crazy. It's just a laundry list of things, and I don't think it's very constructive or useful. Some things are done in the qualitative manner. Some things are quantitative. And costs are always monetized, but the benefits never are. And beyond GDP requires that you look at benefits, and these also require monetization. So, I think there needs to be some rethinking of the better regulation guidelines with the beyond GDP.” (P5)

One interviewee also highlights the need to analyse trade-offs and look towards synergies and connections between GDP and the beyond GDP approach in relation to the better regulation guidelines.

“Our Better Regulation guidelines oblige us to identify the most relevant SDGs, impacted by a particular policy, but what we also need to do is thoroughly analyse the trade-offs, the synergies and all the interrelations between the GDP and the different Beyond GDP metrics.” (P8)

The new Financial Framework is also mentioned as a potential entry point. One interviewee perceives that there is openness towards a performance-based approach.

“Some people, especially in the budget area, seem to like the RRF's approach of allocating funds according to objectives rather than costs. Of course, this gives us the opportunity to focus on performance.” (P6)

The JRC's work on Sustainable and Inclusive Wellbeing is also mentioned in interviews as is the UN's work on national accounts to acknowledge the importance of natural capital and unpaid work. Interviewees also describe different ongoing developments in EU bodies and agencies, including work on environmental accounts and natural capital, experiments with different metrics in evaluation (e.g. Human development index HDI) and timely information on climate emissions and energy and material flows.

Conclusions

This report presents the results of survey and interview data collected by MERGE in June-October 2024 to increase the knowledge about perceptions of beyond GDP concepts and metrics among different stakeholder groups. The report sheds light on how and why GDP is used in policymaking and explores the barriers and drivers of moving beyond GDP. It also explores which policy processes are seen as the best opportunities for integrating a beyond

GDP approach into policy design, assessment and evaluation at the EU level. The survey was responded by 132 individuals including researchers, policymakers, NGO stakeholders and other actors representing MERGE stakeholders. In addition, we interviewed eight EU policymakers to complement the survey results with qualitative insights. The respondents are mostly experts who are aware of the beyond GDP approach.

According to the results, beyond GDP concepts and different approaches are well known among MERGE stakeholders who answered the survey. Results on the familiarity and use of different beyond GDP concepts give indications to openness to these ideas and possibilities to communicate them using a shared language. Notably, sustainable development emerged as the best-known and most widely used concept, which is unsurprising given its prominence in global policy processes over the last 35 years. What is perhaps more striking is the second most commonly used concept, wellbeing economy, which ranks similarly to sustainable development among policymakers, along with sustainable and inclusive growth. These concepts could open avenues to incorporate the beyond GDP approach to political agenda.

Concepts such as the doughnut economy, beyond growth, and post-growth are less frequently used but still recognized. Interestingly, while degrowth is often considered marginal in public debates, it is relatively well-known and used to some extent by policymakers, signalling a broader awareness of alternative economic paradigms and some possibilities for their use. However, interviews with policymakers also indicate that terms that are perceived as more neutral, such as post-growth, are better to be used in the current policymaking context. The interviews also suggest that policymakers are, at least to some extent, constrained in their use of concepts by what is acceptable to the management of their organisation.

The results of this report show that GDP has a relatively strong influence on policymaking, and this has largely not changed in the past five years. The biggest barriers to moving beyond GDP are connected to challenges at system level, which is aligned with previous research (e.g. BRAINPOOL project n.d., Widuto 2022). The barriers that are viewed as most significant relate to structural factors in governance and policymaking. These include path dependencies in governance systems (such as consolidation of GDP), short-termism and prioritization of urgent issues in policymaking, and an unfavourable political context.

The path dependency of governance systems is particularly problematic as it locks institutions into growth-centric frameworks, despite a long history of beyond GDP discussion and recent international milestones reached in this particular policy agenda. Indeed, the results show that while the limitations of GDP in measuring wellbeing and

prosperity are widely recognized, the use of it continues, connected to its current dominant status and widespread use. The ongoing struggle to break away from entrenched systems is a central issue that must be addressed if the beyond GDP approach is to succeed.

While the barriers that are viewed as most important point towards the importance of policymaker's agency within the governance system, the survey respondents see that biggest drivers are growing acceptability among the general public, improved scientific knowledge, growing global momentum and pressure from grassroots initiatives. There seems to be hope that these drivers can help overcome the structural barriers and drive change within governance systems.

Indeed, the interviews with policymakers indicate that politicians are interested in the views of the general public, hence increasing general support for beyond GDP can be an important driver. However, some of the interviewees perceive that there still are concerns among the general public that the beyond GDP transformation would cause an economic recession and unemployment. These concerns are understandable in the current situation in which people suffer from costs of living crises and when knowing that public finance of welfare state institutions is based on the expectations of continuous economic growth. Economic growth is often considered necessary to lever social outcomes. It is important to note that policymakers are not interested in GDP growth as such but in those valuable things it helps finance, as one of the policymakers explained.

The results suggest that improving the general understanding of the benefits of the beyond GDP approach and addressing worries related to beyond GDP transformation can be a major driver for making beyond GDP a political reality. Understanding the views of the general public is thus a key to developing and better communicating beyond GDP ideas, a step we will focus on in the new MERGE survey targeted to the general public in six different European countries. In addition, upcoming co-creative policy deep dives that will be organised in MERGE seek to establish stronger links between the beyond GDP agenda and the pressing political issues. This can enhance understanding of how the more transformative agenda could be better received by the main political parties and their voters.

Overall, the convergence of public opinion, improved scientific research, international collaboration, and grassroots activism are seen as the most important catalysts for advancing the beyond GDP agenda. The results however demonstrate some interesting differences in the perceptions of drivers and barriers between stakeholder groups. Researchers, in particular, consider simultaneous efforts at all levels an important driver. While researchers emphasize the importance of long-term, coordinated efforts, political

leaders are often constrained by election cycles and the need to respond to immediate issues, making structural change more difficult.

Moreover, while policymakers see the problems related to siloed government structures and a multitude of alternative concepts as a greater barrier than other actor groups, researchers perceive the limited support of postgrowth thinking within government systems as a relatively bigger barrier than policymakers. Policymakers also seem to consider growing acceptability among political actors as a slightly more influential driver than researchers. Even though these differences are modest, this could be interpreted as a sign that postgrowth thinking has some “hidden” support within informal discussions in government systems in which policymakers are generally more involved than researchers.

Indeed, even though policymakers in the interviews describe that beyond GDP is not much used as a concept, there is active work towards the wider adoption of alternative metrics. EU policies such as the Green Deal and European Semester already include important social and ecological indicators. Respondents identified the implementation of the Green Deal, strategic foresight, and the European Semester as the best opportunities to integrate a beyond GDP approach into EU-level policies, with the latter being particularly relevant also for shaping the European governance system. However, better enforcement mechanisms and more binding indicators to monitor progress would be needed to support the implementation of beyond GDP targets within these policy frameworks.

The results indicate openness to complement GDP with other indicators, perhaps towards the same direction that was recently suggested by EU when showcasing options for GDP+3 (European Commission 2024b). Replacing GDP altogether might be more difficult due to the consolidation and its merits in measurement of economic performance, a view some of the interviewees express. Moreover, the results show differences in opinions with regard to the question if better alternative indicators already exist or if they still need to be developed. On the one hand, some stakeholders think that feasible alternatives are already available and new indicators or policies are not needed. On the other hand, some think that there is not yet a sufficiently good metric that can replace GDP.

Co-creating a coherent, integrated system of metrics, models and policies that resonates with both policymakers and the general public and producing concrete recommendations and guidance for the use of metrics and models for sustainable and inclusive wellbeing – central goals of the MERGE project – seem to be necessary. Interviewees describe that there are many alternatives available, but see that the implementation and standard ways for their use are lacking. While almost all survey respondents are aware of beyond GDP approaches, 41 do not know how to implement them in practice.

The results point to issues that should be considered when ranking and making recommendations for Beyond GDP metrics. Here we present five key takeaways:

- 1) It is important that perceived legitimacy is carefully considered when ranking and suggesting certain metrics, especially to policymakers. While many respondents are interested in actively seeking alternative metrics and feel the need to integrate additional data or indicators into their work, the majority of them state that they only use data, indicators and models that are produced by organisations that are considered legitimate in their field. Indeed, the biggest flaw of existing beyond GDP indexes and models is that they lack a legitimate status, whereas policymakers are only allowed to use certain metrics. In practice, the legitimate sources seem to refer to conventional well-established datasets such as those produced by EUROSTAT and national statistical institutes. Beyond GDP indicators should therefore be better represented as part of the most legitimate data sources.
- 2) Comparability, coverage and frequency are important reasons for respondents to use GDP, and as such similar characteristics could be expected from Beyond GDP metrics. Indeed, according to the survey results, lack of timeliness and limitations in cross-country comparability are among the main shortcomings of existing Beyond GDP measures and models.
- 3) To complement or replace GDP, the metrics should address its flaws: failing to measure the quality of life, not differentiating between sustainable and unsustainable economic activities, ignoring social inequalities and excluding informal economy activities and unpaid care work.
- 4) The metrics should be easy to understand, as difficulty in interpreting multidimensional indicators is the biggest flaw of existing beyond GDP metrics. The major identified difficulties in replacing GDP is that alternatives do not resonate with pressing political issues and are not as easily understood by different audiences as GDP and monetary values.
- 5) Publicly available data should be preferred as this is one important reason for favouring certain metrics and models for many survey respondents.

While the small sample sizes of both the survey and interview data limit the generalizability of these findings, they provide valuable insights for advancing the beyond GDP agenda. The new knowledge of stakeholders' perceptions can be useful for other projects interested in further developing postgrowth thinking. In practical terms, the findings feed into future activities of the MERGE project. First, these insights into the use of different metrics and concepts, as well as perceptions of GDP and beyond GDP, guide the development of

recommendations for the use of beyond GDP metrics and policies as well as the development of new beyond GDP metrics and policies. Second, they provide a basis for the design of communication, dissemination and exploitation strategies aimed at enhancing the appeal and knowledge of the alternative frameworks among diverse stakeholders.

In future work, MERGE will produce rankings and recommendations for beyond GDP metrics and policies as well as create guidance on the use of new macroeconomic models. We have already published a synthesis report on beyond GDP metrics, models and policies (Costanza et al. 2024) and will continue this work through co-creation with a variety of stakeholders, including policymakers and technical experts.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Survey questions

Introduction

Achieving the UN 2030 Agenda and the EU's policies on environmental and social sustainability requires a comprehensive measure of human progress that does not focus solely on GDP. Many competing indicators and frameworks have emerged, but no consensus has been reached. This makes it difficult to set policy goals for sustainable prosperity and measure progress against global challenges.

[MERGE](#) is a Horizon Europe project that builds on the scientific work of several Horizon Europe consortiums such as [WISE Horizons](#), [ToBe](#) and [SPES](#), and a European Research Council funded project, [REAL](#). These projects will provide improved knowledge on indicators beyond GDP, alternative and more sustainable policy options, and scenarios for a sustainable future. MERGE aims to create synergies between these projects to build a strong science-based forum for further developing beyond GDP policies and indicators.

The purpose of this survey is to understand awareness and perceptions of beyond GDP policies and indicators, and how and why GDP is used in policymaking. It also explores the barriers and drivers of moving beyond GDP and provides an opportunity to identify what support the MERGE project can provide.

Data from the survey will be used to inform future activities of the project. This includes prioritisation of beyond GDP policy frameworks and wellbeing indicators, and the design of policy frameworks and communication strategies to enhance their appeal.

Timeline and process

The survey includes 20 questions. It should take between 10 - 15 minutes to respond.

The deadline for responding to this survey is: **Sunday 28 July 2024.**

If you have any questions or run into any issues, feel free to contact [contact person from MERGE].

Please read and accept our privacy statement here: [link to privacy statement]

Question: I accept your privacy statement

Personal information

Age: 18-28; 29-39; 40-50; 51-61; 62-72; 73+; Prefer not to say

Gender identity: Female; Male; Transgender; Non-binary; Prefer not to say

Where are you based (country)? Austria; Belgium; Bulgaria; Croatia; Cyprus; Czechia; Estonia; Finland; France; Germany; Greece; Hungary; Ireland; Italy; Latvia; Lithuania; Luxembourg; Malta; Netherlands; Poland; Portugal; Romania; Slovak Republic; Slovenia; Spain; Sweden; United Kingdom; Other. If other, please specify.

Please indicate your field of work. Please choose only one option: Academia; EU policymaker; National policymaker; Regional Policymaker; Media; NGO/Citizen initiative; Business association; Trade union; Think tank/research institute; International organization; Diplomatic body; Other. If other, please specify.

To which organization do you belong (if applicable)?

What is your job title (if applicable)?

SECTION ONE: Awareness of a 'beyond GDP approach': a comprehensive approach advocating the use of alternative indicators and a sustainability transition that moves away from current dependence on economic growth.

Q1: How familiar are you with the following concepts? (unfamiliar, somewhat familiar, quite familiar, very familiar) Degrowth; post-growth; beyond growth; green growth; inclusive growth; wellbeing economy; doughnut economy; sustainable development; sustainable and inclusive wellbeing; net zero economy /growth; sustainable and inclusive growth; steady state economy; ecological economy.

Q2: Which of the following statements best describes your awareness of beyond GDP approaches? (choose one)

- "I am not aware of beyond GDP approaches, or what they entail."
- "I am aware of beyond GDP approaches, but I am not convinced by the reasons behind them."
- "I am aware of beyond GDP approaches, but I do not know how to implement them in practice."
- "I am fully aware of beyond GDP approaches and am actively working in this direction."

Q3: Which of these concepts do you refer to in your daily work? (mark all that apply) Green growth; inclusive growth, sustainable and inclusive growth; degrowth; post-growth; beyond

growth; wellbeing economy; doughnut economy; net zero economy/growth; sustainable development; steady state economy; ecological economy; none of the above.

Q4: When thinking about the policymaking context in which you are most familiar and the current situation (rather than what could or should be the case), what are the biggest drivers pushing the political agenda to move beyond growth? Maximum 5 selection(s).

- Growing acceptability as political actors realise that profit-driven economies do not deliver on public and environmental needs
- Growing acceptability as the general public realise that profit-driven economies do not deliver on public and environmental needs
- Simultaneous efforts by the general public, civil servants, politicians and business to enable transition at all levels of the system
- Growing global momentum for moving beyond growth (international summits, agreements, etc)
- Having a legal basis for an alternative approach (e.g., Future Generations Act in Wales, Public Finance Act in New Zealand)
- Pressure from grassroots initiatives who advocate for moving beyond growth
- Influential politician(s) leading efforts
- Enticing narratives and compelling communication by politicians and media
- Growing evidence of impacts from experiments with beyond GDP approaches
- The existence of feasible solutions and practical applications for moving beyond growth (e.g. concrete policies, indicator frameworks etc)
- Improved scientific knowledge and influential publications about the need for and pathway towards moving beyond growth
- Harnessing a window of opportunity provided by an external shock (e.g. COVID-19)
- Don't know
- Other.

If other, please specify.

Q5: When thinking about the policymaking context in which you are most familiar and the current situation (rather than what could or should be the case), what are the biggest barriers to moving beyond growth? Maximum 5 selection(s)

- Existing governance systems and processes are designed around GDP growth (path dependency)
- Short-term, urgent political issues are prioritised over the need for deep economic systems' change

- Short-term policy cycles do not align with the nature of system change
- Lack of clarity about the practical implications of beyond growth approaches and the slow emergence of their benefits
- Unfavourable political context: leading political parties are not in favour of moving beyond growth
- Postgrowth thinking has marginal support within government systems
- Multitude of alternative approaches and concepts (e.g., wellbeing economy, sustainable development, post-growth, degrowth, green growth) leads to confusion
- Applying complex, multi-criteria frameworks that require close collaboration across departments does not fit with existing – often siloed – government structures
- Resistance by those who are content with the prevailing way of doing things
- There is a lack of resources to develop and implement beyond growth approaches
- Insufficient pressure for change from grassroots movements
- Consistent framing against beyond growth narratives by media and politicians (e.g. growth = development, people getting richer)
- Don't know
- Other

If other, please specify:

SECTION TWO: Use of data/indicators/models

Q6: Do you use models/indicators/datasets in your work? Yes; No.

If no, please proceed to question 11. If yes, please answer the following questions.

Q7: How do you use indicators/datasets/models in your work? (select all that apply)

- I collect / update datasets
- I develop indicator dashboards
- I use indicator dashboards to track progress towards certain policy goals
- I develop indices / composite indicators
- I use macroeconomic models (e.g. QUEST, GM)
- I develop monitoring and forecasting models
- I use indicators to raise awareness of a policy issue / demonstrate the prevalence of the issue
- Other

If other, please specify:

Q8: Which of these datasets and metrics do you typically use? (select all that apply)

EUROSTAT databases; Joint Research Centre datasets; Our World in Data; Data from National Statistical Institutes; EU Resilience Dashboard; Social Scoreboard; Social Progress Index; Statistics for the European Green Deal; UN Sustainable Development Goals indicators (SDG); EU Sustainable Development Goals indicator set; Transitions Performance Index; Human Development Index (HDI); Better Life Index/Initiative (BLI); Environmental Performance Index (EPI); Ecological/Carbon Footprint; Inclusive Wealth Index (IWI); Comprehensive Wealth (CW); Life Evaluation Index (LEI); Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI); Gender Equality Index (GEI); Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW); Happy Planet Index; Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI); Other. If other, please specify.

Q9: On what basis do you favour certain metrics and models? Which of the following statements do you agree with? (choose as many as relevant)

- I use only the data, indicators and models produced by organisations viewed as legitimate in my field.
- These are the ones we are asked to use in our organisation for technical reasons.
- These are the ones we are asked to use in our organisation for political reasons.
- I actively search for alternatives and new metrics.
- I only use datasets that are regularly updated.
- I use datasets and indicator dashboards that are not openly available.
- I prefer information based on an index that provides one summary number over information based on various indicators.
- I prefer to look at original data rather than using infographics and scoreboards published by others.
- When tracking progress towards goals, I tend to use briefings and scoreboards produced by others (e.g. think tanks etc).
- I would like to use models in my work, but I do not know how.
- I use publicly available data only.
- I use datasets and indicator dashboards that are not openly available.
- Other

If other, please specify.

Q10: What are the biggest flaws of existing beyond GDP indexes and models (e.g. wellbeing dashboards, systems modelling, alternative welfare measures)? Maximum 5 selection(s).

- They are not openly available.
- They do not have a legitimate status in our organisation.

- They have an insufficient geographical coverage.
- They have limitations in terms of cross-country comparison.
- They do not cover relevant topics.
- Multidimensional indicators are hard to interpret, as different indicators can move in different directions.
- They are not updated regularly enough.
- The data is not timely enough (e.g. published with 2+ years of delay).
- There are technical difficulties to apply them in practice.
- It is difficult to get information of what alternatives exist.
- Don't know
- Other

If other, please specify.

SECTION THREE: Use of GDP

Q11: If you use GDP as an indicator to inform your work, why? (select as many as relevant)

- Frequency
- Coverage
- Comparability
- Overarching number that can tell powerful stories
- High level of disaggregation that allows for zooming in on different social groups and regions
- Technical feasibility
- Legitimacy/credibility
- Habitual use
- Public familiarity with the concept
- Other

If other, please specify.

Q12: In your opinion, what are the biggest flaws of GDP? Maximum 5 selection(s)

- It fails to measure the quality of life: for example, health, education and social relationships are not captured by GDP.
- Income distribution and other social inequalities are ignored.
- It does not differentiate between sustainable and unsustainable economic activities: negative, social and environmental externalities associated with economic growth are not captured.

- It excludes the informal economy and unpaid care work: it does not account for non-market activities.
- Difficulties measuring production related to free internet services (e.g. Facebook, Google, Wikipedia).
- There are problems in measuring government production.
- Difficulties in capturing qualitative improvements of products and services.
- Don't know
- Other

If other, please specify:

Q13: In your opinion, to what degree does the pursuit of GDP growth influence the design of policies? (select one)

- It strongly influences the design of government policies.
- It somewhat influences the design of government policies.
- It has little influence on the design of government policies.
- Don't know

Q14: Thinking about the last five years, how do you feel the influence of GDP on the design of public policies has changed? (select one)

- The influence of GDP on the design of public policies has increased.
- The influence of GDP on the design of public policies has stayed the same.
- The influence of GDP on the design of public policies has decreased.
- Don't know

SECTION FOUR: Effecting change

Q15: Do you feel any need to integrate additional data or indicators into your work? Yes; No.

Q16: If yes, why do you see such a need?

Q17: Based on your expertise, what are the most significant opportunities for integrating a beyond GDP approach into policy design, assessment and evaluation?

Multiannual Financial Framework post 2027; Implementation of the European Green Deal; The European Semester; Strategic autonomy; Social Europe; Competitiveness; Demographic transformation; Better Regulation; Resilience Dashboards; Integrated assessment tools; Strategic foresight; Other. If other, please specify.

SECTION FIVE: How can MERGE help?

MERGE aims to reach a consensus on frameworks and indicators to measure multidimensional wellbeing. We are building networks working to improve understanding, usefulness and accessibility of policy frameworks and beyond GDP indicators and to develop training tools for policy implementation.

Q18: What can MERGE do to support you?

Q19: If relevant, what technical and data guidance, modelling needs or knowledge would be useful to you?

Q20: Would you be willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview? Yes, No. If you answered yes, please add your name and email address.

Many thanks for your time and your assistance with this survey.

If you would like to be kept informed of the progress of the MERGE project or involved in some of the activities that will be taking place over the next few years, [please subscribe to the MERGE network here](#) to be kept up to date according to your interests. We will treat your inputs confidentially and you will only be contacted according to your choices.

Appendix B: Interview questions

[The bolded questions were prioritised in the interviews, if time constraints did not allow going through all of them]

- 1. What is your perception of the Beyond GDP field? (in terms of beyond GDP indicators relevance in policy, governance and policy design as well as implementation)**
- 2. How do you view its influence in your field? Can you name a specific policy file/process that has a potential to benefit from a wider set of indicators?**
3. Thinking about the last five years, how do you feel the influence of GDP on the design of public policies has changed?
- 4. Can you name the biggest barriers for integrating a beyond GDP approach into policy design, assessment and evaluation? When thinking about these factors, how and why they cause a barrier to beyond GDP approach?**
- 5. Based on your expertise, what are the biggest drivers pushing the political agenda for integrating a beyond GDP approach into policy design, assessment and evaluation? When thinking about these factors, how and why do they support the implementation of beyond GDP approach?**

6. What is the knowledge base you use to design policy proposals or to make a decision, assess progress or to what extent the objectives were achieved in your policy area?
- 7. If relevant, why do you favour certain metrics and models? Which IA-models do you regularly use? What are you lacking when using them, especially with regards to the social and ecological dimensions?**
8. Executive Vice President Frans Timmermans worked across European Commission policy silos through the course of the last mandate in his work on the European Green Deal. To what degree do you think that this manner of working supported policy coherence and long-term policy planning during the last mandate?
9. What are the areas where the improvements on long-term policy planning in EU policymaking are most needed?
- 10. Does the European Semester provide a vehicle to guide the EU's path towards sustainable wellbeing? If not, do you think this would be the appropriate framework?**
11. What can MERGE do to support you? Is there technical and data guidance, modelling needs or knowledge that would be useful?
- 12. Is there anyone else you would recommend that we interview?**

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