

Vision report on application of Beyond GDP indicators

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Disse	emination Level	
PU	Public	X
PP	Restricted to other programme participants (including the Commission Services)	
RE	Restricted to a group specified by the consortium (including the Commission Services)	
СО	Confidential, only for members of the consortium (including the Commission Services)	



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Contents

Intro	duction	3
A vis	sion on application of Beyond GDP indicators in policy making	4
1.	Conceptual clarification: a legitimising narrative of Beyond GDP	6
2.	International comparability of Beyond GDP indicators	8
3.	Identify the relevant components of progress	9
4.	Credibility of Beyond GDP indicators: from data to policies one can trust	10
5.	Understanding the message that Beyond GDP indicators give	12
	ards an Action Plan or Roadmap: INPOoL's legacy to the Beyond GDP community	14
Anne	ex – Participants knowledge brokerage workshop 28 th -29 th October 2013	15
Lo	cal-level	15
(In	ter)national-level	16
W	orkshop Organisers, BRAINPOoL project, BRAINPOoL Advisory Board	17



Introduction

During the last decade, Beyond GDP indicators have enjoyed greater public awareness. Renewed international interest in the Beyond GDP topic emerged for example from the EU GDP and Beyond conference (2007), the UNECE/OECD/Eurostat Taskforce for Measuring Sustainable Development (2007), OECD's Progress of Society (2007), and particularly from the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (2009). Such international initiatives have created momentum for alternative ways to measure societal progress in a broad sense (i.e. progress that is equitable, sustainable and results in high well-being, now and in the future).

It is recognized that GDP cannot be used to measure societal progress in a broad sense. 'Beyond GDP' indicators, on the other hand, could deliver the information that is needed for a broad measurement framework. With its policy paper "GDP and beyond: Measuring progress in a changing world"¹, the European Commission has decided on the need to develop more inclusive indicators to complement GDP, e.g. in environmental and social dimensions.

Despite the emergence of various alternative or 'Beyond GDP' indicators, some quite long-established, their role in policy making, to date, appears to be relatively limited. The BRAINPOoL project (a research project that started in October 2011 with funding through the EU's Seventh Programme for research, technological development and demonstration) addresses this challenge of enhancing use of Beyond GDP indicators in policy making. The project has carried out research and interviews, conducted knowledge-brokerage seminars and workshops, and undertaken seven action research case studies to explore ways to improve uptake of Beyond GDP indicators.

This vision document on the application of Beyond GDP indicators has been written based on the views and experiences of policy makers, economists, statisticians, academics, NGOs and journalists who all participated in a two-day knowledge brokerage workshop on the 28th and 29th October 2013 in Venice. The aim of the workshop was to verify and validate challenges, barriers and best practices, as found in previous BRAINPOoL research and knowledge brokerage activities, on the implementation of 'Beyond GDP' indicators in regional, national and international policy.

This vision expresses a shared view on challenges to the use of Beyond GDP indicators in policy making and identifies possible solutions to overcome barriers. With this joint vision, the BRAINPOoL project intends to provide elementary input that sets an agenda for future Beyond GDP work – identifying next steps and tools that will help institutionalise alternative indicators. Based on this vision document, BRAINPOoL will produce another document – a (draft) action plan or roadmap on application of Beyond GDP indicators in policy making. This vision document intends to inform those involved in the production or use of (alternative) indicators on challenges that must be met, in the short or long term, in order to enhance the use of beyond GDP indicators in policy making and governance.

Throughout this document we will use the term 'alternative indicators' and 'Beyond GDP indicators' interchangeably. By alternative or 'Beyond GDP' indicators we mean:

"those indicators and indicator sets that have been proposed as necessary and central to the measurement of societal progress in a broad sense, other than those indicators, such as GDP or the unemployment rate, that are already playing this role."

¹ European Commission COM(2009) 433, "GDP and beyond: Measuring progress in a changing world".

A vision on application of Beyond GDP indicators in policy making

Why a vision document?

The Beyond GDP frame looks at problems from a wider perspective. It strives for progress in a broader sense, not only economically, but also socially and environmentally. For example, the European Commission's 'GDP and Beyond initiative' is about developing indicators that are as clear and appealing as GDP, but more inclusive of issues such as environmental protection, quality of life, well-being and income inequality. 'Beyond GDP' indicators will thus provide essential information on progress towards sustainable development, an overarching objective of the European Commission, and integral part of the Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth². The aim is to continuously improve the quality of life and well-being on Earth for present and future generations.

It is recognised by the European Commission that, despite novel 'GDP and beyond' indicators becoming increasingly available, several challenges to the use of these alternative indicators in policy making are apparent. Indicators often remain compartmentalised in their respective policy areas - yet different policy domains tend to define "progress" differently. For instance, economic policy will define it in terms of GDP, while environmental policy might define it in terms of decreased pollution, etc.

Throughout the BRAINPOoL project's 'action research' we investigated barriers to the creation and use of new measures of progress, particularly in relation to how they can guide policy. Some of these barriers can be seen as an inevitable consequence of the ambitious aims and methodologies of Beyond GDP indicators themselves and are thus somewhat intrinsic and insoluble, while others both can be – and need to be – overcome if alternative indicators are to flourish in the future. This second set of barriers is predominantly not about the indicators per sé, but rather about the policies, narratives, policy-making mechanisms and political choices that they are associated with.

Using 'Beyond GDP' indicators in policy making thus also requires 'balanced' policy making, i.e. to balance different objectives for the policy domains involved (for instance, labour policy, economic policy, environmental policy, etc.). It is important to emphasise that 'balanced' does not just mean the adoption of social and environmental goals in parallel with economic goals but rather a more integrated approach to economic and other policy making. Without successfully merging the currently parallel policy processes we are in no position to understand whether or not we are moving towards well-being and genuine progress for societies, both for current and future generations. The development of Beyond GDP indicators can contribute to more integrated policies – provided it is integral to the action (which competing indicators are not).

Beyond GDP policy making thus requires a new paradigm to look at the problems and consequently new ways of working (in policy practice). The need for this more balanced political programme, that can deal with the complexity of multi-scales, multiple actor groups and both the short- and long-term, can be characterised as one that involves better management of trade-offs than in the past (i.e. less bias in favour of growth as such). This in turn should lead to 'better quality growth', i.e. progress of society that is equitable, sustainable and results in high well-being.

Sustainability and well-being appear to be primarily *outcomes* of more integrated policy that is oriented towards progress in a broad sense, not *explanations*. There is thus a need for more meaningful *explanatory variables* (indicators) that can inform policy makers on areas in which to intervene with policy actions. This would legitimatise the use of Beyond GDP indicators in a conceptual framework that is more explicit on causalities between policy options, policy actions and

² European Commission Staff Working Document SWD(2013) 303, "Progress on 'GDP and beyond' actions"

progress in a broad sense. Sustainability and human well-being are the ultimate goals of such an integrated policy framework.

To summarise, Beyond GDP indicators could thus deliver essential information that is needed for an integrated policy process to function. To date, however, alternative indicators have had only a relatively limited role in actual policy making. This vision document intends to report on some fundamental BRAINPOoL findings on barriers or challenges related to use of Beyond GDP indicators and provide some direction on possible solutions to overcome them. The central question this vision document wants to address is:

What are the biggest challenges, essential to solve in the short or long term, to enhance the use of alternative indicators in policy making?



BEYOND GDP INDICATORS = MULTI VISION

Challenges to the use of Beyond GDP indicators in policy making

1. Conceptual clarification: a legitimising narrative of Beyond GDP

One of the major barriers to the use of alternative indicators in policy making is confusion about the 'Beyond GDP' concept itself. Confusion and divergent interpretations of what exactly is meant by Beyond GDP arise from the large number of institutions and actors now working on alternative indicators. Institutionalisation of alternative indicators, and policies associated with them, will be partly dependent on the existence of common and recognised Beyond GDP definitions and labels. Conceptual clarification and convergence are therefore crucial requirements to enhance the use of Beyond GDP indicators in policy making.

A cacophony of terms to refer to the Beyond GDP concept should be avoided. Throughout our work we found that the divergent and contrasting nature of concepts which underlie different Beyond GDP indicators is leading to damaging confusion, which is acting as a barrier to use. Lack of understanding of alternative indicators amongst politicians and officials is also a key factor in the lack of political demand.

Confusion about the Beyond GDP concept is caused by the inherent (but necessary) complexity that emerges from various attempts to define progress as a multi-dimensional concept that includes the wealth of phenomena that lies outside the measurement of economic growth. The fact that Beyond GDP indicators synthesise different phenomena, sometimes even in a single composite index, makes them complex by nature. Competing concepts of quality of life, living standards, human development and sustainable development contribute to increased confusion, while many terms, such as *well-being*, *sustainability*, *quality of life*, *progress of society* or *sustainable development* are used to mean different things by different actors.

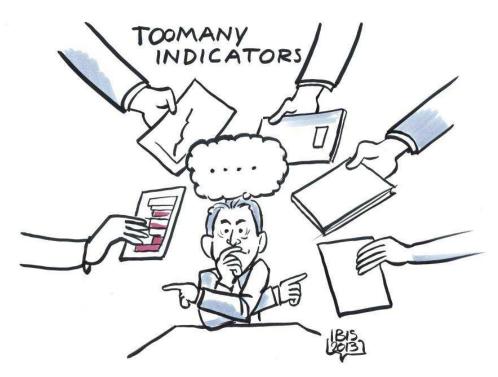
Of course this pursuit is the raison d'être of alternative indicators but it results in a cascade of interlinked challenges and hurdles. It is exactly this complexity that means there is, as yet, *no agreed or harmonised alternative to GDP as a broad measure of societal progress*. Such harmonisation of concepts will strengthen the chances of Beyond GDP indicators being successfully adopted in policy.

However, there exist different views on how harmonization should be achieved. Firstly, given that Beyond GDP is multi-dimensional, the general consensus is that one should not try to seek harmonization in a single alternative measure to GDP. Secondly, from a more evolutionary perspective, there could still be value in competition between various (indicator) concepts at the current stage of the Beyond GDP debate. For example, are all concepts yet evaluated in an objective manner? Can well-founded decisions on how to harmonise concepts yet be made? Moreover, who, or which official body, has the legitimacy (i.e. broad support and trust) to coordinate convergence towards a harmonised concept of Beyond GDP?

Although the usefulness of harmonisation is without doubt, it can be questioned if harmonisation as such is the key issue at stake. It could rather be a legitimising narrative or policy process (which may depend on many other issues than concepts of Beyond GDP indicators alone) that is the most crucial challenge in this context. Harmonisation could also mean seeking to standardise process steps within a narrative that causally links complex indicators to policy outcomes.

Possible solutions

- A theoretical foundation that links clearly with Beyond GDP indicators (like neoclassical economic theory and the System of National Accounts for GDP) will be essential if the use of Beyond GDP indicators in policy making is to become mainstream. Currently, a model or effective popular narrative behind the implementation of Beyond GDP is lacking. In this context, a 'model' means not a quantitative model but a coherent 'account' of how broad progress works; a model which describes 'social metabolism'.
- International coordination is needed on how to proceed and link Beyond GDP with a sound theoretical foundation as well as improving communication on these new indicators. A body or institute that can be trusted because it has the scientific background on indicators from different sources and on different domains should elaborate proposals, consult bodies representing the general public and take care of coordination, harmonisation and communication. This could be a 'Beyond GDP equivalent' of the International Panel on Climate Change, with representatives from governments, NGOs and academia.
- Beyond GDP concepts need to be rooted in processes, goals and targets that have legitimacy.
 Pure expert involvement should be avoided in the decision making process on how to define and measure ultimate goals of more integrated policy, i.e. human well-being and sustainability.
 The complexity and multi-dimensionality of Beyond GDP in fact makes deliberation necessary, based on the exchange of knowledge and experiences between various stakeholders and partners.
- A democratic process with wide representative and public engagement on the measurement
 of ultimate goals (end indicators), including subjectively measured ends, will help to raise
 legitimacy and public awareness of (harmonised) Beyond GDP concepts. This probably has
 highest potential for success on the local level, as democratic engagement might be easier to
 organise at smaller scales.

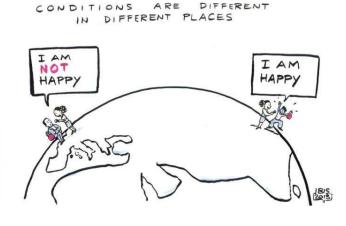


2. International comparability of Beyond GDP indicators

One aspect of the modern policy environment is that globalisation has created more awareness of developments in other countries or regions. As a result international comparisons are meaningful to assess the nature of political success. From this perspective it is important that progress as shown by Beyond GDP indicators is comparable across countries and regions. International harmonisation of core Beyond GDP measurement instruments is a first step to achieve this comparability. We learned that the ability to compare/benchmark progress with developments in other countries or regions makes it easier for politicians to understand Beyond GDP indicators. Yet another challenge is that specificities of problems can vary locally. During BRAINPOoL's action research it was therefore stated that there is a need for "internationally harmonised 'core accounts' to compare global Beyond GDP issues but that are flexible enough to be able to show local specificities of problems".

Possible solutions

- Development of core Beyond GDP measurement instruments with international partners such as OECD and UNECE³, where possible with a link to the EU2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth.
- International/EU standards and frameworks for Beyond GDP data collection, ensuring harmonised data collection and data quality.
- Dialogues between national and regional governments to agree on all relevant aspects of wellbeing/progress/sustainable development, objectives and targets, and identify areas where local specificities should be addressed.
- European cooperation to agree on the most relevant and useful Beyond GDP indicators at different scales: EU-level, Member States, Regional (NUTS2 and NUTS 3) and local level.
- Where possible, European Beyond GDP indicators should be in concordance with the EU Sustainable Development Strategy and EU Sustainable Development Indicators that might inform on relevant "distance to targets".
- The current process of developing the goals, targets and indicators that will make up the
 United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals which aim to be both integrated and
 universally applicable should similarly make good use of Beyond GDP indicators and assist in
 their international harmonisation.



D4.1 Vision Report on application of Beyond GDP indicators

³ As is recommended by the Sponsorship Group (2011) on "Measuring Progress, Well-being and Sustainable Development".

3. Identify the relevant components of progress

As progress is a multi-dimensional concept that goes beyond the economic domain of GDP, the whole point is to use a range of variables in an integrated policy process. This requires better management of trade-offs between different policy domains, and the ability to manage complexity without recourse to the standard economic models.

The concepts that are key to Beyond GDP are seen to be more dynamic and harder to measure. They may require combinations of policies the impact of which will be difficult to predict. The necessary analysis is both complex and uncertain and quantitative assessments may be inadequate. An important factor to take into account is that the general public does not think in terms of indicators; in the end it is all about relevant subjects that policy addresses, and persistent problems that will be solved by policy actions. Beyond GDP indicators should bring a relevant message to the general public.

It is a challenge to measure human well-being or sustainability as ultimate goals of more integrated policy with indicators that have legitimacy. In measuring well-being there is a certain field of tension between subjectively measured personal characteristics (such as 'life satisfaction') and the extent to which they are 'political' and can thus be used in policy making and politics.

Furthermore, some of the 'other desirable outcomes' may only make a difference in the longer term. As voters are believed to take a short-term perspective, policy tends to keep a strong emphasis on the short term. A challenge therefore is not only to ensure longevity in terms of robust quantitative measures, but also to successfully embed and assess the long term in current policy actions. In a way this requires the creation of a social 'utility function' in which trade-offs between different domains, subjective well-being measures, and time scales enter the 'equation'. We use quotations because this is not just a matter of weighing in quantitative terms.

Possible solutions

To identify trade-offs, and to assess the 'costs and benefits' of more for *now* versus *for the future*, a democratic process with public consultations is required. Such consultation rounds should involve the expert level, policy level and deliberation with the general public. The goal should be to find correlations between policy domains and societal progress in a broad sense. The general public should be able to understand the causality between policy actions "now" and long-term effects, "the future". This would require to build a 'well-being function' in deliberation with the public, describing the objectives and associating relative weights. Especially to define and measure well-being in terms of societal characteristics in a legitimate way, the general public should agree on important topics (housing, jobs etc.) to include.

Selection of the right indicators for each policy domain should be done by experts taking account of suggestions of the general public, as well as proposals for internationally harmonised measurement frameworks⁴ based on, relevance, data availability, timeliness, etc.

⁴ For example, the framework as proposed by the Joint UNECE/Eurostat/OECD Taskforce on Measuring Sustainable Development in their final report of May 2013.

4. Credibility of Beyond GDP indicators: from data to policies one can trust

Beyond GDP indicators need credibility and legitimacy to succeed. A number of factors are relevant in this regard. The previous section already addressed the challenge of deciding what has to be measured, and how to make sure these concepts or domains have legitimacy. A second important factor to the credibility or reliability of Beyond GDP indicators is data quality, including the belief that these measures are robust over time. One of the determining factors of quality is scientific consensus on an indicator's methodological foundation. The BRAINPOoL project's 'action research' has found that many feel there is a lack of scientifically neutral evaluation of existing Beyond GDP indicators.

Accordingly, the message that Beyond GDP indicators bring forward should be credible, i.e. not be easy to manipulate. A challenge here is that some alternative indicator producers work within a framework of simply providing 'neutral' information, while others are clearly connected to particular agendas. Being neutral is generally regarded as the best route to achieving legitimacy. We have found that policy makers sometimes have a certain reluctance to connect policy targets directly to specific and detailed (Beyond GDP) indicators. Policy makers sometimes prefer to promote the use of synthetic indicators at an aggregated level because they hide the specific evolution of "distance to target" resulting from their specific policies. Policy makers sometimes also tend to use specific indicators that fit their goals and fear the transparency which gives the general public opportunities to hold them to account. Increased transparency on progress towards long-term policy targets, as indicated by Beyond GDP measures, might conflict with generally more short-term political interests (e.g. getting elected, current budgets).

A challenge with more integrated policies that incorporate Beyond GDP indicators is to understand the consequence of present trends, giving people information on whether present public actions increase or decrease risks for the future (e.g. the state of environment). Beyond GDP will have credibility if it informs the public on long-term policy objectives and current policy actions. The public should understand the 'benefits of current policy action' relative to the 'costs of inaction' (i.e. not responding to societal challenges such as inequality or climate change). This challenge is in essence about how to connect long-term policy objectives to Beyond GDP measures.

Possible solutions

- Supra-governmental bodies or institutions which can propose standards that are likely to be heeded by other institutions (like national statistical offices) should preferably play a leading role in the process of convergence and harmonisation of Beyond GDP concepts and indicator methodologies.
- Statistical offices are considered as the prior (commonly accepted) producers of sound and reliable data. NSIs should become responsible for the production of internationally harmonised core indicators.
- However, as non-official statistics probably have a role in measuring (subjective) well-being, the quality of indicators should also be guaranteed by other actors. Scientific consensus on sound methodologies, based on peer reviewing etc., might be a first step. Secondly, a neutral body or institute should have a role in safeguarding data quality and neutrality of Beyond GDP indicators based on non-official data.
- One way to make sure that Beyond GDP concepts get translated into goals and targets that
 have legitimacy could be that, at the beginning of their mandate, or when an agreement is
 made on political objectives and goals (for instance when an overarching policy strategy such
 as EU2020 is adopted), the government publishes the indicator set they will be judged on
 afterwards.

- It is truly important to be open and transparent on Beyond GDP indicators in relation to policy options and actions. It is helpful to have pressure of public opinion on politicians for transparency, knowledge and social responsibility. Brainstorming, discussing, analysing and even criticism can be considered "effective tools" to improve and promote the application of Beyond GDP indicators.
- Developing Beyond GDP indicators together with the audiences at whom they are targeted and/or encouraging participation will also help to ensure the legitimacy of alternative indicators. The latter is particularly important for local-level initiatives. Local bodies are found to be more 'flexible' and media are often keen to pick up regional stories. It is also easier to build direct relationships with target groups at the local level.
- Part of the answer to the "legitimacy" concern can be found in the legitimacy of the (social, environmental and economic) focus areas discussed by democratic institutions and agreed in multilateral agreements (e.g. the Rio+20 Declaration 'The Future We Want'), as well as in the strategies discussed and adopted to implement these agreements at all levels (European, national, subnational, local).



5. Understanding the message that Beyond GDP indicators give

One of the findings of the BRAINPOoL project is that indicators are unlikely to be used if they have been developed in isolation from the policy process and agenda or allowed to drift apart from that process and agenda. This supports the initial hypothesis of the BRAINPOoL project that producers of indicators and their potential users should be interacting more effectively. Interaction should be seen in a broader context than talking about methodological aspects of indicators in their early phase of development.

What really matters for policy is the message that Beyond GDP indicators bring forward, and what policy actions can be taken based on this message. The Sponsorship Group⁵ recommended that communication should be based on a 'story telling approach' - informing about the indicator itself but also positioning the results in a wider context. Interactions between indicator producers and their (potential) users should thus also focus on possible responses to the indicator outcomes. This enables policy makers to understand what type of policies they can implement to improve the indicator value, i.e. 'the state of society' as shown by the Beyond GDP indicator. A challenge in this context still is how to set a threshold to move from indicator results to policy targets. Which indicator value represents the line between a 'good' or 'bad' situation? There is a need for common criteria in setting policy targets.

Alternative indicators should not only be understood by and targeted at policy makers; it is crucial to their success that they have relevance for a broader audience. We cannot expect to enhance the use of alternative indicators in policy making and politics without an effort to improve statistical understanding in the media and by the general public. Beyond GDP indicators that are 'easy to communicate' and that are understood by a wide public will be essential for successful uptake in policy making.

Indicator initiatives tend to be effective when they allow the production of 'simple' and 'attractive' messages that links to concepts the general public cares about. These could be messages that convey a sense of urgency and give receivers of these messages an idea about how the urgency of the situation affects them personally. The challenge here is to achieve this outcome even if the indicators provide information about phenomena that are less immediately tangible, such as long-term environmental issues.

Possible solutions

Targeted at policy makers:

• In the interactions between indicator development and policy agendas, those developing or maintaining indicators should act as 'statistical entrepreneurs'. This means spotting the political and organisational imperatives and opportunities that will allow them to be used. Such 'indicator entrepreneurs' may be statisticians, policy-makers, politicians, or independent watchdogs. This requires multi-disciplinary working, working across silos within organisations and increased co-operation between organisations.

 More generally, where there are data shortages that prevent a Beyond GDP approach (as BRAINPOoL identified in several case studies) it could be the role of indicator entrepreneurs to identify and advocate appropriate investment in data gathering, harmonisation and communication.

⁵ Final report of the Sponsorship Group on "Measuring Progress, Well-being and Sustainable Development", published in November 2011.

- We noted the importance of close co-operation between experts and governmental representatives. This allows the right balance between sophistication (the priority of the experts) and feasibility (the priority of the governments).
- Closer co-operation between organisations will provide opportunities for sharing best practice, improving knowledge exchange and building networks. This would involve developing common goals, greater mutual understanding (including of the use of indicators), shared investments in training and equipment, and the creation of common indicators for different territories.

To connect to the general public

- One approach to the need for indicators that the public cares about and journalists understand
 is to look for Beyond GDP indicator concepts that have a 'real impact on people's lives'. For
 example, various elements of well-being have a personal connotation instead of a more
 abstract macro orientation like that of GDP. An OECD official presented a relevant line of
 reasoning in this context: "Well-being is not a 'collateral damage' outcome of economic
 production but the ultimate goal in itself".
- To assess the relevance of the message that indicators give a DEEDS-framework has been proposed during BRAINPOoL's action research:
 - "Indicators that make action more likely"

Dramatizes a big problem, that connects to;

Everyday;

Experience, and indicates or demands;

Direction of a;

Solution, now.

- Working with this DEEDS-framework would require:
 - o Finding a legitimate proxy for a problem that has real impact on people's life
 - Decomposing the problem into concrete policy measures: "break into deeds".



Towards an Action Plan or Roadmap: BRAINPOoL's legacy to the Beyond GDP community

Based on the current vision report, the BRAINPOoL project will develop a 'roadmap' or 'action plan' that will contain an outline of the best opportunities for future implementation of Beyond GDP indicators. A draft version of this 'action plan' or 'roadmap' will function as a basis for discussion during the final conference of the project on the 24th of March 2014.

At the conference, the key findings and recommendations from BRAINPOoL will be presented, focussing on how to achieve both a Beyond GDP narrative, and the integrated, innovative policy-making that is needed for Beyond GDP indicators to influence policy. The discussions will be structured through the frame of two relevant policy sets: the shift to a green economy, and labour market policy designed to increase well-being.

Soon after the BRAINPOoL's final conference, a final Action Plan or Roadmap (Deliverable 4.2 of the project) will be made available as legacy to the international Beyond GDP community.



Annex – Participants knowledge brokerage workshop 28th-29th October 2013

Venue: UNESCO BRESCE Venice "Palazzo Zorzi", Venice (IT)

Local-level

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6.	Toni Pujol	Barcelona city council - Strategy Department - Urban Habitat	Spain
7.	Matthias Krebs	City of Mannheim - Strategic City Development	Germany
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13.	Agnieszka Piasna	European Trade Union Institute	Belgium - EU
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18.	Donato Speroni	Istituto per la Formazione al Giornalismo	Italy
19.	Paul Swaim	OECD - DG employment, labour and social affairs principal economist	France - OECD
20.	Magda Zupancic	Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs	Slovenia
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12.	Alistair Whitby	World Future Council	United Kingdom
13.	Jean-Louis Weber	European Environment Agency Scientific Committee (now Retired)/ Honorary Professor, School of Geography, University of Nottingham / Consultant on Economic-Environmental Accounting / BRAINPOoL Advisory Board	Denmark/France
14.	Jan Ibelings	Cartoonist on Tuesday 29 th October (Karikaturist IBIS / Rembrandt van Gein)	The Netherlands