



A Plea for Qualitative Growth: Quality is better than more.

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Today's large and so-called small problems: inequality, climate change, global citizenship, isolation, food safety, financial insecurity, alienation,... cannot be resolved with the current economic and social model. We try, but sooner rather than later, we face numerous limitations. Some have even wondered, and rightly so, whether our very social model could actually have caused several large and small problems.

Should our social movement be satisfied with the unrivalled historic accomplishments of a quantity-based growth model, or is it time to become eager advocates and pioneers of an alternative design? This article suggests a shift in our attention, commitment, energy and creativity. Why not use our experience and zeal to create quality-based growth, away from our quantity-based growth obsession?

Is our strong model really an exemplary design?

Unquestionably the western social-economic model achieved extraordinary feats during the post-war period (although China can also claim a significant poverty reducing trajectory). We should certainly applaud our Rhineland model for this. The model was relatively successful because of a number of crucial combinations which we, as a workers' movement, always advocate and have helped to accomplish. The concept embraces economic growth, as long as it goes hand in hand with prosperity and welfare progress, but also redistribution. Empirically it was, and still is corroborated that economic growth is indispensable to build a comprehensive welfare system. Furthermore, it maintains that this very growth is stimulated by welfare development (a healthy and well educated population enhances the economy) as well as redistribution (equitable redistribution boosts the economy).

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The model is further supported and motivated by social dialogue between employers and employees, care

providers and patients, students and education facilities,... Social dialogue leads to a better opinion perception of those who are often on opposite sides and lays the foundation for a shared engagement towards the chosen social structure. Social dialogue provides a base, in Dutch 'draagvlak' meaning a 'supporting platform', a term which (coincidence?) only exists in our language. Moreover, the model creates abundant scope for private social initiative, especially in those areas where authorities and businesses alike, fail to provide a suitable response to the needs voiced by the people. Let us not forget what is being achieved in our country in the field of collective and social initiatives for education, healthcare, childcare, social accommodation, sheltered employment, the social economy,...

We also observe that this model stimulates a dynamic combination of entrepreneurship and "intrapreneurship". Even in the for-profit sector, the government and social profit sector, both employers and employees have embarked on creative and innovative entrepreneurship. Whatever analysts will conclude, they will at least have to recognize that this model ranks amongst the finest in the world, has produced real economic advancement, with continuously increasing prosperity and welfare, high life expectations, a highly educated population, free speech, democratic participation and a multitude of opportunities. Yet, for some time now, and with reason, some have put this model into question.

Firstly, what is the value of this model? Ultimately isn't it our adulation of the free market economy, spurred on by our fascination and obsession for material growth? A kind of truth regime, which has become the benchmark for everything. Nothing seems genuine if it lacks efficiency, growth, competition and profit. The ultimate wish, the general standard. An imaginary invisible hand has become the alfa and omega. The 'markets' rule supreme, because we regularly hear: "*the markets are nervous*" or "*the markets react positive*". In

contrast, people are reduced to workforces, human capital, inferior to financial capital.

Secondly, we discover on a daily basis that the current model has its flaws. What about jobless growth? The increasing alienation of those who perform real labour? The denial of the model's expense? Who pays for the redundant, worn-out and so called non-performing employees, the environmental pollution the model creates, the care for the victims of inequality or unfair conduct?

Finally, shouldn't we question the model's sustainability? Can it be stretched perpetually, roping in more countries to eventually encompass the entire globe? Is it a beacon to inspire other countries? Since the rise of China, we've cottoned on to the fact that not every family on this earth can show off with a second and third car in their drive, or produce gourmet meals with exotic ingredients on a daily basis.

Count your blessings... and see whom you hurt.

We are relatively well-off, but there is no room for complacency. Ranking 21st in the human development index isn't much to boast about and things are not looking any brighter as far as inequality in our society is concerned. "It hurts" when we read that there are 358.000 Belgian dollar millionaires on a total population of 11.000.000. Piketty's conclusion is also applicable: to become rich one has to be born rich (or marry into money). Private wealth, such as the value of shares and real estate, grows at a faster rate than the economy. Lest we forget: for the last 10 to 20 years, private wealth has grown faster here than in the US, the UK, France or Germany. The recent nouveaux riches-royalty cult and the pitying concern for the never ending influx of downtrodden desperate asylum seekers shows that here also: '*les chanceux sont ceux qui arrivent à tout, les malchanceux ceux à qui tout arrive*'. – The fortunate ones accomplish everything, the unfortunate ones undergo everything.

A need for qualitative growth.

Welfare growth and redistribution stimulate and promote economic growth. Social entrepreneurs provide further development whilst social dialogue supports that very growth and prevents social disturbances. Similarly, a resolute choice for qualitative growth can give a boost to our economic model. This impulse is the result of the dedication and commitment to achieve quality, which in turn corrects the model and gives it renewed vitality. It shifts our focus, offers fresh perspectives. Something different to fight for, to mobilize, to experiment with.

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BNI US \$ PPP	HDI	IHDI	Happy Planet Index	Where to be born index	OESO Better life index	World Happiness index	Social Progress Index
1 Monaco 186.950	1 Norway 0,944	1 Norway 0,891	1 Costa Rica 64	1 Switzerland 8,22/10	1 Australia	1 Switzerland	1 Norway
6 Luxembourg 69.880	4 The Netherlands 0,915	3 The Netherlands 0,854	41 UK 47,9	8 The Netherlands 7,94/10	9 The Netherlands	7 The Netherlands 7,389	9 The Netherlands 86,50
15 The Netherlands 51.210	6 Germany 0,911	5 Germany 0,846	46 Germany 47,2	15 Belgium 7,51/10	12 UK	17 Luxembourg 7,082	11 UK 84,68
18 Germany 47.640	14 UK 0,892	18 UK 0,812	50 France 46,5	16 Germany 7,38/10	13 Belgium	19 Belgium 7,054	14 Germany 84,04
20 Belgium 47.030	20 France 0,884	19 Luxembourg 0,814	66 The Netherlands 43,1	26 France 7,04/10	14 Germany	21 UK 6,967	17 Belgium 82,83
23 France 43.080	21 Belgium 0,881	21 Belgium 0,806	107 Belgium 37,1	27 UK 7,01/10	17 Luxembourg	26 Germany 6,672	21 France 80,82
24 UK 42.690	21 Luxembourg 0,881	22 France 0,804	Luxembourg	Luxembourg	18 France	29 France 6,562	Luxembourg

The Gross National Income (GNI) is calculated by institutions such as The World Bank and The International Monetary Fund. It is the sum of the income of residents of a country, both domestically and abroad. It is usually indicated per capita. By looking at the GNI over the years, one tries to gain insight into the economic growth of a country.

The Human Development Index (HDI) looks at more than just economic growth. The index was first developed in 1990 by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). By collecting indicators referring to life expectancy, education and income per capita, the HDI is used to gain insight into the human wealth of a certain country. In other words, to assess whether its

population is able to build the life they want.

The Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI) refers to the potential human development, which is hampered by for instance inequality or gender relations of a country. As a result, adjusted indexes are produced taking into account the level of inequality or gender relations. Hence the Inequality-adjusted HDI.

The Happy Planet Index (HPI) is one of the first indexes to take a country's ecological footprint into account. It was introduced in 2006 by the **New Economics Foundation**. It is based on the general principle that countries must ensure that their inhabitants can live a long and happy life whilst avoiding infringing on future generations and people in other countries to do the same. Contrary to what its name may imply, it is not a measure of people's personal happiness but rather a measure of the contribution of a given country to people's happiness.

The Where-to-be-born Index was first introduced in 2006 by The Economist Intelligence Unit as the quality-of-life index (QLI). The index reads like a lottery-of-life: it attempts to measure to which extent someone's birth country will provide the best opportunities for a healthy, safe and prosperous life in the years ahead. To this end, it uses results of life-satisfaction surveys and about ten objective determinants of quality of life.

The OESO Better Life Index offers since 2011 two tools. A "Your better life index" is an interactive tool allowing users to compare countries of their choice according to topics such as housing, income, education, work, safety, etc. The How's Life index makes a ranking of the 40 most prosperous countries.

The World Happiness Report has been compiled since 2011 by the de United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network. The report uses data from the Gallup polls comprising more than 150 countries. They measure the personal estimates of the real income per capita, health life expectancy, reliance on other persons, freedom of making life choices, absence level of corruption and level of generosity within society.

The Social Progress Index was initiated in 2013 by the Social Progress Network. It attempts to create a holistic measurement framework for measuring the health of social progress. More than 50 indicators are used, divided in three groups: basic human needs (nutrition and basic medical care, water and sanitation, shelter,...); foundations of wellbeing (access to knowledge and information, healthcare, ecosystem sustainability,...) and opportunities (personal rights, freedoms, choices, tolerance,...).

What do we mean by quality-based or qualitative growth? We can elaborate and present complex econometric and mathematical fractions, but the easiest and best definition is: improving the quality of life.

Certainly an easy definition, but what do we actually want to achieve? Up till now, growth was measured by increased output, separate from the value or reduced value of that output (more traffic jams are good for the economy because more cars inherently means more petrol consumption). With our qualitative growth we want an output that makes our lives, those of our fellow terrestrials and future generations better.

In its current form, quantitative growth makes an abstraction of humans and nature. At best, it makes them objects of

growth. In the case of qualitative growth, people and nature are the core, the engines, the subjects. Qualitative growth is by, for and with the people and also by, for and with nature. Quantity-based growth focuses on a limited number of hard and quantifiable aspects. Quality-based growth is a combination of economic growth and a broad spectrum of hard and soft qualitative dimensions. Hence, a set of hard (i.e. employment, education levels, ecological sustainability, environmental conservation, poverty alleviation, income distribution, technological innovation, work/family balance) and soft aspects (i.e. wellbeing, fulfilment, purpose, creativity, tranquillity, beauty). Quality of life and its growth as a condition for a good life, as seen by Luc Van Ootegem of the HIVA Research Institute for Work and Society of the university of Leuven.

This implies we need to approach the human being in its totality: "there is a good chance that people experience "quality of life" as a feeling of fulfilment with life as a whole, only when we take all possible components of one's human-being into account." (Van Gorp, p. 29). It means we have to look beyond our horizon.

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We shouldn't merely concentrate on what growth can do for us, but equally what it can do for people on the other side of the globe, for future generations, here but also elsewhere. Numerous dimensions can be mentioned. But we will limit ourselves to two, purely as examples.

1. Until the 70ies allergies hardly ever came up in conversation. Currently, one in three people are confronted with it.

There are 300 million asthma sufferers in the world. Eight percent of the population suffers from a food allergy. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that by 2050 half of the Western population will suffer from an allergy: respiratory problems, food allergy, professional allergies, allergic reactions to medication or cosmetics,... With dire consequences for our economy and community. Asthma is one of the main causes of school absenteeism. The social expense is huge: productivity loss, an extra burden on the health service, the cost of medication, examination expenses, and especially reduced quality of life.

For those who still think that asthma is merely a by-product of our ill-fated economy: the largest and most hazardous pollution is encountered 'indoors' (living room, office, workshop, car,...). The WHO estimates the yearly death rate due to 'domestic pollution' at over 4,3 million. Significantly higher than external pollution (3,7 million). We can hardly grasp the extent of the toxic and deadly effects due to lack of ventilation and the use of detergents, adhesives and air fresheners.

2. By now, most of us have experienced a 'more intense' work pattern. More has to be done in less time, with fewer colleagues to generate a higher output and achieve superior targets. Research of amongst others Monique Ramioul of the HIVA Research Institute for Work and Society of the university of Leuven points to a serious risk of diminishing job quality. In our country, employees experience less job autonomy which can lead to increased psychosocial risks. Tasks become more complex whilst training isn't always matched to the actual job. For many, working becomes 'harder': vibrations, noise, extreme temperatures, smoke, fumes and olfactory pollution. Physical demands are increasing along with the pace of work and stress. People are increasingly dependent of others, of machines and deadlines. The feeling of job quality loss creeps in. Working becomes a burden.

Those who reckon this is merely a problem of the work floor: the job also corrodes quality time, our leisure time. Frequently, people take their work home, and domestic worries are taken to work. Last but not least, the work burden is increasingly shared with and borne by the home front.

Low-hanging fruit

In the meantime we have recognised the classic remedies to correct our model. But it is not sufficient. It can only be successful if we expand our erstwhile national efforts and apply it globally. Namely, a resolute battle for a social project that creates prosperity for all. We have spotted roles for various actors and identified reachable steps.

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Just for inspiration.

Let's take companies. There will be qualitative growth when the process becomes more important than the product, i.e. valued employee involvement. Additionally: once product and process both become part of a social project, even more can be achieved. There would be qualitative growth if a cosmetics giant were to ban the term 'hypoallergenic' from its packaging because it is unethical to sell the illusion that cosmetics without allergens exist. Qualitative growth would also be a fact if a hotel chain were to provide rooms with an air quality label, or if car manufacturers could reinvent themselves and become growing mobility facilitators instead of producing ever more vehicles.

The social profit sector can also boost qualitative growth, by recognizing that care is less transaction and more interaction. There is quality-based growth when there is more time for contact and care. For instance when an elderly person is no longer taught to use adult diapers, simply because it wouldn't

be cost and time efficient to take him to the toilet (After all, in case of a 'false alarm' it would seriously waste the care provider's time).

Social movements certainly play a role. They should challenge, correct, prospect and use their social protest voice to identify what feels wrong, unjust and pointless. As social entrepreneurs, they need to test new society and employment systems. They need to forge ties with people and build bridges between groups. Why not ease people's growing feeling of loneliness and powerlessness. Bring the unemployed, long-term ill, poor and elderly back into society. Make parents feel that they can indeed raise their children. It would be a wonderful contribution to the qualitative growth we all strive for.

We expect a lot of the authorities, and with good reason. We want ever cooperative and motivating authorities, sometimes insistent, always guiding. They can do a lot to improve our quality of life. The very year smoking in the work place and public places was banned, premature births and child hospitalization due to asthma fell by 10% in Europe and North-America. In countries that offer more legal job protection and respect a social dialogue between employers and trade unions, the overall job quality deteriorated less or not at all...

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Even individually at micro-level a lot can be achieved. Our obsession with accumulating material possessions could be exchanged for a personal contact culture, forging social networks and expanding personal development. We can evolve from possessive, envious individuals to people who dare to be generous, still believe in mutual benefit, compassion and empathy. Real people that uphold the principle: if you don't give, you don't live.

Qualitative growth: we could start right away. All it needs is a couple of companies, some media outlets, social movements and organizations, certain authorities and individuals to reset their compass and we are off. If they could just consider for a moment how they can and want to contribute to improve the quality of people's lives, a torrent of qualitative innovation would be set in motion. Growth guaranteed.

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