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# Measuring quality of life for public policy: an idea whose time has come? Agenda-setting dynamics in the European Union

Ian Bache

**ABSTRACT** Measuring quality of life has recently risen rapidly up the political agenda in a range of political arenas. In the EU context this is indicated most clearly by a Commission communication to the Council and European Parliament in 2009, ‘GDP and Beyond’, which sets out a roadmap with five key actions to improve the indicators for measuring progress. This initiative, along with similar developments both nationally and internationally, signals discontent with the dominance of gross domestic product growth as the dominant measure of societal progress and suggest that in some respects at least, concern with measuring quality of life is an idea whose time has come. This article seeks to explain how and why this issue has risen up the EU’s political agenda through this initiative, drawing on Kingdon’s (2011) multiple streams approach to agenda-setting and related contributions.

**KEY WORDS** Agenda-setting; environment; Eurostat; multiple streams; quality of life; well-being.

## INTRODUCTION

Measuring quality of life has recently risen rapidly up the political agenda in a range of political arenas. In the European Union (EU) context this is indicated most clearly by a Commission communication to the Council and European Parliament (EP) in 2009, ‘GDP and Beyond’ (European Commission 2009), which sets out a roadmap with five key actions to improve the indicators for measuring progress. This initiative, along with similar developments both nationally and internationally, signals discontent with the dominance of gross domestic product (GDP) growth as the dominant measure of societal progress and suggest that, in some respects at least, concern with measuring quality of life<sup>1</sup> is an idea whose time has come. This article seeks to explain why and how this issue has risen up the EU’s political agenda through this initiative, drawing on Kingdon’s (2011)<sup>2</sup> multiple streams approach to agenda-setting. In doing so, the article is novel in seeking to address a current topic rather

than providing an *ex post* analysis of a policy decision, as is common in most agenda-setting studies.<sup>3</sup>

While developed in the context of United States (US) politics, this approach has become a landmark contribution that has increasingly been applied to other political systems, including the EU, and insights from these applications are drawn on also. This approach provides a very helpful way of understanding developments, explicitly theorizing both structural and agential factors without privileging one over the other. However, an important dimension of the findings here that is not really signalled by Kingdon's (2011) approach is the importance of international networks through which ideas are developed. This is in some respects an obvious observation in the EU context, but this case study reveals complex overlapping national, European and other international policy networks through which ideas are developed and diffused that are key to understanding EU agenda-setting. Moreover, the case study highlights the potential for territorial disjunctures between Kingdon's (2011) three streams in the context of multi-level governance.<sup>4</sup>

## THE MULTIPLE STREAMS APPROACH

Princen (2007) identifies two key questions in relation to agenda-setting in the EU: where do issues on the EU's agenda come from and under what conditions do actors succeed in getting those issues on the agenda? While the literature on EU agenda-setting has expanded in recent years (Ackrill and Kay 2011; Moschella 2011; Princen 2007, 2009, 2011; Princen and Rhinard 2006), demonstrating important power dynamics and drawing attention both to issues that are placed high on the agenda and those that are excluded, it remains a relatively under-researched aspect of policy-making. Such research requires a long time frame to understand the rise and fall of issues and the nature of change, whether characterized by incrementalism or punctuated equilibrium (Pralle 2006: 987).

The focus here is on the 'political agenda', which is taken to refer to issues that receive serious attention by decision-makers (Baumgartner *et al.* 2006; Kingdon 2011; Princen 2007). This agenda is analytically distinct from public and media agendas (Princen 2011), although there are inevitable overlaps in practice. The analysis also draws on Kingdon's (2011) distinction between the *governmental* agenda, which are the topics receiving attention, and the *decision* agenda, which refers to those topics lined up for a decision. While the term 'governmental' might not be the preferred choice to describe at least some EU institutions, it is nevertheless useful in this context to distinguish between political attention and substantive decisions. In this case, there is undoubtedly a governmental agenda, but arguably the key decisions relating to this agenda are yet to be made.

### Participants and processes

The multiple streams approach is one that pertains under conditions of ambiguity, 'a state of having many ways of thinking about the same circumstances

or phenomena' (Feldman cited in Zahariadis 2003: 2–3). It identifies three process streams – problems, policies and politics – and the importance of key actors, policy entrepreneurs,<sup>5</sup> who in the context of ambiguity can manipulate the policy process to advance their aims. Problems can press the political agenda through the occurrence of a crisis or high profile events or less dramatically through a shift in respected indicators. Policies develop through the accumulation of knowledge by experts and their subsequent proposals, although Kingdon (2011, 17) also notes that ideas may become faddish and sweep through policy communities without any obvious movement in the science of knowledge. Political processes affect the agenda through shifts in public opinion, changes in government and other similar dynamics. Thus, politicians respond to shifts in public opinion and public moods as well as trying to lead and shape public opinion.

These three processes – problem recognition, generation of policy proposals and political developments – can either constrain or facilitate the elevation of an idea up the political agenda. They are conceptualized as streams of activity that develop largely separately from each other 'governed by different forces, different considerations, and different styles' (Kingdon 2011: 88). The political agenda is set by either problem recognition or political developments (e.g., a change of government), whereas the alternatives (the policy options to choose from) are decided in the policy stream, populated primarily by experts and bureaucrats. Sometimes there is a recognized problem, but no obvious policy solution. Or there may be a recognized problem and an appropriate policy response, but the political circumstances are not conducive to action, and so on.

### **Policy windows**

The greatest opportunity for change occurs when a policy window is opened by either political events or compelling problems. Thus, there can be either political windows or problem windows. They can close for a variety of reasons, such as the problem being addressed, the failure of participants to get desired action, that the events that mattered pass from the scene, through a subsequent change in key personnel, or because there is no available alternative (Kingdon 2011: 169–70).

It is during policy windows that policy entrepreneurs are crucial to moving change forward by 'selling' their combination of problem definition and policy alternative to political actors. In the EU system, this role is generally heightened by its approximation to conditions of ambiguity: participants with unclear goals; fluid participation; and opaque organizational technology in which jurisdictional boundaries are blurred (Zahariadis 2008: 517). It is when the three streams converge that a critical juncture is created, providing the greatest opportunity for change. Here policy entrepreneurs play a key role in coupling streams through framing issues persuasively. However, as Zahariadis (2008: 520) notes, 'In light of the mostly informal and opaque EU policy process ... coupling becomes more difficult to accomplish at the EU than the

national level.’ The problem stream tends to be connected last and it is this that ‘provides legitimacy for dealing with societal problems, after politics and policy streams have been coupled’ (Ackrill and Kay 2011: 77). In this case, the politics and policy streams are to some extent coupled but agreement on the ‘problem’ that quality of life measures can solve is less advanced, and this stream requires more effective framing of the problem if it is to be effectively coupled.

### **The nature of change**

According to Kingdon (2011), change in the policy stream tends to be incremental, but the politics and problem streams are prone to more sudden changes, resembling punctuated equilibrium. As Baumgartner *et al.* (2006: 961) suggest:

a primary finding from agenda-setting studies is the reactive nature of policy-making, resulting in a disjointed and episodic trace of policy activities across time. As new participants with fresh ideas break into the inner circle of policy-making, the system is jolted; there is nothing smooth about the process of adjustment in democratic societies.

However, the alternatives available to policy-makers develop more gradually in the policies stream. Here comparisons are made with the Darwinian process of natural selection in which the ‘fittest’ proposals are more likely to survive and prosper. Moreover, there is often a lengthy process of ‘softening up’ in which ideas are sold to the policy community. One possible difference here in the EU context is that because of the nature of the institutional framework, the prospect for abrupt shifts in political direction is less than in national systems. This is reflected on later.

### **QUALITY OF LIFE ON THE POLITICAL AGENDA**

While this article is concerned with recent moves to promote quality of life measurements to guide public policy, these moves are not without historical precedent. Although concern with quality of life and notions of the ‘good society’ have a long history in political thought, the precedent for recent developments can be found in the social indicators movement in the 1960s and 1970s. This arose in the more prosperous post-war nations as awareness grew of the social costs of economic growth. It gained high-profile political support in some countries, not least the United States, where President Johnson famously spoke of the good society being ‘a place where men are more concerned with the quality of their goals than the quantity of their goods’ (Johnson 1964). This movement led to the introduction of new national surveys in the US and elsewhere, such as the Swedish Level of Living Survey (1965) and the UK Social Trends Report (1970), along with numerous international agency reports. These sought to measure educational achievement, life expectancy, poverty levels, and crime rates amongst other things, providing

alternative ‘objective’ benchmarks for progress (Scott 2008: 35–6; McGillivray 2007: 7). However, it was clear by the mid-1970s that this information did not have the impact on public policy for which its advocates had hoped. Cobb and Rixford (1998: 11) identified a number of reasons for this: economic anxieties that pushed aside concerns about social issues; the ideological shift toward conservatism and distrust of government; the limited usefulness of social indicators to policy-makers; the lack of a theoretical framework comparable to economic theory; the lack of an agreed-upon method of making normative judgments; the lack of a common unit of measurement to permit aggregation, comparable to the use of money in economics; and the declining faith in econometric modelling, which failed to avert rising inflation and unemployment.

The more recent interest in quality of life indicators share some of these social concerns, but these are accompanied by a strong, environmental imperative and a growing interest in measuring life satisfaction. Moreover, since the 1970s, the ‘science’ of well-being measurement has become more robust and has given policy-makers an increased confidence in the accuracy of the data generated, particularly in relation to ‘self-report’ surveys of life satisfaction (or ‘subjective well-being’). A key finding has been that, beyond a basic level of income, incremental increases in income do not lead to increases in life satisfaction – the so called ‘Easterlin paradox’ (Easterlin 1973). Complementing this finding has been a wide body of cross-disciplinary research that has identified the importance of a range of factors on quality of life, including social interaction, faith, intimate relationships, government spending and different political–institutional frameworks (Dorn *et al.* 2007; Ott 2010; Pavot and Diener 2004). In response to these findings have been growing demands from epistemic communities for governments to pursue enhancement of well-being as an explicit policy goal and one that might help policy-makers resolve the ‘apples versus oranges problem’ of comparing policy options by providing a standard unit of analysis (De Prycker 2010: 589). While policy-makers have until recently been reluctant to consider this approach, the Human Development Index (HDI) is a notable exception. The HDI is a composite statistic that combines three dimensions: life expectancy at birth; access to knowledge (access to schooling and expected years of schooling); and standard of living (using Gross National Income). It was based on the work of Amartya Sen and brought into use in 1990 by the United Nations Development Program. While the HDI is not without its critics (see Veenhoven 2007), and Sen himself has expressed misgivings in the light of advances in measurements (Gertner 2010), it is notable here not just for its durability as an alternative to GDP alone but also because Sen has played a key role in subsequent developments (see below).

### **QUALITY OF LIFE ON THE POLITICAL AGENDA: CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS BEYOND THE EU SYSTEM**

Quality of life has risen up the political agenda in a number of settings, both national and international. National initiatives tend to be in Organization for

Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) or EU countries. Within the OECD, for example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics has developed Measures of Australia's Progress (MAP) as its 'flagship publication'. MAP 'brings together measures from across social, economic and environmental domains, so these can be assessed side by side for a balanced view of national progress' (Wall and Salvaris 2011: 8). Within the EU, notable initiatives include those in the United Kingdom (UK), Germany and France. In the UK, Prime Minister David Cameron announced in November 2010 that quality of life measures developed by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) would in future be used for public policy purposes.<sup>6</sup> In Germany a Federal Commission began work in January 2011 to develop new indicators of prosperity, while France has begun implementing a series of measures in response to the findings of the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (CMEPSP). Indeed, this Commission has been important in giving momentum to a number of national initiatives.

The CMEPSP was established in February 2008 by President Sarkozy of France and was led by Nobel Prize-winning economists Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen.<sup>7</sup> The Commission's brief was to:

identify the limits of GDP as an indicator of economic performance and social progress, including the problems with its measurement; to consider what additional information might be required for the production of more relevant indicators of social progress; to assess the feasibility of alternative measurement tools, and to discuss how to present the statistical information in an appropriate way. (CMEPSP 2009: Executive Summary)

From April 2008 the Commission convened meetings and hearings that led to its final report, published in September 2009, which urged a 'shift of emphasis from a production-oriented measurement system to one focused on the well-being of current and future generations towards broader measures of social progress' (CMEPSP 2009: 2). The report produced a number of recommendations relating to measurement of quality of life aimed at stimulating debate and action at national and international levels (see also endnote 1).

The OECD has also been very active on this issue and its work pre-dates that of the Stiglitz–Sen Commission. As well as monitoring the economic progress of countries, the measurement of quality of life and monitoring of wider notions of progress is stated as a 'key priority' for the organization. The Istanbul Declaration of 2007 (WFSKP 2007) underlined this commitment and the OECD World Forum on 'Statistics, Knowledge and Policies' in 2012 aims to assess progress in this area. In addition, the establishment of the OECD *Better Life Index* and accompanying website provides the main platform for collaboration and exchange of quality of life information internationally, and allows users to 'visualize well-being outcomes' across OECD countries (OECD 2011).

## THE EU

In a broad sense, concern with quality of life in the EU is as old as the EU itself: Article 2 of the Treaty of Rome describes one of the tasks of the EU as ‘the raising of the standard of living and quality of life’. However, only in recent past has the issue risen up the EU agenda and a co-ordinated effort been made to measure quality of life with a view to guiding policy. The first steps in this direction were taken in 2003 in the form of a small scale survey on quality of life in the EU by the Eurofound agency. The pace of events accelerated in the second half of the decade, though, and by 2009 the Commission had issued its ‘GDP and Beyond’ communication (European Commission 2009) to the Council and EP, which was endorsed by the EP in 2011. This communication provides a roadmap of five key actions to improve the EU’s indicators of progress in a way deemed more appropriate to citizens’ concerns than GDP alone. It states that:

by design and purpose it [GDP] cannot be relied upon to inform policy debates on all issues. Critically, GDP does not measure environmental sustainability or social inclusion and these limitations need to be taken into account when using it in policy analysis and debates. (European Commission 2009: 2)

The five actions that the Commission proposes to implement are: complementing GDP with environmental and social indicators; near real-time information for decision-making; more accurate reporting on distribution and inequalities; developing a European Sustainable Development Scoreboard; extending national accounts to environmental and social issues. These actions will be reviewed in 2012 and the Commission will report on the progress made.

### The politics stream

Since the early 1990s, the Commission has been positioning itself and the EU as a global leader on environmental (and related) policy issues. The history of the ‘GDP and Beyond’ initiative can be traced back to this period with a conference in 1995 organized by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and EU institutions. This conference, which was strongly environmental in focus, largely failed in its immediate objective of advancing the quality of life agenda, but provided a reference point for subsequent developments. Some of those involved in organizing this conference remained closely involved in relevant EU networks and found an opportunity to relaunch the initiative with the encouragement of Environment Commissioner Dimas. This led to the 2007 conference ‘Beyond GDP’, which was organized jointly by the European Commission, European Parliament, Club of Rome, OECD and WWF, and was attended by over 650 delegates from a wide range of organizations. Directorate General (DG) Environment was the driving force behind this conference, although early in the process Commissioner Dimas enlisted the support of Commissioner Almunia, then in charge of Economic and Monetary Affairs, who had responsibility for Eurostat (the Commission’s statistical directorate).

The objective of the conference was to identify the indices most appropriate for measuring progress in the EU and to consider how these might best be taken up in public debate and integrated into decision-making. The Commission's 2009 communication was a direct outcome of the 2007 conference. However, an important part of the context was the deliberations of the Stiglitz–Sen Commission. Indeed, while there was considerable overlap in the personnel involved in these two initiatives, there was also a degree of institutional competition: the launch of the Commission's communication in September 2009 was deliberately scheduled one week before the launch of the Stiglitz–Sen report.<sup>8</sup> However, the importance of Stiglitz–Sen was noted at the conference by Art de Gues, Deputy Secretary General of the OECD, who highlighted the comment by Stiglitz that after the financial crisis 'there is no going back to business as usual'.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly for the analytical framework adopted here, Enrico Giovannini, President of the Italian national Statistical Office (ISTAT) and a former Chief Statistician of the OECD, spoke of a 'political window of opportunity' in the post-crisis recovery period to construct a new political narrative for politicians concerned to ask themselves 'what can I sell to citizens if I cannot for a while sell high GDP growth rates?'.<sup>10</sup>

Following the lead of DG Environment and Eurostat, other Commission directorates subsequently engaged with the issue. Some of the more obvious directorates such as DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion and DG Health and Consumer Affairs became involved quite early in the process, but there now exists a Commission Inter-departmental Co-ordination Group co-chaired by Eurostat and DG Environment Directors General with the participation of 14 other directorates along with four agencies. This group co-ordinates Commission actions as well as communications on the issue.

Within the EU institutions, this initiative has gained high-level support. President Barroso attended the 2007 conference and spoke in its favour. Current Environment Commissioner Potočnik (2011: 6–7) has argued for 'social and environmental statistics and indicators on the same level with economic statistics, concerning scope, details and timeliness'. Economic and Monetary Affairs Commissioner Olli Rehn has also endorsed the initiative. In addition to support from the EP, the communication has been endorsed by the Economic and Social Committee and Committee of the Regions. Indeed, the Committee of the Regions (2011) proposed that the allocation of structural funds should not in future be allocated solely on GDP per capita, but also according to environmental and social indicators.

Within member states, President Sarkozy is a long-standing and vocal advocate and his position strengthened following the financial crisis:

for years, people said that finance was a formidable creator of wealth, only to discover one day that it accumulated so many risks that the world almost plunged into chaos. The crisis doesn't only make us free to imagine other models, another future, another world. It obliges us to do so. (Sarkozy 2009)

In April 2010 President Sarkozy and Chancellor Merkel presented a joint Franco-German declaration stating that ‘the two countries would push the European Union to adopt proposals for the calculation of economic growth based on work by the Stiglitz Commission’ (RFI 2010). As noted above, the UK is taking action in line with EU developments and its national statistical office is closely engaged with Eurostat on the issue (see below).

In short, as Eurostat (2009: 4) has suggested, there is ‘a clear political will to radically reassess the way progress is measured’. And as one of our interviewees (2011) involved in EU developments observed:

the Beyond GDP initiative is now one part of becoming a bigger puzzle . . . we have several heads of state supporting it, support in the Parliament. So while four or five years ago it was really the OECD and the EU, we now have many supportive actors.

An interesting twist to the story between the conference in 2007 and the communication in 2009 is important in explaining the level of support. While the conference had the title ‘Beyond GDP’, this was seen as potentially too radical a shift politically: it implied the jettisoning of GDP in favour of other measures. The communication title ‘GDP and Beyond’ instead proposes introducing measures to complement rather than replace GDP as a benchmark of progress.

### **The policy stream**

Kingdon (2011) describes how in the policy stream ideas ‘float around’ in specialized policy communities and that the process of having ideas accepted can take years or indeed may not happen at all. There is generally a long process of ‘softening up’ in the policy stream in which proposals are floated and refined until the time is right for them to be heard. This chimes well with this case. As noted above, the ‘science’ of measuring well-being has advanced significantly since the 1970s when Easterlin (1973) published his seminal study.

However, there is an important difference in the policy stream observed that is not acknowledged in Kingdon’s (2011) analysis, which is its transnational nature. Kingdon’s model was developed in a particular time (1980s) and space (the US) and illustrated in relation to particular case studies (health and transportation) in which the policy communities would have been predominantly domestic. Since his initial study, policy communities in many policy areas have become more transnational. This is perhaps truer in the context of European integration than elsewhere. However, this case points to the importance of transnational policy communities both within and beyond the EU (see also Princen 2009). Indeed, interviews suggested that these transnational networks of experts on measuring quality of life were more established than the relevant domestic networks in some countries.

Our interviews revealed close connections between officials, academics, think-tanks and other actors that spanned national boundaries. There was a particular

nexus connecting a lot of the momentum for measuring quality of life to the OECD and, in particular, to the former Chief Statistician, Enrico Giovannini. Giovannini was identified as someone with a strong personal commitment to the issue, a convincing grasp of the details and a persuasive view of its importance. He played a key role in developing the OECD's agenda, which predated the activities of Stiglitz–Sen and the EU. Indeed, the Paris-based OECD was seen as influential on the French administration on this issue and on President Sarkozy specifically, which ultimately led to the establishment of the Stiglitz–Sen Commission. Giovannini was also involved in key EU conferences on this topic, chaired one of the three working groups of the Stiglitz–Sen Commission, and maintains an on-going influence within the networks, presently as head of Italy's national statistical institute.

Of course, as Kingdon (2011: 70) points out, 'public policy is not one single actor's brainchild', and while Giovannini may have played an important role across national boundaries, other actors illustrate this point further. The London-based new economics foundation (nef) is an example of a think-tank (or 'think-and-do-tank' as they style themselves) that was cited by interviewees nationally and internationally as a key player in the flow of ideas within networks. Nef is involved in detailed discussions with Eurostat in developing indicators at EU level, as well as doing similar work with the ONS in the UK and with the OECD. In short, there is an intense flow of ideas and information between domestic and international bodies.

More explicitly, there are dense interactions between statistical bodies within the EU and beyond. Within the EU, the European Statistical System (ESS) is comprised of Eurostat and national statistical offices. There are regular formal meetings and more informal exchanges ongoing. A Sponsorship Group was established by Eurostat for its work on 'GDP and Beyond', which involves representatives of national offices as well as the OECD. In turn, Eurostat officials are also involved in OECD deliberations and those within national statistical systems. For example, Eurostat has representation on the UK's Well-being Measures Advisory Group and Eurostat interviewees reported how they are monitoring closely the ONS's piloting of subjective well-being questions in its Household Panel Survey, with a view to drawing lessons for EU surveys. Generally, our interviewees emphasized the interconnectedness of these processes and the regular exchange of ideas and practice.

In addition to officials, think tanks and statistical institutes, academics have played a crucial role in the advance of quality of life measures. Individuals from a range of disciplines, including economics, psychology, social policy and environmental studies, have helped shape ideas within policy communities. Indeed, one could argue that the quality of life concept is currently best understood as a fusion of contributions from such disciplines. Academics have been involved not just in generating ideas but also in promoting them through formal consultations on relevant advisory groups as well as through conferences and workshops. Indeed the Stiglitz–Sen Commission, which set much of the present EU agenda, was heavily populated by academics. Economists were

prominent, with specialisms such as feminist economics and welfare economics and those whose interests span other fields (international affairs, social organization, environment, behavioural science, and philosophy). However, there were also non-economists with a background in corporate responsibility, psychology and public policy.

### **The problem stream**

As noted by Kingdon (2011), the problem stream tends to be connected last and is important in providing legitimacy and thus greater scope for action. This is indeed the case here. For Kingdon, a problem can press the political agenda through a crisis or high profile event or through a shift in respected indicators. While the global financial crisis beginning in 2008 has given impetus to developments in the EU and elsewhere, they have a longer history that is partly explained by improvement in the relevant indicators, but also by environmental challenges. Thus, while for some 'GDP and Beyond' is an opportunity to use the effects of the crisis to promote the social dimension, for others it is a vehicle for advancing environmental concerns. Others are concerned that even before the crisis there was increasingly convincing evidence that growing prosperity did not increase life satisfaction. The point is that while some agreement has emerged in the EU on the need to raise the status of measures other than GDP, there is no consensus on which measures for which 'problem'.

It is interesting that while in the 1970s an economic crisis was important in diminishing the social indicators movement, important political figures have continued to support quality of life indicators in the face of the current recession. This may be because of ongoing environmental challenges or increased confidence in the relevant indicators. It may also be the political opportunity it provides for politicians and policy-makers in political systems where growth prospects are severely limited in the near future. Either way, to advance more successfully on this agenda requires the construction of a more common narrative of the problem that quality of life indicators might seek to address. Thus, the framing of the issue is crucial in getting it on to the decisional agenda (Moschella 2011; Princen 2007) and, in the EU context, the need to persuade a wide range of actors that the issue demands action at European level. In short, policy entrepreneurs need to more effectively couple the problem stream with the politics and policy streams while the window of opportunity remains open.

### **OUTSTANDING ISSUES**

In Kingdon's (2011) terms, this is an issue that has reached the 'governmental' agenda but not the decision agenda and there is some way to go before the statistical programme being developed might be used by EU policy-makers to guide policy-making. This of course requires political will, but there are also issues at the statistical level that still need to be finessed. For example, subjective well-being indicators are not as widely accepted within the statistical community as are

more objective indicators, although there is an emerging consensus that both should play a role. Agreement on this was incorporated in the Sophia Memorandum (2010) signed up to by national and international statistical institutes, including Eurostat. There is also a tension between the political need for a limited number of indicators – or indeed single indicator – that are easy to communicate, and statisticians' preference for a wider range of indicators that does not compromise the scientific integrity of data. Here is a case in point where GDP has a clear advantage politically, even though what it measures is in many respects unhelpful. Generally, though, there is preference for an approach within the EU that is close to those elsewhere, to facilitate wider comparisons of progress.

Despite these issues, the 'GDP and Beyond' communication is seen as something that could inform strategic goals for the post-2010 Lisbon Strategy, although some interviewees reported disappointment that little about quality of life is in the succeeding Europe 2020 strategy: 'this would have been a major step, giving visibility to well-being' (Interview, Eurostat official, 2011). Those social and environmental indicators within the strategy were not a consequence of the Commission communication, but part of a longer-term process of lobbying. Others thought that it was perhaps a little soon for an impact to be felt in this way. Scrivens and Iasiello (2010: 37) suggested that one lesson from the Lisbon Strategy was that:

focussing on too many indicators is ineffective; and yet narrowing the coverage of the most high-profile indicators to economic issues may have undermined the social inclusion and sustainability processes, by relegating them to parallel processes.

However, Commissioner Rehn (2011, 142) stated in March 2011 that:

Not all the issues on producing the EU 2020 indicators are clearly set ... There is a need to discuss the recent EU policy initiatives and the important role statistical indicators will play in benchmarking and monitoring the progress of these policies.

Moreover, running parallel to EU interest in wider measures of progress is a move to more evidence-based policy-making. On this, interviewees reported a shift in many Commission DGs to greater interest in monitoring, targeting and evaluation of policies. This is seen as 'fundamental' on the environmental side. As one EU Commission official (Interview, 2011) put it:

'you can't qualitatively improve greenhouse gas emissions: you need to measure them, you need to monitor them and you need to reduce them. So the goal of getting better metrics is really important in many ways.

## ANALYSIS

In building on Kingdon's (2011) contribution, EU scholars have added or emphasized a number of insights that are relevant to this analysis. Zahariadis

(2003, 2008) has emphasized the fluidity and ambiguity in EU policy-making that generally heightens the scope for policy entrepreneurs and small groups of actors to act. Princen and Rhinard (2006) have suggested that issues can emerge on the EU's agenda either from below (through officials and experts) or from above (through heads of government in the European Council). Further, Princen (2009) has identified the role of transnational policy debate as a first step for some issues, as is the case here, the next step being when EU institutions take up the issue and the final step is when the issue moves on to the decision agenda. Moreover, he emphasizes that the factors that drive the governmental agenda (step two) and the decision agenda (step three) are not identical.

Here, the issue has been pushed on to the governmental agenda from below, with officials, academics, think tanks and interest groups all contributing ideas for change. Small groups of actors including key policy entrepreneurs from both within and without the EU system have been identified as important: as Zahariadis (2008: 527) notes 'Institutions make things possible, but people make things happen'. Moreover, the fact that this issue is rising up the governmental agenda in many different settings points to the international factors that are at play here. There is also some evidence of 'venue shopping' (Baumgartner and Jones 1991; Richardson 2000), with groups such as *nef* working strategically in different political arenas simultaneously to promote the same goal. As well as signalling the importance of transnational actors and policy communities in the EU and beyond, this case adds to our knowledge on the Commission as an agenda-setter (Moschella 2011). While the issue has been fomenting in policy communities for some time, DG Environment (together with Eurostat) has advanced and provided leadership for an advocacy coalition within the EU and put the issue on to the agenda of both other Commission directorates and other EU institutions.

Within the Commission, important roles have been played by policy entrepreneurs at both a strategic and operational level. The role of Commissioner Dimas at DG Environment has been noted above, but the appointment of Walter Radermacher as Director General of Eurostat in 2008 was also seen as important by interviewees. Radermacher has a long history of promoting environmental issues while at the German Federal Statistical Office, where he worked from 1978 to 2008, latterly as its President. At an operational level, Oliver Zwirner at DG Environment was mentioned as a key player in coordinating and promoting activities with the support of DG Environment Director General Robin Miege, who represents the Commission at the OECD Environmental Policy meetings. The influence of DG Environment actors is perhaps signalled most clearly in the substantive environmental content to the indicator dimensions of the Commission communication (see above), which have a different emphasis to the broader range of dimensions set out by the Stiglitz–Sen Commission (see endnote 1).<sup>11</sup>

However, for this issue to move to the decision agenda requires a common problem definition or 'framing' of the problem, which requires more action by actors from both 'above' and 'below'. The economic crisis has pushed

the issue into the political mainstream and requires further action by policy entrepreneurs while the problem window remains open.

While Kingdon's (2011) model has provided a useful framework for analysing developments, in other ways it is limited in the EU context. It is valid in indicating that the policy stream has moved incrementally and that the problem stream is likely to be last to connect. However, in relation to the political stream, there has yet to be a lurch forward and progress has been incremental. A lurch forward may still be possible, but the nature of the institutional framework and fluid participation makes the prospect for abrupt shifts in political direction less than in national systems. When the initiative comes from 'below', a number of institutions need to be persuaded rather than a single government. Even where there is support from 'above', this involves intra-institutional bargaining among 27 member states before there is a clear signal from the Council.

The model is also helpful in highlighting the role of both structural factors (scientific advances, environmental problems and the economic crisis) and agential factors (the role of Giovannini, nee Sarkozy, Dimas and others.). In addition, in this case, as Kingdon (2011: 143) suggests, 'ideas themselves turn out to be as important as political pressure'. However, the model is less helpful in highlighting the role of the structural process and agential influences beyond the EU system but relevant to it. In short, it does not acknowledge the complexity of multi-level governance in which processes (policy, politics and problem streams) and participants operate at different territorial levels simultaneously. Moreover, while policy communities have become increasingly transnational, the politics stream often remains national (e.g., decisions on health policies). Further, problems might be defined nationally, subnationally, supranationally (EU) or internationally, which again might present a territorial mismatch with the location of policy alternatives or political authority and thus lead to inertia. Thus, the match between policy, politics and problem has to be not only temporal, but ultimately also spatial. In this respect, the search for an acceptable policy solution could promote co-operation and enhance multi-level governance

In short, sensitization to the role of territorially overarching policy communities is an important matter for the research applying Kingdon's (2011) model. Here, the literature on international policy diffusion is helpful in emphasizing the increasingly porous nature of political systems and highlights how international norms are translated into different national lexicons (True and Mintrom 2001). Focusing more specifically on policy transfer rather than diffusion, Diane Stone (2000: 7) highlights the importance of transnational policy communities of experts and professionals 'that share their expertise and information and form common patterns of understanding regarding policy through regular interaction', which can lead to emulation, learning, or an 'international policy culture'<sup>12</sup> (see also Princen 2009). In the European context more specifically, there is an extensive literature on Europeanization that explores from a range of theoretical, epistemological and methodological perspectives how domestic and international systems interact to shape ideas, discourses, politics, policies and practices (see Bache *et al.* 2012). This literature deals with a

range of relevant processes including learning, diffusion, lesson-drawing, emulation and policy transfer.

Each of these literatures has the potential to contribute to the multiple streams approach by highlighting the international processes at play and facilitating a deeper understanding of how these interact with domestic processes in shaping the agenda (domestic and international).

## CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the article, two key questions were raised in relation to agenda setting in the EU: where do issues on the EU's agenda come from and under what conditions do actors succeed in getting those issues on the agenda? In this case, the answer to the first question is that the issue has come primarily from a transnational policy community. The answer to the second question is that the propitious conditions have involved a complex mix of structural and agential factors.

At the statistical level, there is evidence that a paradigm shift may be taking place within the EU and beyond, in which GDP sits less dominantly alongside other indicators in measuring societal progress. At a political level, there is also evidence of a movement that largely transcends traditional left–right cleavages. Both statisticians and politicians take confidence from being part of an international movement, albeit one that remains somewhat under the public radar. However, while developments to date are significant, there are statistical issues to be finessed and important political advances to be made if a paradigm shift is to be witnessed at the policy level. Only then will it be convincing to describe quality of life as an idea whose time has come.

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## NOTES

- 1 While in some literatures the terms 'well-being' and 'quality of life' have specific meanings (for an overview, see Phillips [2006]), in others they do not. Moreover,

the language of politicians and policy-makers tends to elide between the two terms without there being any perceptible difference in meaning. Well-being/quality of life is understood here as being shaped by the eight dimensions identified by the Stiglitz–Sen Commission that have influenced the work of the EU and national governments: material living standards (income, consumption and wealth); health; education; personal activities including work; political voice and governance; social connections and relationships; environment (present and future conditions); insecurity, of an economic as well as a physical nature (CMEPSP 2009: 14–55).

- 2 While the most recent (fourth) edition is used here, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies* was first published in 1984.
- 3 I am grateful to the anonymous *JEPP* reviewer who made this point.
- 4 The case study is based on data from 30 semi-structured interviews conducted with policy-makers and politicians in Brussels, Luxembourg and the UK between April and September 2011. I am grateful to the University of Sheffield's Rapid Response Knowledge Transfer Scheme for funding this research.
- 5 Policy entrepreneurs are 'people who are willing to invest their resources in pushing their pet proposals or problems, are responsible not only for prompting important people to pay attention, but also for coupling solutions to problems and for coupling both problems and solutions to politics' (Kingdon 2011: 20).
- 6 Beyond monitoring progress, such indicators might also be used for informing policy design and for policy appraisal (Dolan et al. 2011: 4). On developments in the UK, see Bache and Reardon (forthcoming).
- 7 Stiglitz was Chair and Sen 'Advisor'. While commonly referred to as the Stiglitz–Sen Commission, it is also sometimes referred to as the Stiglitz Commission or the Stiglitz–Sen–Fitoussi Commission, to include reference to the co-ordinator (Jean Paul Fitoussi).
- 8 This point was made by a number of interviewees.
- 9 Spoken contribution to the conference *GDP and Beyond – Measuring Progress in a Changing World*, hosted by the European Commission, European Parliament, Club of Rome, OECD and WWF in Brussels, 19–20 September 2007, available at <http://webcast.ec.europa.eu/eutv/portal/archive.html?viewConference=7407&CatId=7371>
- 10 See note 9 above.
- 11 However, this also reflects the political realities of EU competences, which are more limited in relation to other dimensions identified by Stiglitz–Sen such as health and education.
- 12 'experts and professionals potentially become a stronger causal factor in convergence when they act as "policy entrepreneurs"' (Stone 2000: 7).

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