

Kluwer Mediation Blog

We still haven't found what we're looking for

Charlie Woods (Core Solutions Group / Scottish Universities Insight Institute) · Saturday, October 8th, 2022

Mediators work hard to help parties to a dispute to explore and understand their underlying needs and interests, which might have been forgotten or overlooked in the defence of a position that was once adopted to promote their interests.

A recent [book](#) by political scientist Krzysztof Pelc 'Beyond Self-interest – why the market rewards those that reject it' is a fascinating look at the whole question of the relationship between needs and self-interest. In essence it is about how we often achieve what we desire by not explicitly trying to achieve it – the best things in life are by-products of other activities and objectives. This is particularly the case in advanced economies when basic needs are met.

“Actions that appear disinterested often bear more fruit than those that come across as self-interested. Unintended effects are often more potent by virtue of being unintended”

He delves in to the relationship between thoughts and feelings, using J S Mill as his starting point – a rational utilitarian by training and upbringing he was also attracted to the insights offered by the intuition and passion of the romantic artists into the limits of a strictly instrumental approach to increasing overall utility.

Pelc explores the individual and societal implications. Including the need to organise society to provide sufficient income and social insurance to allow people the scope to follow their passion. He quotes JS Mill from 1848: 'it is only in the backward countries of the world that increased production is still an important object: in those most advanced what is economically needed is a better distribution'. This might also lead to wider unintended economic benefits. Indeed some [studies](#) suggest that reducing inequality can have a positive effect on growth.

At a time when economic growth is back at the centre of the political agenda in the UK, this begs the question of what growth is for. The conventional answer is allow us to pay for the important things in life (and clear up the unintended environmental and social consequences of pursuing growth).

This brings to mind the story of the businessman and the fisherman. The fisherman is happy catching sufficient fish to allow him to support his family and spend the rest of the time with his family and friends enjoying life. The businessman encourages him to work harder to grow his business so that one day he can sell it for a large profit. The fisherman asks him what he would do then, to which the businessman replies, it would allow him spend more time with his family and

friends enjoying life!

This whole issue is explored in greater depth in Robert and Edward Skidelski's [book](#) 'How much is enough?' They echo some of Pelc's observations when they conclude "*The greatest waste now confronting us is not one of money but of human possibilities*".

In many respects this is the essence of approaches that try to put the promotion of a wellbeing economy at the heart of public policy. This recognises that economic progress is not an end in itself but something that supports individual and social progress within planetary boundaries. An approach described by Kate Raworth in her [book](#) 'Doughnut Economics' and promoted by groups such as the [Wellbeing Economy Alliance](#) and the Wellbeing Economy Governments partnership, of which Scotland is a member.

One of the practical issues the wellbeing approach faces is that it is very difficult to devise an all embracing indicator (a GDP equivalent), which captures the breadth and depth of what's involved both in terms of quality and quantity, to allow overall progress to be measured. A number of attempts have been made and a further work is underway.

The Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)) are the United Nation's framework to measure progress towards its 2030 [Agenda](#) for Sustainable Development agreed by governments in 2015. They cover 17 goals and 169 individual targets encompassing economic, environmental and social objectives – demonstrating the complexity of what's involved in measuring progress on such a broad front. The 2022 [SDGs Report](#) makes for sobering reading highlighting 'cascading and interlinked crises' putting the 2030 Agenda in danger.

The value of approaches such as the SDGs are that they provide a framework for getting beneath the surface to think about underlying needs and interests and consider where there might have to be trade-offs between goals and where there might be synergies that can be exploited to make the whole greater than the sum of the parts. The downside is that by their very nature they are complex and can't be reduced to simple soundbites.

More often than not, because of its apparent simplicity, growth in GDP becomes the default metric for assessing progress in political discourse. A role that was never intended for it by those that developed it. The limitations of GDP have been known for a long time and were summarised most eloquently by Robert Kennedy in 1968 when he said it measures "*everything except that which makes life worthwhile*" – yet it is still at the forefront of public policy. This [article](#) provides an excellent overview.

The relationship between positions, goals, wants, interests and needs is complex. On the face of it we may adopt the position that we want to maximise something, say income; but to what end, what are our underlying interests, what do we really need? Taking time to dig deep to try to unravel rational thoughts and more intuitive feelings to understand what's really valued is an essential prerequisite for any course of action – this applies to both individuals and wider society. Mediation skills have a key role to play in helping us find what we're really looking for!


To make sure you do not miss out on regular updates from the Kluwer Mediation Blog, please subscribe [here](#).


Profile Navigator and Relationship Indicator

Includes 7,300+ profiles of arbitrators, expert witnesses, counsels & 13,500+ relationships to uncover potential conflicts of interest.

Learn how **Kluwer Arbitration** can support you.

Learn more about the
newly-updated
*Profile Navigator and
Relationship Indicator*



 Wolters Kluwer

This entry was posted on Saturday, October 8th, 2022 at 8:00 am and is filed under [Dialogue](#), [Economics](#), [Intuition](#), [Mediation and Society](#), [mediation process](#), [Philosophy](#), [Policy](#), [Public Policy](#), [Scotland](#), [Uncategorized](#)

You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can leave a response, or [trackback](#) from your own site.