Sustainability

Anna Coote and Andrew Percy

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Sustainability involves, at its simplest, an inherent 'capacity for continuance'[1]. That suggests a system that can function in ways that continue to achieve its desired goals over time. UBS could have positive impacts on sustainability through prevention of harm, through economic stabilisation and through helping to mitigate climate change and the depletion of natural resources.

It is hard to over-state the importance of measures that address the upstream causes of social, economic and environmental harm. Failure to do so cannot be justified on ethical or practical grounds, because of the untold human misery and incalculable costs of dealing with crises and catastrophes when things go wrong.

Preventative services not only help people to stay well and flourish; they can also reduce demand for a range of services, not just healthcare. Unemployment, anti-social behaviour, and many forms of crime, for example, have roots in poverty and deprivation, which can be significantly reduced by a more generous 'social wage'[2].

Yet paradoxically, while everyone recognises the potential benefits of prevention, it is rarely prioritized. Most public services operate in silos and remain predominantly 'downstream' operations, addressing a variety of needs and harms that are avoidable. Measures of success, as we have noted, often overlook longer-term effects, or where investment from one department yields benefits to another. Reversing this focus will require a thorough overhaul of public policy. The two basic foundations of prevention are, first, a scientific understanding of cause and effect and the possibility of prediction, and second, a capacity for controlled government intervention in social life[3]. So despite past failures, effective prevention will entail an enlarged and

more integrated role for public intervention – of which UBS is a crucial component.

Where the economy is concerned, public services can help to stabilise fluctuations by generating relatively secure employment. While they are vulnerable to cuts in government spending, they are not directly linked to downturns in the market. This applies not only to public sector bodies, but to the many non-government organisations that – in our vision of UBS – are vehicles for collective action to meet shared needs. They can be seen as part of the 'social economy', which has been described as 'an engine for social innovation, solidarity and social investment', with incentive structures that tend to support employment solidarity[4]. When times get tough, workers are more willing to trade off higher pay for collective job security. Along with the public sector bodies with which they often work in partnership, they act as a counter cyclical buffer, helping to offset the effects of market downturns and recession, contributing to the economy's 'capacity for continuance'.

The most profound threat to human flourishing is that of climate collapse and extreme environmental stress, as we have noted. The entire edifice of environmental sustainability is premised on prevention – or mitigation as it is called because some future heating of the planet cannot now be prevented. This provides strong justification for UBS.

A move towards more and better public services is likely to prove more environmentally sustainable than a market based system. For a start, UBS can play a vital role in switching the entire economy from a fixation on economic growth to a concern for human wellbeing within planetary limits. Public provisioning systems are better able than market systems to promote sustainable consumption, to coordinate sustainable practices such as active travel, resource-efficient buildings and local food procurement, and to implement national strategies for reducing GHG emissions. Where governments issue guidance, public sector organisations are more likely to comply because they share public interest values. Where public bodies work with non-government partners or sub-contractors, they can spread sustainable practices among a wider range of institutions.

There is some evidence that collectively provided services have a smaller ecological footprint than privately funded alternatives. For example, the US healthcare system directly accounts for 8 per cent of emissions in the US, compared with the UK system, where 3 per cent of emissions directly stem from the NHS. This is due both to the greater macro-efficiency and lower expenditure shares of healthcare in the UK, and to lower emissions per pound or dollar spent, which is thought to be a result of better resource allocation

and procurement practices[5]. There is also some evidence that more extensive welfare states are generally better suited to adopting and implementing pro-environmental policies, especially where they embody ideas about shared needs and collective responsibilities[6].

Public services perform important precautionary environmental and climate functions in their own right. The impact of Hurricane Katrina on the predominantly poor and black populations of Louisiana (where more than 1,500 died), in contrast to its impact on Cuba (where only two died) demonstrated the importance of collective services in dealing with climate-related risks.

Finally, public services have a vital role to play in ensuring that sustainable policies are socially just. For example, programmes to retrofit the vast bulk of the housing stock, proposed for the UK as part of a Green New Deal, will require public planning, finance and management[7]. If government can coordinate the range of services effectively, they can offset any regressive effects of climate policies (such as higher energy prices) and ensure a 'just transition' to sustainable living.

End Notes

[1]Ekins, P. (2014). 'Strong sustainability and critical natural capital', In Atkinson, G. et al. (eds). Handbook of Sustainable Development. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, p 56.

[2]Coote, A. (2015). 'People, Planet Power: towards a new social settlement'. London: NEF, p.19.

[3]Freeman, R. (1992). 'The idea of prevention: A critical review'. In Scott, S.J. et al. (eds). Private Risks and Public Dangers. Aldershot: Avebury.; Gough, I. (2015), 'The political economy of prevention'. British Journal of Political Science, 45 (2): 307–327

[4]Op cit, Independent Commission on Sustainable Equality, p. 74-5.

[5]Gough, I. (2017). Heat, Greed and Human Need. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, p.163.

[6]Gough, I. et al. (2008). 'Climate change and social policy: A symposium'. Journal of European Social Policy, 18 (4), p. 325–344 .

[7]Green New Deal Group. (2008). 'A Green New Deal'. London: NEF, p.3.