



The Wisdom of Prevention

Long-term planning, upstream investment and early action to prevent harm

The **cover image** shows the John Snow memorial and public house on Broadwick Street in London. Snow's study of the 1854 cholera outbreak in the area mapped the incidence of the disease, tracing the origin of the epidemic back to a single water pump. This discovery confirmed his then contested hypothesis that cholera is a waterborne disease. The day after he reported his findings to the Board of St James's Parish, the pump's handle was removed, shutting off the problem at its source.

John Snow moved the focus upstream, tackling the root of the problem, preventing, rather than curing disease. He is now considered to be the father of epidemiology.

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Executive Summary

Preventing harm is the wise option, adopted far too rarely. More often, we wait until things go wrong and end up coping with the consequences, which is costly and unsustainable.

We must get better at preventing harm – to people, planet and the economy. This calls for long-term planning, upstream investment and early action. It will improve people's quality of life, make better use of public money, reduce the need for costly state services and help to safeguard the future. Preventing harm is essential if we are to make the 'Great Transition' to a sustainable future.

To build an economy that serves the interests of people and the planet, by promoting well-being and sustainable social justice for all, we have to understand why things go wrong, and tackle the underlying causes of harm – for example:

- For society: tackling the underlying causes of poverty, unemployment, ill-health, illiteracy and homelessness, reducing crime and social conflict, insecurity and distrust, and cutting the need for hospitals, prisons and income support.
- For the environment: cutting greenhouse gas emissions and the risks of climate change, safeguarding natural resources and stopping pollution of air, land and water.
- For the economy: regulating financial institutions to prevent speculation, investing in good jobs and renewable energy, taxing polluters and discouraging carbon-intensive production.

There are different levels of prevention:

- 'Downstream' measures try to cope with the consequences of harm and focus on specific cases, to stop things getting worse.
- 'Midstream' measures aim to mitigate the effects of harm that has already happened and focus on groups and other things considered 'at risk' or 'vulnerable'.
- 'Upstream' measures aim to prevent harm before it occurs and usually focus on whole populations and systems.

Sometimes, prevention is needed on all three levels. But 'downstream' intervention should be a last resort. Without tackling the underlying causes of harm, 'midstream' and 'downstream' measures will have little or no lasting effect.

The causes of harm – and the benefits of preventing it – are mutually reinforcing

The underlying causes of harm in society, the environment and economy are often strongly linked and can be mutually reinforcing. So adopting a preventative approach can bring multiple benefits. Examples include encouraging active modes of travel such as walking and cycling, and insulating homes against the cold. These can yield social, environmental and economic dividends.

The case for prevention is increasingly urgent

Climate change is threatening catastrophic damage to the natural environment. Social inequalities are widening. The neoliberal paradigm for managing the economy is in crisis and threatening the future of the welfare state.

Bottom-up prevention is best, but only with enough support

Prevention works best when it involves change from the bottom up: people and organisations acting for themselves, becoming more resilient and less vulnerable. But action at this level needs strong support to tackle the political, economic and cultural factors that have helped to cause the harm in the first place. People need information, education, advocacy and strong leadership to understand and act upon the wisdom of prevention.

There are formidable barriers to change

The logic of prevention seems to contradict the ‘rescue principle’ that defines philanthropy, charity and most health care. People who want to do good in the world are committed to helping those who are already needy. They may see upstream measures as a diversion. To tackle this problem we must change professional cultures, build up skills, knowledge and experience, and challenge the ethics of failing to prevent harm.

Rescue and cure tend to have immediate, tangible and measurable results, while preventative measures are long-term, more complex and harder to measure. This creates a political bias against shifting the balance of investment upstream. Meanwhile, the neo-liberal consensus favours maximum freedom for markets and minimum state intervention. At the very moment when we most need to move upstream, for social, environmental and economic reasons, the ideas that shape our economy and politics are still pulling strongly in the opposite direction. This is unsustainable.

But now is the best time for change

There is mounting evidence that unfettered markets are failing. Dissenting voices are growing stronger and more plentiful. Now is the time to put the wisdom of prevention at the heart of a new political economy. Change will need to be steady and incremental, winning public confidence through dialogue and partnership at every stage. We must take every opportunity to raise awareness, to show the benefits of early action and build up the evidence base. If we fail, we risk losing the capacity to cope with the consequences of harm.

Introduction

Imagine yourself standing on the banks of a fast-flowing river. The water is full of children, women and men who are being swept along, in danger of drowning. You and others are working yourselves to a state of exhaustion, trying to haul them to dry land before they are carried out of reach. It is unrelenting hard work and more and more of you are needed because more and more bodies are caught in the current, hurtling past. You are all so preoccupied with the task that you can barely think. But at some point, someone must surely ask – what’s going on upstream? Shouldn’t we find out why all these people are falling in and try to stop it happening?

This is a well-worked metaphor for much of the British welfare state. Almost all our resources and energies are devoted to dealing with problems once they have occurred, rather than with stopping them happening in the first place. This paper examines the case for moving upstream to prevent harm. It contributes to emerging discussions in UK policy about the benefits of early action. In March 2012, Iain Duncan Smith put ‘prevention and early intervention’ at the top of his social justice agenda¹, pointing out that the Government is spending £25 billion a year on the consequences of social breakdown and a pittance on its underlying causes.²

On the surface, being in favour of preventing harm is like being against sin. It has also been described as ‘a category-shifting, mind-changing idea.’³ We begin by setting out what prevention entails, then explain why it matters, especially now. We examine barriers in the way of making such a shift and consider what can be done to overcome them.

Society, environment, economy

This analysis takes a broad perspective across the three spheres of society, environment and economy. It starts from the premise that these spheres are inextricably linked and interdependent; that lessons can be learned by examining the differences and similarities between them; that they must be addressed together in order to plan for a sustainable future; and that planning for a sustainable future – and working to deliver it – is an urgent necessity.

At **nef** (the new economics foundation), we call this the ‘Great Transition’: getting from where we are today – with widening inequalities, accelerating climate change, depleting natural resources and a deepening slump in the economies of the rich world – to where we want

to be. What we want is a strong healthy and just society, a flourishing economy that treasures and protects the natural environment and a secure legacy for future generations. To make this transition, we must use our shared resources much more wisely, by shifting the balance of investment and expenditure away from curing and repairing towards preventing harm across society, environment and economy.

Positive, not negative

This is a positive move. It has four major advantages. First, it helps to maintain and improve the quality of people's lives and to create favourable conditions for building human capabilities. Secondly, it makes more efficient use of public resources, ending wasteful expenditure and saving tax revenues for dealing with unavoidable risks. Thirdly, it reduces the need for costly and intensive state intervention to cope with 'downstream' problems such as avoidable ill-being, conflict and disorder, environmental damage and economic dysfunction. And fourthly it helps to safeguard the future for our children and grandchildren. It has been described as a 'ready for anything society' characterised by "enabling services" ... that build capability, equip us to flourish, protect us from harm, prepare us for change, enable us all to be ready for everything.⁴ Prevention isn't needless interference or 'nannying'. It is a liberating force and a source of long-term security.

What prevention entails

Our proposition is that more should be done to prevent harm to society, the environment and the economy. If ‘harm’ is the negative, what are the positives that we wish to protect? A central tenet of **nef** is that we must develop an economy that serves the interests of people and the planet, rather than leaving people and the planet to the mercy of a self-serving economy. A key goal is *well-being for all*.

We understand ‘well-being’ as feeling good physically and mentally and being able to function in the world: it describes people’s emotions, their sense of competence and connection to others. But what matters particularly here are those two words ‘for all’. Our goal is to create the conditions for everyone to enjoy well-being, regardless of background or circumstances. This means building an equality of opportunity that is profound rather than shallow – depending not only on rules against unfair discrimination, but also on proactive fairness. We call this *sustainable social justice*, meaning the fair and equitable distribution of social, environmental and economic resources between people, places and generations.

In a social policy context, the aim is to prevent avoidable harm or disadvantage that undermines or diminishes well-being for all and sustainable social justice. It’s about introducing measures that reduce or eliminate such risks as poverty, unemployment, illness, illiteracy and homelessness. For William Beveridge in 1942, these were the ‘five giants’ to be vanquished by the post-war welfare state: ‘want, idleness, disease, ignorance and squalor’.⁵ It was clear then, as it is today, that economic strategies are required to meet social objectives. Successful preventative measures can do more than improve the individual’s quality of life. They bring broader benefits by preventing harm to relationships across society (for example by reducing the fear of crime or the likelihood of social unrest). They also prevent needs that would give rise to costly curative or corrective interventions (such as more hospitals, prisons and income support).

Reading across to the environment, the aim is to prevent damage and safeguard natural resources so that the environment can continue to support human well-being, not just now but for future generations. Preventative policies include measures to protect the rain forests, safeguard fish stocks, recycle materials instead of dumping them and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to mitigate climate change. The

problem here is that there is too little implementation, too late, as GHG emissions and global temperatures continue to escalate.

Where the economy is concerned, one aim is to prevent the kinds of dysfunction that have brought on the slump: too much consumer indebtedness, too much lending by banks with too little security, too much global speculation through complex financial instruments, too much profiteering and too little sound investment. Regulating financial institutions to reduce speculation can be seen as a preventative measure. A more fundamental challenge is to turn the economy around so that it is geared to encouraging things that are good for people and the planet (such as safe, satisfying and rewarding jobs, efficient use of energy and renewable materials) and penalising things that are bad (poor working conditions, carbon intensive production, air pollution). This can be done through taxation and regulation, by investing public resources in sustainable production and by fair distribution. Arguably, there is a further step: to prevent hegemonic ideas about what makes the economy tick from getting in the way of moving upstream to prevent harm (of which more later).

Layers of prevention

In all three spheres – society, environment and economy – there are different levels of prevention, depending on how far upstream we go to address the underlying causes of harm. Those familiar with health policy will be aware of the distinction between primary, secondary and tertiary levels of intervention. These broadly distinguish between

1. **Upstream interventions** that aim to prevent harm before it occurs, which usually address whole populations and systems;
2. **Midstream interventions** to address harm that has already occurred to mitigate the effects, which are usually targeted at groups or areas considered 'at risk';
3. **Downstream interventions** to cope with the consequences of harm that has not – or cannot be – avoided, which are concerned with specific cases.

These distinctions do not map directly on to the policy landscape in other areas, although there are some similar patterns. Policies aimed at adapting to climate change (such as putting in flood defences to stave off rising sea levels) can be seen as a downstream curative approach, where policies and resources are focused on coping with harm that could have been, but has not been, avoided. Bank bail-outs may also be seen as a wasteful, downstream cure for an avoidable problem that began much further upstream. These examples are a matter of judgement, not science.

Thinking about the different levels of prevention helps us to consider not just the immediate causes of harm, but the causes of the causes: the links between underlying systems and structures on the one hand, and attitudes and activities on the other. When we 'excavate and uproot the causes of problems',⁶ we are compelled to consider how far upstream it is necessary and feasible to move. We also find that upstream economic

measures provide an essential underpinning to prevention of social and environmental harm. Table 1 below is purely illustrative.

Table 1. Examples of different levels of prevention

Policy area	Downstream	Midstream	Upstream
Society	<p>Vascular surgery to prevent stroke</p> <p>Double mastectomy for women with a high genetic risk of breast cancer.</p> <p>Programme to help truanting children to take or retake exams.</p> <p>Hostels for young teenagers who have run away from home that combine shelter with support and help with education, employment and other problems.</p>	<p>GP-prescribed exercise for overweight patients</p> <p>Parenting classes for families considered 'vulnerable'</p> <p>After-hours homework for children from 'problematic' backgrounds</p> <p>Community-based rehabilitation for first-time offenders</p> <p>Programmes aimed at preventing misuse of drugs and alcohol</p>	<p>Anti-poverty strategies and measures to reduce socio-economic inequalities</p> <p>Free, universal, high-quality education, childcare and other essential services</p> <p>Ban on smoking in public places</p> <p>Immunisation and screening</p>
Environment	<p>Carbon capture and storage for emissions from coal-fired power stations and other large-scale geo-engineering projects that aim to manage, for example, radiation and ocean acidification (although the effects of such projects are so far unproven).</p>	<p>Finding ways to make the most efficient use of these new forms of green energy.</p>	<p>Investment in very low and zero carbon technologies, including all sustainable means of producing and applying renewable energy and recycling waste.</p>
Economy	<p>Quantitative easing and other measures that aim to help a sick economy from falling into a deeper recession.</p>	<p>Separating retail from investment banking and creating networks of banks that serve the needs of low-income neighbourhoods.</p>	<p>Investing public resources in education, health, employment and income security, in building human capabilities, in decarbonising production, in home insulation, public transport and the development of renewable energy.</p>

World Bank analysis

A comparable analysis has been adopted by the World Bank. Reporting on 'risk management' in approaching 'social protection in a globalising world',⁷ it acknowledges the importance of 'moving away from unproductive coping strategies to ex-ante planning and mechanisms to help households anticipate and insure against' shocks. As examples of shock, it cites 'drought, cyclones, floods, conflict, terms of trade, policy reforms, [ill-]health, unemployment, etc' and the objectives it seeks are 'accelerated poverty reduction and sustained economic and social development'.

The World Bank report distinguishes between 'prevention', 'mitigation' and 'coping' strategies. Prevention, accordingly, reduces the probability of an adverse risk occurring, while mitigation reduces the impact of a probable future risk, and coping attempts to lessen the impact of risks that have occurred. These are mapped against different kinds of risk and vulnerability, and different risk management strategies, which are categorised as 'informal, market-based and public arrangements'. Throughout, the World Bank recognises that social risks are profoundly influenced by environmental and economic conditions, and that 'downstream' arrangements for dealing with risk are wasteful and often counter-productive.

Vertical integration: combining levels of intervention

There is no single formula for preventing harm, especially for those who are already at risk or have already experienced harm. Consider the example of people described as having 'multiple social needs'. In their case, preventing harm will involve addressing the particular relationships between homelessness, substance misuse, unemployment and mental ill-health – and understanding how these can be mutually reinforcing. This requires detailed, customised work to unpick the immediate, harmful dynamics between the different factors and to begin to create conditions that will eventually enable the individuals concerned to flourish.

And then there is the challenge of stopping those who have single or incipient needs from developing multiple needs. Moving upstream to tackle the 'causes of the causes' will not – at least for a very long time – reduce demand for what David Robinson calls 'prompt interventions at the cliff edge'. These are intended to 'pick up the first signs of difficulty and respond to them, targeting services at individuals, families and communities with identified problems which, if not forestalled, could, in many cases, lead to more serious difficulties.' If they fail, 'late action' or downstream intervention becomes essential, although, as Robinson notes, this is 'in every sense, a last resort'.⁸

Focusing on the different levels of prevention helps to shed light on the futility of investing exclusively in late action. The logic of downstream prevention is that people at risk or in trouble have become *the problem*: their lives are the territory over which battles are fought to change behaviour. Yet they rarely if ever have any chance to control the factors that shaped their problems in the first place. As Michael Marmot shows in his classic work on health inequalities, the primary causes of most social problems can be traced to the same bundle of issues: material poverty combined with a poverty of opportunity and aspiration, locked in by class, culture and location.⁹

Graham Allen and Iain Duncan Smith have called for 'early intervention' to turn around the lives of families caught in cycles of deprivation.¹⁰ These are exemplified by Allen as 'Sharon', a young single mother, who asks her MP for help with 'housing and child support problems', only to be followed sixteen years later by her daughter 'Tracey' who submits an identical request.¹¹ Their proposed strategy starts with a 'pre-natal package' to prepare mother and father for parenthood, including listening

and communications skills, and moves through a post-natal ‘nurse/family partnership’ and Sure Start children’s centres, to primary school follow-on programmes, anti-drug and alcohol programmes, and pre-conception ‘skilling’ for secondary school students.¹² Notably, this is a package of *social* policies aimed at solving a package of *social* problems. It does not attempt to address the ‘causes of the causes’. If it is to succeed, it will have to prevail over external circumstances such as chronic unemployment, government spending cuts, housing shortages, diminishing public services and widening inequalities of income and wealth.

The point is not that downstream (or mid-stream) intervention is unnecessary. All too often it is essential. But without primary prevention, secondary and tertiary measures will have only limited scope or short-term success, because they will be confounded by factors further upstream that remain undisturbed.

Horizontal integration: across the three spheres

The further upstream we look to prevent harm, the more keenly we become aware of the interdependence of society, environment and economy. The underlying causes of ill-health, for example, are strongly influenced by economic factors. In his strategic review of health inequalities in England, Michael Marmot concludes that prevention requires an integrated, whole-systems approach.

‘...social and economic inequalities underpin the determinants of health: the range of interactive factors that shape health and well-being. These include: material circumstances, the social environment, psychosocial factors, behaviours and biological factors. In turn, these factors are influenced by social position, itself shaped by education, occupation, income, gender, ethnicity and race. All these influences are affected by the socio-political and cultural and social context in which they sit.’¹³

Marmot also recognises that climate change carries major risks for human health, and greater risks for those who are already poor and powerless. A growing body of evidence shows that poor health is closely correlated with a polluted environment, inadequate diet due to shortages or too much overly processed food, and lack of access to green space and opportunities for physical exercise. These are all aspects of the natural environment.

Resource depletion, pollution of air, land and water, huge increases in greenhouse gas emissions – these are all examples of preventable but un-prevented damage to the natural environment. They are leading to global warming, rising sea levels, weather extremes, droughts, floods, extinction of species, crop failures and famines – causing people to lose their health, homes and livelihoods. The state of the natural environment matters a great deal for health and well-being – in the short, medium and long term.

This point is emphasised in Forum for the Future’s ‘Framework for a sustainable economy’, which begins with environmental boundaries – the world’s finite and essential resources – and then describes social

conditions 'necessary to support a complex, flourishing, global civilisation.' A sustainable economy must work within these 'boundaries' and 'conditions'. They are not 'optional aspirations', but limits that must be respected if people are to 'develop their full potential and lead productive, creative lives', now and in generations to come. Indeed, if current policies on agriculture, water, energy and environment remain unchanged, almost half the world's population (47 per cent) will be living under severe water stress by 2030, and 1.2 billion people will still lack access to energy services.¹⁴

Generally, those who are the least responsible for causing such problems are most likely to suffer from their effects. Rich countries and rich people within rich and poor countries are responsible for an overwhelming majority of GHG emissions and natural resource depletion. 'Unsustainable forms of development are not evenly distributed across the world.'¹⁵ The damage may take place in India, China or Brazil, but the demand comes from the high-rolling consumerism of the rich West. For example, in the UK consumption-based greenhouse gas emissions (from goods that are largely imported) are 50 per cent greater than those based on production within the UK.¹⁶

The forces of production and consumption that drive the catastrophic exploitation of the natural environment are embedded in the global economy. This underlines the case for an integrated approach. We are unlikely to move towards environmental sustainability unless we develop much more compatible and supportive ways of managing money and markets.

Multiple dividends

Moving upstream and linking the social, environmental and economic spheres will open up opportunities not only for understanding better the 'causes of the causes' but also for achieving synergistic benefits: two or three advantages gained as a result of one intervention. As Michael Marmot argues, tackling the underlying causes of health inequalities 'will have multiple benefits that extend beyond the reduction of health inequalities.'¹⁷

Here are two examples of how upstream prevention can bring multiple benefits across the three spheres. The first is encouraging 'active' modes of travel such as walking and cycling. This comes with the crucial proviso that all such measures cater for people on low incomes no less than for the mobile middle-classes. More active travel will cut down on greenhouse gas emissions, as people make less use of motorised transport, and reduce air pollution. As it becomes easier – safer, more congenial, more normal – people will take more exercise, which is good for their mental and physical health, reducing the volume of illness that requires money spent on treatment and care. It will help to reduce levels of obesity, which is more prevalent among low-income groups and is a large and growing cause of NHS expenditure.¹⁸ In addition, it will usually cost people less to travel, reducing the amount of money they need to get by each week. Social, environmental and economic benefits.

The second example is insulating homes against the cold. This is a labour intensive activity so, if done on a sufficient scale, it creates plenty of new jobs – skilled and unskilled. It promises to reduce the need for winter fuel allowances that cost taxpayers some £3 billion a year.¹⁹ It protects people from cold-related illness, which is good for their well-being. That reduces demand for health services, so it helps safeguard public resources for meeting unavoidable needs for treatment. It cuts the amount of energy that is used to heat homes – domestic energy accounts for 26 per cent of UK carbon emissions²⁰ – shrinking the carbon footprint and helping to mitigate climate change. And consequently it cuts domestic fuel bills, making it easier for people, especially those who are poor, to make ends meet. Social, environmental and economic benefits.

Why the case is urgent

Preventing harm to society, the environment and the economy is more important than ever now, and is central to **nef**'s ambition for a 'Great Transition' to a sustainable future.

Environmental reasons

First, it is intensely urgent that we tackle global warming and resource depletion. Consumption based emissions in the UK have been estimated as just over 13.5 tonnes of CO₂ per capita.²¹ In order to prevent global temperatures rising more than 2 degrees centigrade above pre-industrial levels, this needs to be cut to 2 tonnes per person per year. A rise of two degrees is dangerous enough; anything higher would be disastrous. This calls for a massive reduction in emissions.

Lord Stern, leading climate change economist, has famously attributed climate change to 'the greatest market failure the world has seen'.²² He estimated, in the Stern Review presented to government 2006,²³ that we would need to reach a stabilisation target for greenhouse gas emissions of 550 equivalent parts per million by 2050. But that could mean temperatures rising as high as 5.3 degrees centigrade above pre-industrial levels. By 2009 he revised his estimate downwards on the ground that 'Five degrees is absolutely enormous':

It would redraw the physical geography of the world. Large parts of the world would become desert, including most of southern Europe and the southern part of France. Other areas would be inundated. You'd see massive movements of population. If we've learnt anything from the last 200 to 300 years, it is that big movements of population have a high probability of conflict. This isn't a black swan, a small probability of a big problem: this is a big probability of a big problem.²⁴

Measures put into practice so far are barely scratching the surface. We need to shift to renewable sources of energy, use less of it, and promote 'green' productivity. We must change patterns of consumption that stimulate carbon-intensive production and resource depletion in other countries – where the goods we buy are made. If we care about the toxic legacy we are preparing for future generations, we must give much higher priority to preventing catastrophic damage to the natural environment.

Social reasons

Secondly, social inequalities are wide and growing wider, within and between countries and regions of the world. In OECD countries today, the average income of the richest 10 per cent of the population is about 9 times that of the poorest 10 per cent – a ratio of 9 to 1. In the UK that ratio rises to 10 to 1,²⁵ and the chances of children from poor backgrounds moving out of poverty and disadvantage are slimmer than they have been for half a century. Inequalities are not only bad news for the poor, but are shown to diminish the quality of life of all social groups. Levels of ill-health, social disorder and crime are lower across the social spectrum in more egalitarian societies.²⁶

For evidence of the hopelessness of tackling inequalities without addressing the upstream causes, we need look no further than the record of New Labour in government. It made some valiant efforts – Sure Start, the minimum wage, child tax credits. But at the end of its time in office, inequalities of income and wealth were no narrower and social mobility no less sluggish than at the beginning. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the poorest 10 per cent experienced lower-than-average growth while the richest 10 per cent saw very strong income growth, especially at the end of the decade, when the incomes of the top 1 per cent rose by a full 13 per cent in a single year. Labour's extra spending on benefits and tax credits, according to the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS), only served to slow the growth in inequality. It could not halt inequality growth altogether, nor was it enough to meet child poverty targets.²⁷

To meet our objectives of sustainable social justice and well-being for all, there is an increasingly urgent case for moving upstream to tackle the underlying political and economic causes of extremities of wealth, poverty and disadvantage.

Economic reasons

Thirdly, the neo-liberal paradigm for running the economy has reached an unprecedented crisis. The notion that markets are ultimately self-correcting and should as far as possible be left alone by governments, is untenable. Yet this idea has become increasingly powerful and hegemonic over the last three decades, even surviving the collapse of financial institutions in 2008. Apparently, most governments still hope that markets will recover and return to 'business as usual'.

It doesn't look likely that policies adopted to address the recession – at least in the UK – are going to be a wild success. There are no signs that punishing austerity measures, privatisation of public resources, and minimal controls over plundering financial markets – are bringing on an economic recovery. Evidence of this failure is mounting daily. It is time to turn attention to the upstream causes of failure: to bring about, in the words of Lord Turner, chair of the Financial Services Authority, 'a paradigm shift in political economy'.²⁸

And since we are concerned with the interdependence of society, environment and economy, we must also ask whether returning the

economy to 'business as usual', even if possible, would be desirable. Leading environmental economist Professor Tim Jackson argues persuasively that continuing economic growth in the developed world would make it impossible to meet treaty obligations for carbon reduction, unless we abandoned any attempt to achieve greater global equity. However hard we try, he says, we cannot decarbonise the economy thoroughly enough or fast enough to offset the effects of growth on greenhouse gas emissions and global warming, unless we expect poorer countries to cease their efforts to catch up with the West.²⁹ Jackson argues that, in countries such as the UK, a flourishing, prosperous economy is one where success is measured by sustainability rather than by growth.

This brings us back to society and what can be done to promote social justice and well-being for all. The welfare state was built on the premise of continuing economic growth. Without growth, we shall have to think differently about how to develop a modern welfare system: using our shared resources wisely, preventing harm where possible, investing in measures that promote and sustain well-being for all, and staunching the flow of money spent on avoidable cure and repair. We shall have to treat the economy differently too: not as an end in itself, but as a means to an end. As Forum for the Future argues, that end should be 'the net wellbeing of human societies'.³⁰

In each of the three interlinked spheres – social, environmental and economic – preventing harm is more urgent than ever. Downstream isn't working: we have to move upstream if we want to make the 'Great Transition' to a sustainable future.

People and power

Preventing harm is not exclusively about top-down measures. The World Bank refers to three levels of activity: informal, market-based and public arrangements for managing risk (that is, action by people, by businesses and by governments). It acknowledges the value of the latter – state interventions – when the other two are absent, excluded or ineffectual. Preventing harm is arguably most effective when it involves change from the bottom up: people and organisations becoming more resilient: building up their own immune systems, both literally and metaphorically, so that they become less susceptible to harm; changing attitudes and capabilities so that they are better able to withstand harm by taking positive actions themselves.

Ideally, the process of preventing harm is profoundly participative and runs through all the different layers of intervention. However, there are two important caveats. The first is that efforts to build resilience among individuals and groups, however participative the process, are unlikely to enjoy much immediate success or longer-term sustainability unless systems and structures are also changed so that they support and reinforce that resilience.

Here is one example: smoking. A universal ban on smoking in public places helps to change attitudes and to reduce the amount that people smoke. Nicotine patches help individuals who are addicted to give up. But what about mothers with small children who continue to smoke at home? Professor Hilary Graham famously demonstrated that these women went on smoking because it was the only thing that gave them a little bit of control, a small but precious sense of reward, time out and relief from stress in an otherwise relentless daily life, in which they controlled nothing, had no reward and no free time.³¹ So telling mothers it is bad for their babies adds to the stress and won't help them stop smoking. It may even make it harder for them. Only when they become the prime movers in identifying how their lives can be improved and taking action to realise goals they have set themselves will there be a chance of breaking a destructive habit. But they can't do this on their own or even together in groups. They will need to engage with those who have power to change the causes of the causes: for instance, lack of opportunity, poor housing conditions, a sense of powerlessness, poverty. This implies more sharing of responsibility between citizens and state, with government acting as 'an enabler of locally led action'.³² Preventing harm is personal *and* political, behavioural *and* structural.

The second caveat is that it is doubtful whether people will grasp the nettle of prevention firmly or fast enough through democratic consensus. Even if the logic of moving upstream is clear and compelling, the practical issues involved are complex and uncomfortable, requiring far-sightedness and even some personal forfeiture. So while the *processes* of preventing harm may well be more effective if they are participative, especially in the social sphere, the *politics* of prevention offers a formidable challenge to democracy, perhaps especially where the environment is concerned. Without information, education, advocacy and strong leadership – globally as well as nationally – voting majorities could hinder rather than help to propel the move upstream.

Further challenges

An upheaval of priorities towards long-term planning, upstream investment and early action to prevent harm is likely to encounter resistance on several fronts. In the social sphere, the logic of prevention may seem to threaten the 'rescue principle' that defines philanthropy as well as most health care. Doctors, nurses, social workers, charity workers, faith groups, philanthropic funders – all these great battalions of people who want to do good in the world are programmed to haul bodies out of the water: the sick, the hungry, the poor, the homeless, the disabled, the 'problem families', the people with 'multiple needs', the abused and neglected children, the old and frail, the lonely and isolated. For many of the great battalions, helping the needy is the whole point of the job. It's in their mission statement or their charitable objectives. It would seem a dereliction to divert efforts from so many immediate, tangible, urgent cries for help. It would take a different set of skills and motivations. It may even smack of politics.

Overcoming this kind of resistance means tackling professional culture and status, changing attitudes, hierarchies, incentives and regulatory regimes. It is partly about skills and experience: changing the way people are trained and deployed. It's certainly about opening minds and building knowledge. Inevitably, it's about having enough resources to achieve the upstream momentum. And, crucially, it is about challenging the ethical implications of clinging to the status quo. When does one cross the line between practicing one's profession to the best of one's ability, and securing one's own employment, income, identity and status by doing nothing to prevent the needs that one is trained to meet?

This leads to another barrier: the difficulty of knowing whether something is making a difference. If you give an arthritic patient a hip operation, you have an immediate, tangible result that you can measure. The same goes for most downstream activities. Move upstream, for example to encourage healthy eating and exercise to prevent arthritis, and it takes much longer for interventions to have an effect. The causal pathways become more complex and indistinct, creating what David Robinson has called 'the evaluation bias against the earliest action'.³³

When William Beveridge planned a free national health service, he saw it as a fundamental upstream investment that would help prevent illness and therefore reduce expenditure on healthcare in future. He couldn't foresee the complex ways in which, over time, new technologies, profit-driven pharmaceutical companies, powerful professional interests and

an ageing population would fuel expectations and demands, driving up costs inexorably.

It is much easier, especially in these days of 'evidence-based policy making', to make the case for investing public or charitable funds in interventions where the outcomes are certain, and measurable benefits can be reaped in the near future. MPs want to show their voters that their policies deliver clear results about things that really matter to them, before the next election. The political cycle, leaning heavily towards short-term crowd-pleasing, puts a heavy brake on the longer-term ambitions of preventing harm.

And there is, inevitably, a serious clash of interests when it comes to allocating resources. If we need – as of course we do – to keep on hauling the bodies out of the river, how can we find the money to do the extra work that is needed to stop them falling in upstream? Less than five per cent of the £110 billion annual budget for health is spent on public health and health promotion. That is a mere drop in the ocean of the national health budget. And yet this pitiful allocation is part of the reason why health care gobbles up more and more of taxpayers' money.

The voting public have a long-standing love affair with the rescue and cure component of the NHS. White coats and stethoscopes, flashing blue lights, emergency rooms. Open heart surgery, MRI scanners, trolleys being rushed along corridors. In fact what is eating up the healthcare budget is not all that life-saving heroism, but the unglamorous daily grind of processing people with largely avoidable chronic conditions – obesity, diabetes, arthritis, asthma, hypertension, depression to name but a few. Effective upstream intervention would cost far less than coping with these conditions once they have set in. It would call upon other budgets – for education, housing, transport, work and benefits for example. But there is a problem with timing.

For political and humanitarian reasons, there would have to be increased investment in upstream measures without much noticeable decrease in downstream measures. When we consider how rescue and cure tend to have immediate, tangible and measurable results, while upstream measures are long-term, less concrete, less predictable and harder to measure, the odds seem stacked against shifting the balance of investment upstream.

In the environmental sphere, there are competing claims here too. However, these are not between urgent necessities – treating and preventing ill-being – but between taking action to mitigate intangible future harms and a more comfortable inertia: turning a blind eye, carrying on spending and consuming, hoping to continue with 'business as usual'.

This brings us to the last barrier for discussion here: the economy. For the last three decades, since the early Reagan and Thatcher years, our lives, opportunities and politics, have been shaped by increasingly strong assumptions about what's good for the economy and therefore what's good for us. This is the almost indestructible notion that markets must be free; left to their own devices, they will create wealth for us all to

enjoy. Governments are there to facilitate the free functioning of markets but the less state interference, the better.

The neo-liberal counter revolution overturned the Keynesian post-war consensus, which sought to modify the play of market forces to build a healthy, well educated, secure and productive workforce. The neo-liberals shifted the co-ordinates, so that instead of there being reciprocity of benefits between people and markets, orchestrated by the state, markets took a dominant position. Political differences between left and right dissolved in the heat of this free-market romance. Public services have come to be seen on all sides as a drag on the economy. Market rules – choice and competition – are the driving forces in public sector reform. People are consumers before they are citizens. The ideas of shared interests and solidarity have given way to individualism and personalisation. The state is too big and must be cut back (yet the banks are too big and must be bailed out).

On the social side, state intervention has been reduced to identifying 'vulnerable' groups and trying to build their 'resilience'. The problem, as we have noted, is the poor, rather than the causes of poverty. Businesses are called in to help 'nudge' individuals into changing their behaviour. But nothing must be done to interfere with markets, or to challenge the economic and power relations that create and entrench both privilege and disadvantage.

The scale and force of the neo-liberal paradigm cannot be underestimated. Concerns about the natural environment were never very strong and are now in danger of being trampled underfoot in the desperate pursuit of economic 'recovery'. Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne, in his Autumn Statement to Parliament in 2011, criticised the 'burden' of 'endless social and environmental goals', rejecting anything that might inconvenience 'doing whatever it takes...to build the foundations of future growth.'³⁴ Jonathon Porritt commented shortly afterwards: 'We find ourselves in some terminal zero-sum game: we either combat the grim consequences of global recession, or we get to grips with climate change and a host of other sustainability issues. But not, apparently, both at the same time.'³⁵

Prevailing ideas about what makes the economy tick and grow contradict the logic of prevention. No to putting people and the planet first. No to state intervention. No to public investment except in measures directly intended to grow the economy. Haul the bodies out of the river, but at your own expense, please, and in your own time: we call it the 'Big Society'. In other words, at the very moment when we most need to move upstream, for social, environmental and economic reasons, the ideas that shape our politics are still pulling strongly in the opposite direction. As Forum for the Future has argued, the very values on which we build governance and our interactions on a global scale are unsustainable.³⁶

Overcoming the barriers

What can we hope for? The evidence that unfettered markets are failing is mounting steadily and dissident voices are growing stronger – from senior economists to street-level protests. A new consensus may be building that we can find better ways to manage money and markets; that we can reorder our priorities in favour of people and the planet. This is how one commentator describes the ‘Occupy’ movement:

...simply the kid in the fairy tale, saying what everyone knows but has, until now, been afraid to say – the emperor has no clothes – we have system failure. They’ve given focus to what people were already seeing and feeling; that our problem is not just debt, or inequality, or a recession, or corporate influence or ecological damage. It’s the whole package – the system is profoundly broken and beyond incremental reform.³⁷

The neo-liberal consensus may be the biggest barrier to prevention at present. But it is possible that we are approaching a watershed – where we shed one set of discredited ideas and start to build a new one – and this may provide a timely opportunity for moving upstream. It is time for a paradigm shift and there is now a chance, which we haven’t had in the last 30 years, to make sure that preventing harm across the three spheres is at the heart of a new political economy.

The social, environmental and economic problems that beset us today are grave and urgent, calling for big ideas and bold strategies. It would be a mistake to let the magnitude of the challenge overwhelm or paralyse us, so that it just becomes another barrier (‘it’s all too much, what difference can we possibly make?’) The ‘Great Transition’ will need strong political will and leadership to drive the change. The pace must be steady. However, it can only be achieved incrementally, winning public confidence through dialogue and partnership at every stage.

While we move upstream, there are countless small and medium-sized objectives we can set ourselves along the way that are well worth pursuing for their own sake and that will also contribute to the transition. One is to generate discussion among those who are involved in rescue and cure, to raise awareness about the upstream causes of the problems they are trying to solve. Another is to take every opportunity to intervene earlier to prevent harm – taking smaller, intermediate steps where larger ones are too daunting. The Early Action Task Force has suggested ‘Early Action Transition Plans’ to be developed across

government and linked through the Office of Budget Responsibility to forecasting and measurement. A ministerial committee chaired by the prime minister or an 'Early Action Unit' could ensure that each department asked deeper questions about causes and would help to promote a more coordinated approach to implementing policy. But this is probably more about generating 'new attitudes' throughout society, than applying multiple new layers of legislation.³⁸ A third objective is to gather evidence about the immediate and long-term effects of all such efforts, building a body of knowledge about the strengths and weaknesses of upstream and mid-stream interventions. Valuing the smaller steps, undertaking them and understanding their effects are essential stages of transition.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to show what prevention entails, why it matters and why, particularly, it matters now. It describes some of the most important barriers and suggests there may be ways for overcoming them.

Let's end with a reflection. What will happen if we don't give higher priority to stopping the bodies from falling into the water? If we let the poor get poorer and the rich richer? If we let another generation leave school without hope of jobs or a better life? If we let global warming continue unabated? If we let global markets go on calling the shots and shaping all our aspirations? Would it even leave us with enough capacity to keep on hauling the bodies out? How could we account for ourselves to our children and grandchildren? These are questions well worth asking, even if we don't yet know how to answer them.

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Written by: Anna Coote

new economics foundation

3 Jonathan Street
London SE11 5NH
United Kingdom

Telephone: +44 (0)20 7822 6300
Facsimile: +44 (0)2078206301
E-mail: info@neweconomics.org
www.neweconomics.org

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