



Living well in Manchester?

Life in Manchester

More than a quarter of children in Manchester live in severe poverty. More than one in twenty working age adults is unemployed. This is set to increase. Many of those with jobs are poorly paid, and rely on benefits to make ends meet. Energy and resources prices and the cost of living go up and up.

What's the answer? Almost everyone says "economic growth", although this has consistently failed to cut poverty in Manchester. The gap between rich and poor, with all the consequences that are known to flow from this, continues to increase.

Our council is committed to reducing poverty: it's a cornerstone of its strategy, but will more economic growth really deliver? Is it sustainable? Is it even feasible given an economic system in permanent crisis? What are the alternatives that can also rapidly reduce our shared carbon footprint?

Limits to growth

It's time to face the reality that it is not possible to de-link economic growth from the use of energy and resources in any realistic timescale, if indeed it is possible at all. To rely on such de-linking is gambling against the odds. Nobody can actually explain how this miracle of de-linking will be done.

Economic growth means resource/energy usage. The recent UK average growth rate of 2.9% each year results in the economy doubling in size every 25 years (nearly twice as many cars, twice as much energy use, twice as much emissions). Even a low 1.7% would double the economy every 43 years. It's often said that 3.5% is "desirable", and that means doubling every 20 years. And already our global footprint of 5.3 hectares per person is far greater than the 3.7 hectares that the UK can offer us (so we'll raid other countries?).

There is a cap on world productivity due to limited resources, we already use too much, far more than our share, and the only way we can grow is by taking from others, from

other cities in the UK, from the poor in less developed countries – leading to more wars, more displaced people, and more famine.

And the steadily increasing world population will never reach the same intensity of resource use as people in Manchester.

So de-linking is a myth, economic growth has peaked and anyway the last 50 years of economic growth don't seem to have solved the problems of relative poverty in Manchester. Manchester is increasingly, in common with the rest of the UK, becoming an even more divided city, those that have well paid jobs, and those that have less and less, increasingly unable to afford food and energy. There is no technological solution to this, there are only a finite amount of resources on earth. A different solution is needed.

So, we continue as we are, chasing the mirage of economic growth to save us and things get worse and worse, people get unhappier as divisions in society increase, the numbers in absolute poverty increase and more welfare cuts get made, or we can begin to work towards an economy based on the right to a fair share of limited resources, the right to a share of paid work, based on all of us consuming less.

And anyway, hasn't growth already stopped here in Manchester? Pretty much. So rather than trying to get it back, what if we try to live with this situation. What will that mean?

Only so much of this can be planned, although trying to plan will help, moreover, we can build a picture of the way a society based on this different economic model might look. This vision of an alternative society can then be used to inform the strategies and plans that are now being laid out, helping us to move toward a more sustainable society that will avoid catastrophic climate change.

Rethinking work

For many, work is dreary, deadening, debilitating – yet the impact of losing work and readjusting can be terribly difficult. Who we are, our self respect and how others see us is over-defined by our employment. Somehow we need to improve the balance between the personal and social value of paid work and other kinds of productive work.

If jobs are going to be limited, we should be doing everything we can to ensure the work is shared out more. How is it that some work unhealthily long hours, whilst others don't have paid work at all? Changing this means encouraging and valuing part-time work and encouraging a better work-life balance. Let's close up the gap between the lowest paid and the highest paid – we know the true costs of such

inequality. Is it so unreasonable for a society to aim for fair shares of work, its costs and benefits, as well as its products? This idea sounded less strange 50 years ago – and are we truly much better off now?

As oil gets more expensive all sorts of costs increase – that means going back to more locally based production, using local resources wherever possible. Small to medium sized businesses with ties to the locality, produce security of paid work and spend their surplus locally. Large, geographically widespread firms tend to move where labour is cheapest. The public sector can support this (and to some extent already is) by buying where it can from local businesses.

Much of the really important work in our society is unpaid: looking after children, looking after relatives, developing communities, running clubs and societies, creating art and cultural activities. Cutting down on average hours of paid work will give more time for these activities, but with less paid work there will be less money for health and welfare. Perhaps the shortfall can be made up by shifting to a situation where citizens can contribute time the running of services instead of taxes. This needs careful working out, we'll have no Cameron glibness here in Manchester: our public services were hard won and deserve defending but they can also be alienating and deskilling of the community – more citizen involvement could redress the balance while reducing the need for paid care.

If we are going to live on and accept lower average earnings, then there needs to be institutional and political support – cheaper access to transport, warm housing, local culture and entertainment, community buildings and locally produced, nutritious food. In terms of local economic strategy this pulls us toward public transport, subsidised housing improvement, funding of local voluntarism, investment in community infrastructure and small scale culture – collective solutions based on sharing and solving problems together. And this will be hard work at first in our often fractured communities.

When we talk about green jobs what do we really mean? We need to aim for all jobs to be green, not as an add-on, but as a fundamental part of what we mean by work. Employment based on growth, ever increasing amounts of resource use, and rising wages leading to increased consumerism cannot be green, whatever it is doing.

Living Well

But more than this, there needs to be a completely new approach to well-being:

- No more reliance on an increasing cake from which some crumbs might fall down for the disadvantaged.

- No more deferring of social and climate justice – ‘until the economy recovers’.
- No more gambling with our children and grandchildren’s lives by risking runaway climate change.

As the Bolivian delegation to the UN put it:

Living Well is not the same as living better, living better than others, because in order to live better than others, it is necessary to exploit, to embark upon serious competition, concentrating wealth in few hands. Trying to live better is selfish, and shows apathy, individualism. Some want to live better, whilst others, the majority, continue living poorly. Not taking an interest in other people’s lives, means caring only for the individual’s own life, at most in the life of their family.

As a different vision of life, Living Well is contrary to luxury, opulence and waste, it is contrary to consumerism. In some countries of the North, in big metropolitan cities, people buy clothes they throw away after wearing them only once. That lack of care for others results in oligarchies, nobility, aristocracy, elites who always seek to live better at other people’s expense.

That’s Bolivia –why not here?

But we can’t wait: the International Panel on Climate Change estimates we have (in 2011) no more than 5 years to halt carbon emissions if we want to prevent runaway global warming.

The aim of the Irwell Group (named for one of the rivers that flows, mostly unseen and unloved, through Manchester) is to provide a constructive challenge to those taking action on climate change in

Manchester. We hope to offer fresh perspectives and ideas that will provoke new ways of looking at the problems and inspire different and better solutions.

<http://irwellgroup.wordpress.com/>

irwellgroup@gmail.com