

Unlocking a better future: a framework for systemic change to deliver a just transition in Scotland

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Fiona Lambe

Nina Weitz

Annika Hilgert

Eric Kemp-Benedict

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Key messages

- The Unlocking a Better Future (UBF) framework proved effective in mapping policy levers, identifying systemic gaps, and organizing insights from research and policy consultations. It enabled the development of a coherent and actionable roadmap of recommendations for transformation in Scotland.
 - The methodology has broader applicability for shaping transformative change and can be adapted for other national or subnational contexts. It offers a practical way to conceptualize and support transformative change across a nation's society and economy.
 - Identifying synergies, trade-offs and co-benefits strengthens the quality of policy recommendations: Using the SDG Synergies tool in policy consultations enabled early identification of interactions between recommendations, helping to maximize co-benefits, minimize unintended consequences, and support joined-up thinking across policy areas.
 - Consultation with the Scottish Government policy team and other key stakeholders enhanced relevance and legitimacy of the findings.
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1. Introduction

Around the world, governments face the urgent and interlinked challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss and growing inequality. While the international community has access to the knowledge and means needed to address these crises, recent years have seen troubling reversals in sustainability commitments, with many countries falling short of their environmental and social targets.

Despite these global setbacks, there are hopeful signs. Some countries are choosing a different path, marked by systemic change and long-term thinking. Scotland is one of them.



As part of the development of its new environment strategy, the Scottish Government has embraced the need for transformative societal and economic change to achieve a “net-zero, nature-positive” future. To support the development of this future strategy, the Scottish Government commissioned SEI to provide evidence on how such broad societal transformation could be conceptualized, implemented, supported and monitored in practice, with specific recommendations for societal transformation.

This brief presents highlights from the report, *Applying the Unlocking a Better Future Framework for a Just Transition in Scotland*, shedding light on the methods and framework used, as well as the findings regarding the shifts needed to achieve lasting change.

1.1 A foundational framework

The research project was part of a series commissioned to inform the Scottish environment strategy. Projects by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) and Global Footprint Network (GFN) addressed economy and global footprint outcomes, supported by the James Hutton Institute. A separate project led by the University of Greenwich reviewed international thinking on transformative sustainability change.

We synthesized recommendations from our research, as well as from the NEF and GFN projects, into a holistic, systems-based framework for the Scottish Government’s environment strategy outcomes on economy, society and global footprint. Recognizing the complex interactions among these outcomes, the Scottish Government requested that the work be guided by the report *Stockholm+50: Unlocking a Better Future*. The report, developed by SEI and the Council on Energy, Environment and Water, was based on a synthesis of scientific evidence about actions that can be taken to promote the socio-economic transformations needed to tackle the global climate and nature emergencies (SEI & CEEW, 2022).

Underpinning the Unlocking a Better Future (UBF) framework is the recognition that societies exist within the broader context of the biosphere, and that national and global economies are just one aspect of human social systems (Folke, 2016; SEI & CEEW, 2022). Economies rely on societies to function, and societies, in turn, depend on the often-overlooked foundation of a thriving, resilient biosphere (Folke et al., 2011). Central to the framework are three transformative shifts: redefining our relationship with nature, ensuring lasting prosperity for all, and investing in a sustainable future. Each of these shifts is supported by a set of targeted actions. Together, these shifts and their associated actions represent a pathway toward systemic transformation, offering significant potential for advancing sustainability (see section below for details on the three shifts).

Making specific policy recommendations to Scotland entailed adapting the UBF framework to the Scottish policy landscape and vision, tailoring the global-scale outlook to the national context.

2. Methodology for developing a holistic framework for Scotland

We applied a structured, systems-based methodology anchored in the UBF framework to explore the three transformational shifts (redefining the human–nature relationship, enabling lasting prosperity for all, and investing in a sustainable future).

A key component of the methodology was a comprehensive review and mapping of existing Scottish Government strategies and policies against the UBF framework. This process proved particularly valuable for identifying not only gaps where transformative action is needed, but also entry points where transformative initiatives are already emerging in Scotland. The results of the mapping directly informed and inspired the recommendations for transforming Scotland’s economy and society, which are clustered into nine thematic areas:

- Valuing nature
- Nature-based education
- Rights of Nature
- Animal welfare
- Nature in urban areas
- Sustainable lifestyles
- National accounting beyond GDP
- Innovation systems
- Supply chain governance.

The review revealed, for example, that while Scotland has strong environmental ambitions, current strategies lack systematic approaches to promoting nature-based education or enhancing human–nature connectedness through learning. This gap led to the development of a recommendation to integrate nature-based education across the curriculum, from early years through to adult learning, and to promote outdoor access as part of health and wellbeing policies.

Similarly, the concept of “Rights of Nature” – which reframes legal and governance systems to recognize nature as a rights-bearing entity – was largely absent from Scottish policies. Recognizing this as a missing element in current policy areas in Scotland, the research proposed further exploration of legal innovations and participatory governance models that could pave the way for inclusion of Rights of Nature in future legal and decision-making frameworks.

Related to the economy, the mapping exercise highlighted that while Scotland has made strides in integrating wellbeing goals into policy (such as through the National Performance Framework), more could be done to align economic decision-making with wellbeing and environmental outcomes. This informed the recommendation to use wider measures of wellbeing in Scotland’s Wellbeing Economy Monitor to help guide economic policy and to embed a sustainability filter into innovation and procurement policies.

To enhance the robustness of the recommendations, the team conducted stakeholder workshops using the SDG Synergies tool to assess the interlinkages, synergies and

trade-offs among proposed actions. Regular consultation with the Scottish Government policy team and external stakeholders helped ensure that the analysis was relevant, grounded in the national context, and actionable.

The methodology also included an evidence review of international approaches to public engagement in sustainability transitions. This review examined participatory models from different countries to understand best practices in inclusive decision-making, including citizen assemblies and co-design processes. It provided a comparative perspective that informed the design of Scotland-specific recommendations on how public engagement can be included in the transition through the future environment strategy and associated recommendations.

One key insight from this review was the importance of institutionalizing long-term public engagement mechanisms – rather than relying solely on ad hoc consultations. For example, the research highlighted that in other contexts, structured deliberative processes have contributed to greater legitimacy, public trust and more effective policy outcomes. This learning directly informed the recommendation to embed two-way, long-term engagement practices in Scotland's transition planning.

Together, these methodological steps provided a holistic view of transformation pathways tailored to Scotland's policy landscape, as well as a set of concrete and localized recommendations for shifting Scottish society and economy. The final step in the methodology focused on integrating these recommendations with the recommendations on economic transformation and Scotland's environmental footprint, developed by NEF and GFN, respectively. We took recommendations from all three projects to create a single holistic framework (see Figure 1).

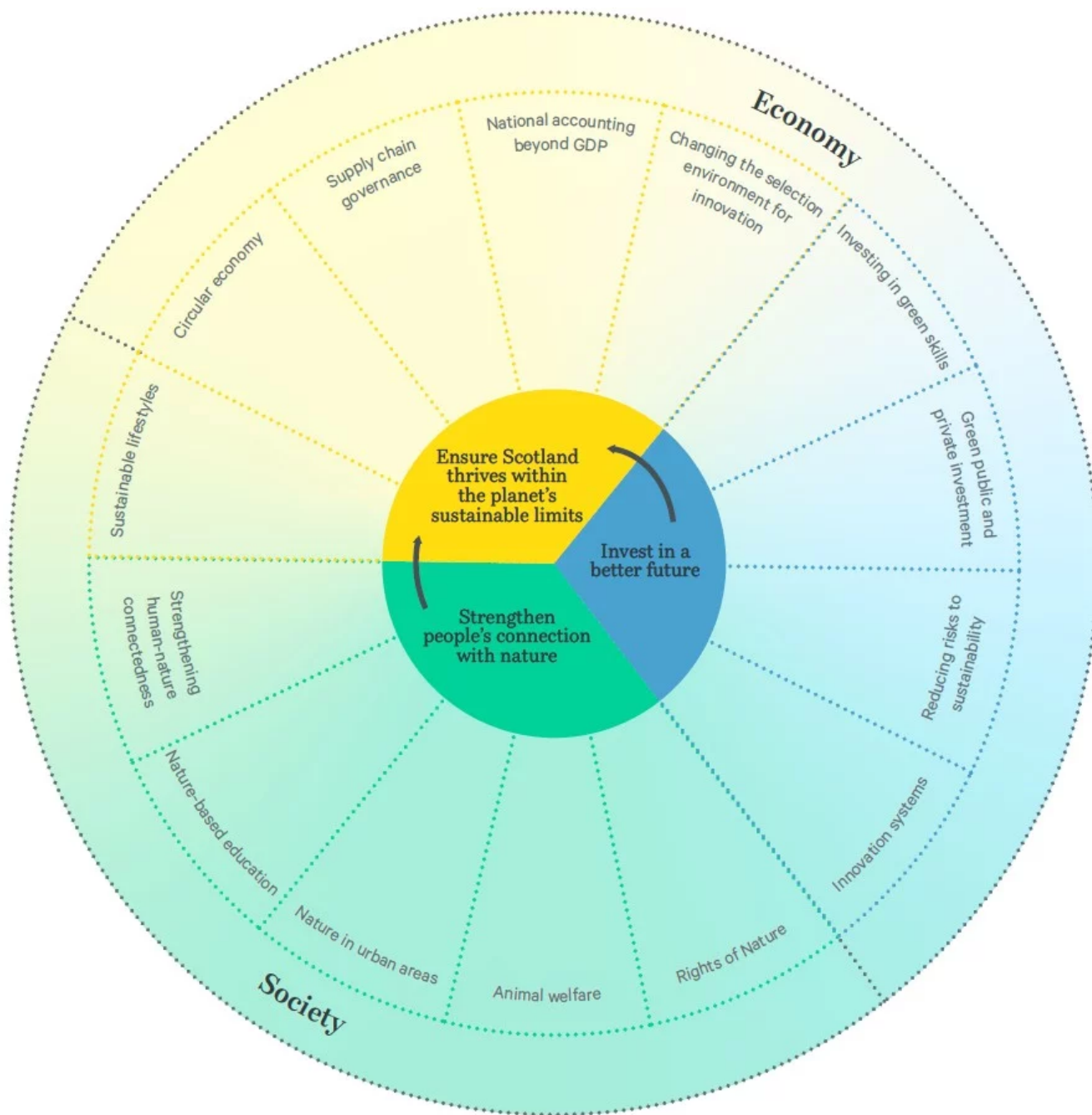


Figure 1. The holistic framework tailored to Scotland.

3. Evidence-based policymaking: using the holistic framework

The holistic framework can be used to:

- present an overview of current thematic areas and recommendations for policies and measures considered important for supporting societal and economic transformation in the Scottish context
- identify possible gaps where further policies or measures are needed
- align future policies and measures with common themes and overarching goals.

The holistic framework offers a comprehensive view of key thematic areas where proposed policies and actions are expected to have significant influence. It serves as a tool to help identify gaps where further policy recommendations may be necessary within each theme, as well as to examine how different areas intersect and influence one another.

The goal in developing this framework was to create a lasting resource that policymakers can use as a strategic foundation when designing future initiatives with the potential to drive transformative change. Where policies touch on several thematic areas, the framework could be used to articulate and visualize what the policy mix includes and which thematic areas are most prominent in that mix.

The holistic framework assumes an integrated and systemic approach to policymaking, which ensures policy mixes are coherent and consistent towards sustainability goals and increase incentives for action. To move these recommendations forward, it is essential for the Scottish Government to adopt tools that systematically explore policy linkages – both synergies and trade-offs – while considering broader system boundaries and long-term impacts on future generations. Additionally, sequencing policy steps strategically could help to activate positive tipping points that drive larger systemic shifts.

4. Tracking transformation

The project provided suggestions for indicators that could be used to track progress towards transformative change in Scotland going forward. While traditional indicators reflect current realities, truly transformative change involves shifts in deep structures – economic, legal and social – that are harder to capture. Effective monitoring should therefore focus not just on outcomes but on signals of systemic change. The proposed indicators are partly drawn from existing data and highlight areas such as human–nature connectedness, sustainable economic structures and future-focused investment.

However, gaps remain, particularly in measuring structural change and value shifts. To address this, we recommend integrating novel indicators that reflect shifts in societal priorities, such as those drawn from the [World Values Survey](#) or wealth distribution data. One example is the indicator from the World Values Survey that asks whether, looking toward the future, people believe there should be “less emphasis on money and material possessions”. This indicator offers insight into shifts in societal values and priorities – particularly whether cultural norms are beginning to align with the ethos of

a wellbeing economy and ecological sustainability, which could indicate cultural shifts that support long-term change.

5. Conclusions

This research and the report on which this brief is based offer not only a set of evidence-based recommendations, but a strategic and systemic framework and method for understanding how deep societal and economic transformation can be initiated and sustained. Drawing on the UBF framework, the work highlights how Scotland can move from ambition to action by addressing structural challenges, engaging with societal values, and identifying entry points for change already emerging across government and society.

Key messages from the research include the need to rethink societal norms and infrastructures, transform foundational economic metrics and goals, redefine the relationship between humans and nature, and embed inclusive public engagement as a driver of change. The project also highlights the importance of tracking transformation through forward-looking, values-based indicators and of identifying synergies and trade-offs through tools such as the SDG Synergies analysis.

The work demonstrates that transformative change is politically sensitive and complex; it requires deep consultation, alignment across sectors, and ongoing public engagement. Through collaborative engagement with the Scottish Government and wider stakeholders, the research has produced insights that are both ambitious and grounded.

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Linnégatan 87D 115 23 Stockholm,
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Author contact

fiona.lambe@sei.org

Media contact

ulrika.lamberth@sei.org

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