

Community economies and a transformational politics of poverty

Kelly Dombroski and Stephen Healy

How can we work to transform our economies so that all can survive well together? In the Millennium declaration, signatories pledged to “*spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty*”, eventually resulting in the detailed targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Setting targets is a management strategy which assumes the problem of poverty is primarily a lack of goal-setting, vision, or resource allocation. This is one important aspect of the problem to be sure, and the SDG process has certainly altered resource allocations and produced results. The other part of the problem is transforming the way we do economy more broadly, towards modes of production that care for people and planet more effectively. In our view a first step is recognise that economies are something we construct both through what we do and do not do. The Community Economies Collective is a group of thinkers and writers who work to rethink how we do economy, with a preference for those who are most vulnerable in our world - human and nonhuman.

The starting point for our work is to acknowledge the valuable economic work that the poor and vulnerable already do to survive, often unpaid subsistence work in the so-called informal economy. Mainstream development approaches, when they acknowledge these activities, see them as significant only to the extent that they might be made to contribute to formal sector growth. Community economies researchers begin by documenting and making visible how everyday economic activities might contribute to shared survival, emphasizing the role that unpaid labour, nonmarket transactions and the use and care of resources shared in common play. Rather than looking only at capitalist development we include the role that family, cooperative, and social enterprises play in generating wellbeing and how these shared endeavours might be invested in further. Pursuing this approach requires a shift in the mode of politics, away from bringing attention to the ‘abject and dehumanising conditions’ of the lives of the poor in order to elicit a charitable response, mostly to help the lives of the poor look more ‘like ours’. Our mode of transformational politics is to seek to ‘humanise’ or include through paying attention to the intrinsic humanity and economic know-how of those living in poverty, looking to produce a shared understanding of different ways of surviving well in the world.

Looking at what is there already opens *all of us* to new possibilities for how we might survive well together.

A community economies approach asks us to question our understanding of what is necessary for our survival. In Kelly’s work in the urban slum parts of a city in western China, she unpicked the targets for sanitation that used figures based on numbers of private water-flush toilets. While some in the West (such as Matt Damon) express horror that more people have cellphones than toilets, Kelly began with the ways families were already keeping hygiene even as they lived in shops or rooms without running water, identifying ways this could be tweaked for optimal sanitation without private toilets. Indeed, she also discovered groups in Australian and New

Zealand rethinking their hygiene practices in light of the 'nappyfree' practices of the poor in urban China.

A community economies approach asks us to question our understanding of how we relate to one another. For example, members of our collective have been working in three different countries in the Pacific on appropriate indicators for gender equality. Rather than imposing a particular view of gender equality that seeks to make vulnerable men and women equivalent participants in a formal market, they began with an inventory of the diverse economic contributions that men and women already make to the household and village economy. For example, many women fed their families through household gardens, which does not appear in official economic measures. The team then worked with community partners, men and women, to define what gender equality would look like in their part of the Pacific. Rather than a vision of men and women becoming equivalent participants in a market economy, equality became about according respect to the different contributions each made to surviving well together. For these communities, gender equality did not mean a vision where everyone did the *same* work, but a future where some people (particularly women) were not unfairly burdened with heavier workloads than others.¹

Community economies thinkers JK Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron and Stephen Healy identify six key concerns that groups all over the world are questioning their understanding of, in order to 'take back economies for people and planet'.² These are:

- *Surviving well* – what do we really need to live healthy lives for ourselves and the planet? ,?
- *Distributing surplus* – How do we decide what to do with what is left over from meeting our survival needs?
- *Encountering others* – what kinds of relationships do we have with other people and environments as we seek to survive well?
- *Consuming sustainably* – what do we use up in the process of surviving well?
- *Caring for commons* – how do we maintain, restore and replenish our natural, social and intellectual commons?
- *Investing in future generations* – how do we direct surplus for the wellbeing of people and planet into the future?

The idea is that rather than 'managing' poverty, we seek to survive well in solidarity and negotiation with others, based on a recognition of both our difference and our interdependence. The 'community' of a community economy is not something predefined, but an open term referring to those who are questioning together in solidarity around these key concerns. Our solidarity is based on the recognition that we are all engaged in balancing our needs, others' needs, and planetary needs. The targets of the SDGs and the basic needs of all must be considered in solidarity and relationship with the knowledge that we are entering 'overshoot' with regards to our human demands on our world,³ which as Pope Francis has insisted, must

¹ Read more and download resources at <https://melanesianeconomies.wordpress.com/> .

² See Gibson-Graham, J. K., Jenny Cameron, and Stephen Healy. 2013. *Take Back the Economy: An ethical guide for transforming our communities*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

³ Raworth, Kate. 2017. *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing.

not be considered just a 'thing' to use up.⁴ The recognition of 'overshoot' must shift us away from managing a problem 'out there' in the world and towards cultivating a kind of being-with and learning together. As Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen reminds us, by being-with those in poverty and crisis we might remember the real faces and stories of those with whom we are seeking to help.⁵ While Nouwen was thinking mostly of transformational politics in the face of imminent nuclear war, his thoughts apply as much to our work in transforming poverty in the face of global climate change:

There are many voices who say: "these little acts of mercy are a waste of time when we consider the urgency of stopping the arms race." But the peacemaker knows that true peace is a divine gift which has nothing to do with statistics or measures of success or popularity. ... when our peace work is primarily issue-oriented it easily loses heart and becomes cold. . . People are not problems. They smile and cry, work and play, struggle and celebrate. They have names and faces to be remembered (2005, p77).

Thus we imagine the danger of the SDGs could be slipping into competitive achievement over specific targets for 'issues' that have somehow lost a human face. What we as community economies thinkers seek to do is to bring to light questions of surviving well *together*, where the 'issues' are less important than the community that gathers in solidarity to negotiate how we might take back economies for people and planet.

Biographies

Kelly Dombroski is a Senior Lecturer in the geography department of the University of Canterbury, and although of Catholic heritage is part of the faith community at Ilam Baptist Church in Christchurch. Stephen Healy is a Senior Research Fellow in the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University who has only recently found his way back to his Catholic faith. Both are members of the Community Economies Collective, an international collective of scholars building on the work of JK Gibson-Graham.

⁴ Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* of the Holy Father Francis on care for our common home.

⁵ Nouwen, Henri JM. 2005. *Peacework: prayer, resistance, community*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books.