
IMAGINING A CONSCIENTIOUS ECONOMY

构想尽责经济

CHRISTOPH WALDERSEE 克里斯托夫·瓦尔德赛

ABSTRACT

The multiple layered crises (pandemic, climate change, differences in development, migration pressures, etc.) force us to consider what kind of economic growth we have and what we may need. In this article, I shall attempt to outline some key features of what could be developed in a “Conscientious Economy”. Given the observable diversity among various national responses to the Covid-19 crisis, it is clear that no existing economic model is likely to be sufficient to trigger a global recovery that is both fair to all and sustainable. This paper will indicate that there are some promising attempts to rethink economics that need further study, and serious efforts at their implementation. These should become our priority as we seek to overcome the lingering effects of Covid-19.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE UNDERLYING CRISIS WHILE STILL FIGHTING TO OVERCOME THE PANDEMIC

The pandemic is not only a grave threat to people's lives, but it also profoundly alters their lifestyle, and thus significantly impacts the economy. In a world in which both personal and overall societal success is defined by economic growth, any crisis undermining such growth is a threat to people's wellbeing. Both are so intricately interconnected that not even a deadly pandemic seems to be able to change this pattern. This is not surprising as no one can escape the uncompromising relationship between the overall economic situation, the struggle to earn one's livelihood, and overcome the threat to one's individual wellbeing and even survival. Most people have no choice other to participate in this struggle, regardless of its risks. And yet, it is more and more apparent that this condition cannot go on, as it ruins the sources of our life. The planet's atmosphere, air, water, and soil, are all under threat to such an extent that the base of our survival is dwindling, leaving no room for maintaining the way of life we are used to and find worth living.

More of us now understand that we must overhaul our lifestyle. The nexus of economic mechanism with our wellbeing does not suit our environment and is no longer sustainable. We continuously overuse our resources by ignoring their finiteness. Also, this nexus deepens the gap between richer and poorer nations, exacerbating systemic global inequality, leaving behind large parts of our own population as well as all lesser developed countries. It puts at risk their populations whose existence is already more fragile than those in the "developed" world. Less developed, and thus poorer nations are already feeling the symptoms of economic crisis disproportionately. Most of these countries are in the world's warmer regions and are more exposed to the rise in extreme weather conditions resulting

from the climate change our current economic model has induced. These countries simply do not have the funds to live under the growing weather extremes and subsequent changes to their natural habitat.

Perhaps we are blind to the lessons of the Covid-19 crisis. The problem is rooted in our insatiable appetite for exploiting what surrounds us, of which we are a part and on which we depend. We have intruded into every corner of the planet and spun our web of interference and interdependence. While expanding our habitat, we have transgressed into wilderness areas. We are oversimplifying the world by subjugating it, with the intent of reshaping it according to our needs. This is violating nature, which is even more foolish as our understanding of nature is still limited. In other words, we are exposing ourselves to things we do not yet fully know. What in former times was regarded as the discovery of the unknown now becomes a threat. In these times, as the Covid-19 pandemic should convince us, a tiny mis-step is felt throughout the world and can easily become a threat to our survival.

Acknowledging this situation, we must grasp the opportunity the current health crisis offers. We need to reassess on which terms we can continue to live, interfering with nature. We must adapt life and what we deem our wellbeing, propelling us into a new and healthier era, in tune with our planet and our resources. To get there our economic attitude must be re-examined. In other words, right now we have an opportunity to understand *and face and tackle* the combined crises: Covid-19 could open our eyes leading us into a different society. We can finally understand that our economic behaviour is at the heart of the problem. Rather than regard markets as an automatism that governs us, we must reverse this and govern the markets ourselves. Dispelling the paralysing automatism of the markets means embedding them once again in our societal needs and ideals. Let the markets serve us, not vice versa.

RESOURCES FOR RETHINKING ECONOMICS

New societal and economic models must be discussed and introduced. We must address our approach to the economy, our blind surrender to sterile thinking about the alleged automatism of markets. Our assessment of profit and growth must be radically rethought, reinterpreted, redefined, and relaunched.

Investments will always be needed and must not be left to public administration or governments. Such entities do not think in terms of productivity, rarely innovate, and are seldom likely to optimise cost and efficiency or practical facilitation in the ways individual entrepreneurs or groups of them are likely to do. The private sector should continue to exist and should be allowed and encouraged to thrive, even as large corporations. Also, we should not get rid of our medium and small sized companies which are an endless source of ingenuity and human productivity.

But we must see them as resources, embedding their activities within what is achievable in a sustainable world. In other words, the corporate sector, and the markets of which they are part, must work within a system, governed by rules and subordinate to the overall goal of sustainability. We, as the ones through whom and for whom markets exist, must be able not only to survive but to evolve and prosper. Markets and their players – in other words everyone – must accept this principle and accept their respective role in it. Just as every individual in our society must support this economic model by restraining his or her own yearning, by overcoming careless spending, the corporate sector must step back from endless fighting and constant competition narrowly motivated only by an increase in profits. So, the market mechanism will continue to exist and even be allowed to expand and grow. But what is considered gain, what is perceived as profit must be redefined. We need to identify and apply new terms of value in line with what is available,

what is left, and what is sustainable. At that stage we will move from a mechanical view of a market driven economy and the society depending on it, to what Karl Polanyi (1944) and later John G. Ruggie called an “*embedded liberalism*” (1982).

In 2010 the Austrian economist, Christian Felber, introduced a credible approach for achieving a sustainable economy. His initiative, “The Economy for the Common Good” (ECG) proposes “an economic model, which makes the Common Good, a good life for everyone on a healthy planet, its primary goal and purpose.” ECG suggests that

“at the heart of this concept lies the idea that values-driven businesses are mindful of and committed to:

- Human Dignity
- Solidarity and Social Justice
- Environmental Sustainability
- Transparency and Co-Determination. (Felber, 2010)”

Companies and institutions all over the world have subscribed to these principles and its base is broadening quickly. Together with the university-based initiative “Rethinking Economics” (2021) it is taking hold on all continents. These two initiatives can be seen as proof that there is readiness for change, from all sides.

There are promising indications in psychology and sociology that the concept of selflessness for the sake of all is taking shape. We, as the economic actors, are beginning to realise how much the way we act really matters. Finally, the need for sustainability is teaching us to act for a common good. It forces us to take on the finiteness of what we have on our planet.

A ROLE FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND COLLABORATION

There are three steps that could lead us on this path to a sustainable future:

1. Understanding the concept of “economy” as good housekeeping instead of as permanent competition.
2. Understanding society as a group of equals with varied ideas and desires about what life is and seeking to balance them.
3. Understanding that none of this is possible without a ground-breaking change in how we look at life and at each other: tolerating each other’s concept of life, beliefs, wishes, and ideas.

With these basic tenets on approaching life (including our economy), our convictions and thus religion step in. Even those who do not believe in anything other than themselves are not free of a religious attitude toward their own lives. It is crucial to enter dialogue on what each group or individual understands when relating to the basics of life. While following convictions can stir up fierce competition in values, we must reach mutual understanding when it comes to securing our survival. Tolerating each other’s convictions and values is crucial when we want to reach common ground to overcome the crises. This is where the interreligious dialogue must guide us. It is probably the best way to stipulate each other’s readiness to take the vital step back and acknowledge others’ rights, wishes, ideas, and beliefs.

MAKING PROGRESS TOWARD A CONSCIENTIOUS ECONOMY

How do we determine progress and growth: are these measurable on either a quantitative or a qualitative principle, or both? What are the expenses and what the returns? Should we allow economic mechanisms to govern us or instead take the economy as an instrument

for managing our resources? The challenge of determining progress and growth should be reconsidered in light of our acute awareness of the finiteness of these resources. It therefore requires a change in attitude. A “conscientious economy” may serve as an overarching prerequisite for sustaining life on a finite planet, that is, an economy based on accepting the principle of scarcity of resources plus equal accessibility to them. Such an economy is necessarily a sharing economy. But it will only work when we succeed in institutionalising an ever-increasing effort to tell, instruct, and train everyone in future generations to be aware of what the resources sustaining us on this planet are, and how much is left of them. In other words, we must focus on what we must share.

What does “conscientious” mean here? It is a synonym for the notion that everyone is coming from the same understanding, reaching out for the same final goal – survival in dignity – and accepting that there is no-one unworthy of participating in it. To get to this stage everyone needs to learn and internalise the facts and the consequences of acting as well as non-acting on them. Everyone must learn how to value and tolerate each other’s approach to sustainability. This is a continuous and perpetual, never completed process. And we may fail, should it stop.

From our present knowledge-based society we will need to evolve into an educative and ever continuing “training society”. Instead of creating a canon of knowledge and certifying individual expertise, in such a world we will completely internalise who each of us is. We must individually realise our limits and what is undeniably left as sharable resources to sustain us. Because so far there does not seem to be any alternative to the resources of our planet, we must integrate our knowledge about this into what we do, whoever we are, whatever we do. This needs to become an integral part of us and guide our innermost value system, how we think, how

we act and how we form and teach our values. Education is the key and without putting it first we may not be able to accept the facts. Instead, the facts will rule us.

We must reach the point where we act on shared values and prospects, in a world understood, based on proven evidence. To reach and maintain this understanding, we must quantify it. Shared standards, data, and – for example – technically based Key Performance Indicators (KPI) (2021) can help us to do so. KPI are an evidence-based, decision supporting, set of technical benchmarks that can tell us about our limits. KPI – a worldwide standard tool – were developed to maintain awareness of these limits, informing us of what can be done without endangering everything. In fact, in many fields they are daily practice, for example in developing infrastructure. KPI are now used as a defining and ultimately limiting standard for how to keep to norms (and values). They allow us to quantify any specification in every respect while making it accountable but also still narratable in accordance with the tenet: tell, instruct, understand, train. Again, education, training and lastly full internalisation is key to establish and keep within this system.

Possibly, this will be met by resistance. So, for learning what is at stake education must take the lead. Establishing a rule-based world this will be the backbone, the structural guidance overarching and supporting the spiritual part of such a society. But as no society will ever exist completely sharing spiritual aspirations, a rule-based order must maintain this construct.

Consequently, we need to rethink the earlier mentioned hierarchy of the three steps for a sustainable future and wellbeing, articulating it under the following two conditions:

- I. The afore-mentioned hierarchy is technical and involves practical learning, on all levels.
- II. There is a correlation between learning how society works, what our own place in it is, and what that means to everyone else.

We must learn to accept that each of us is different, and we must learn to accept each other unreservedly. To make these two conditions work we need to create a readiness to share, to step back, and to relinquish.

Then, perhaps it would make more sense to realign the three steps:

1. Understanding that we need a ground-breaking change in how we look at life and each other: tolerating each other's concept of life, beliefs, wishes, and ideas.
2. Understanding society as a group of equals with different ideas, desires and perspectives on what life should be and seeking to balance it.
3. Understanding the concept of "economy" as good housekeeping instead of perpetual competition in striving for growth.

This reversed hierarchy of steps would be an approach based on prioritising life via belief, not via material desire. This way of putting it calls for a post-materialistic concept of living. But such a post-materialistic concept of how to lead a life that is in tune with what is there, what may be left, is based on a verifiable, accountable system, which can be calculated and thus proven. This proven part of the equation does not lean on mere trust and confidence of the people. Instead, it is based on what is factually known about what is left, and what can or must be shared. It is then up to our underlying value system to tell why we would share it: reinventing or rather reinstating or restoring a canon of non-materialistic values that equal one another – meaning: what was practised for millennia as the riches of a spiritual life.

This is no new concept. In fact, it answers to what all major religious movements all over the world have stipulated: for the sake of a non-dependent being, building a community for the common good, acting to create a society seeking communion. This may provide a way and help us to renounce our own desires in order to realise personal goals for the sake of everyone.

CONCLUSION

Though we should assume that capitalism as a concept will not perish, we must reconcile it with this post-materialistic regime. And yet, there is room for both: no doubt, opportunities to make an investment for a return will continue to exist. But in such a world the fact that everyone would be governed by renouncing own desire for the sake of the common good, of sociality and solidarity, and awarded for living in a world that can continue to sustain and value each of us, would not rule out that those who wish could invest any surplus in other endeavours. But it should be based on an accommodating, conscientious and in the end literally religiously inspired belief, instead of a mere mechanical automatism of a plainly market-driven economy. This could then – perhaps – be considered a new economic paradigm. In history overcoming crises and in particular pandemics have often triggered new developments. The present situation could help us catalyse an overall more sustainable world.



CHRISTOPH WALDERSEE, Business Consultant,
Beijing, China

REFERENCES 参考资料

- Felber, C. (2015) *Economy for the Common Good*. Retrieved on July 6, 2021, from <https://www.ecogood.org/what-is-ecg/ecg-in-a-nutshell/>
- KPI.org. (2021). *What is a Key Performance Indicator?* Retrieved on July 9, 2021, from <https://kpi.org/KPI-Basics>
- Polanyi, K. (1944). *The Great Transformation*. New York/Toronto: Farrar & Rinehart
- Rethinking Economics. (2021). Retrieved on July 6, 2021, from <https://www.rethinkeconomics.org/>
- Ruggie, J. G. (1982). “International regimes, transactions, and change: embedded liberalism in the post-war economic order” *International Organization* 36.2. Retrieved on July 30, 2021, from https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/john-ruggie/files/international_regimes_transactions.pdf