

“A good place to start building a ‘new normal’ would be a recognition that there is no infrastructure more fundamental than culture, no form of capital investment more productive than investment in human capital and no better place to start policy planning than by looking at a community’s assets and capabilities rather than its needs.”

— John NEWBIGIN, Creative economy to the mayor of London

Image Source: ‘Comedies’ intersecting on the Piazza Dante in Naples, Italy.
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Human capital as a sustainable infrastructure: Towards an eighteenth Sustainable Development Goal?

As COVID has triggered multiple crises across the world, leaving health services struggling to cope and businesses struggling to survive, it's the resilience, creativity and solidarity of communities that has taken the strain, from the 'Jerusalema' dance challenge to food banks for the self-isolating. There's clear evidence that, even if they are poor or marginalised, communities with the strongest social and cultural infrastructure have done better than their neighbours in terms of saving lives and livelihoods. While finance capital and the formal economy have been disabled, social capital and the informal economy have come to the rescue.

None of this is the product of COVID but the pandemic has pushed it to the centre of the stage. What are the implications for public policy and public investment? If the intangible cultural networks of an apparently disorganised community turn out to have provided the most durable in-

frastructure and the most practical and nimble responses to a rapidly changing crisis, might they not also have a role to play in tackling the long queue of crises that stretch ahead of us – climate change, environmental degradation, youth unemployment, growing inequalities of wealth and opportunity?

This is not to entertain some romantic myth about the innate wisdom of the community, but to point out that it would be foolish to ignore the evidence that COVID has placed in front of us. The accelerating pace of urbanisation means the growth of informal communities is sure to continue, and informal communities tend to generate informal economic activity, which is already estimated by the ILO to account for 60% of all economic activity globally, despite being massively constrained by lack of skills, lack of finance, lack of access to markets and by oppression, corruption and criminality. Furthermore, the rapid evolution of digital technologies and machine learning is cutting swathes through traditional labour markets. And while we can expect this 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' to generate new jobs and require new skills, the period of transition is likely to be at least as painful as in previous technology revolutions and youth unemployment is already becoming a global crisis.

It's worth considering a UN report of 2013 into the global creative economy, highlighting scores of case studies from urban communities, mainly in the global South, that observed that it was becoming impossible to disentangle eco-

conomic activity from cultural activity. Cultural and creative businesses are central to most neighbourhood economies, and most of them are in or on the fringes of the informal sector – whether it's festivals, food, music, sport, fashion, traditional artisanal crafts or digital content production and distribution on smart phones. And most of those activities, by their nature, are dependent on the creative, social, emotional and manual skills that are beyond the capacity of artificial intelligence and likely to remain so for some decades to come. These jobs may look vulnerable, and in an obvious sense they are, but they are also strangely 'future-proofed' in a way that is untrue of an increasing number of apparently secure jobs in logistics, retail, finance, health and the law – to name but a few. If we cross-reference that with the fact that the creative industries are generating jobs faster than almost any other sector in every region of the world – South as well as North – then we begin to square the circle between informal community, informal economy and the creative energy that feeds and is fed by culture, heritage and aspiration. That same UN report concluded that the most effective policy interventions in poorer urban communities were those that started by "looking at the community's assets and capabilities, not its needs".

Those assets are human capital or, if you prefer, social and cultural capital that provide a basis for addressing issues of rights, dignity, identity and access as well as livelihood. The economic driver is entrepreneurship from within the community rather than job creation from outside. The challenge

for public policy is that it's more about 'how' than 'what'. A phrase that came up in one of our Global Solutions dialogues was "Process affects outcome" and the truth of that observation is seen both in the failure of many grand public regeneration projects for urban communities and the success of much spontaneous community response to COVID.

It's no accident that several hundred cities around the world now like to style themselves as 'creative', by which is meant not just a focus on their cultural institutions and creative industries, though they may be part of the story, but a creative and inclusive approach to developing and implementing policies – engaging citizens in a way that promotes good planning and growth but also aims to address social equity, emotional well-being, environmental sustainability, civic identity and pride.

During the pandemic there has been a lot of talk about new ways of managing the global economy in the future – a 'new normal'. Here are two suggestions for how we might begin to shape a new normal that works better than the old one.

The first would be to regard the informal economy with more respect, looking at its "assets and capabilities" rather than its shortcomings. While many workers, especially women, may find themselves in the informal sector because of circumstances beyond their control, there are many for whom it works – not because they want to evade tax and regulation but because it allows a flexibility and a

measure of control that suits them. In the same way that governments find it difficult to engage with the creative industries because they are so dominated by informal partnerships of lone entrepreneurs and micro businesses, the informal economy appears messy and inconsequential to many planners, politicians and government administrators who long for the relative simplicity of the 20th century industrial economy – big units of production, stable company structures and an easy-to-trace flow of goods and services. The 21st century economy seems to be less and less like that. The little guys are getting on with surviving and it's the very big guys – the platform operators and their spin-offs – who are the ones evading tax and regulation.

A second suggestion relates to the fact that 2021 is designated by the UN as the year of the creative economy's contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals. But there's an anomaly at the heart of this excellent idea – the contribution of the creative economy is as much cultural as economic, yet access to cultural activity and freedom of creative expression are not specifically included in the SDGs at all. There are oblique references to the role of culture in education, mental health and emotional wellbeing but why not tell it like it is: – participation in culture is the glue that holds any society and every community together – without it there is no community and without community there can be no real sustainability, given the impact we humans now collectively have on our planet.

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