

## Tui Motu InterIslands Magazine



### Surviving Well Together

Kelly Dombroski & Stephen Healy — February 1st, 2018

KELLY DOMBROSKI and STEPHEN HEALY describe a community economies approach to poverty which seeks to acknowledge what people are already doing in their communities to sustain themselves and then to act in solidarity with them.

How can we work to transform our economies so that all can survive well together? In the United Nations Millennium Declaration, signatories pledged to "spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanising 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 to 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.

#### Valuing All Work Being Done

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, emphasising the role of unpaid labour, nonmarket transactions and the use and care of resources shared in common play. Rather than looking only at capitalist development we emphasise the role of family, cooperative, and social enterprises which generate wellbeing directly, investigating how these shared endeavours might be invested in further.

Pursuing this approach requires a shift in the mode of politics, away from only 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. We aim 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.

### Using a Community Economies Approach

A community economies approach asks us to question our understanding of what is necessary for our survival. In Kelly's work in the urban slums 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 Australia and New Zealand rethinking their hygiene practices in light of the "nappyfree" practices of the poor in urban China.

### Using the Approach for Gender Equality

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 feed 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.

### Six Key Concerns

Community economies thinkers J K 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". 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 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.

### Being-with Not Doing-to

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, which, as Pope Francis has insisted, must not be considered just a "thing" to use up. 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 whom we are seeking to help. 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."

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.

