

6. Practicing wellbeing through community economies: an action research approach

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INTRODUCTION: ANOTHER ECONOMY, ANOTHER WELLBEING

Given that wellbeing is a term used to examine ‘the complex relationships between interior life, self or relational selves and the external environment’ (Atkinson et al., 2020, p. 1917), it is bound to be polyvalent. With divergent research approaches coming to the fore across respective disciplines, the discourse of wellbeing is therefore only partly formed and already diverse. This characteristic – meaning many things to many people – may in fact be one of wellbeing’s strengths as a rallying concept. At a moment of drastic unsustainability, where human survival on Earth itself appears an open question, we can see the openness to discussions around this concept as an opportunity for intervening in the present and future.

The wellbeing research agenda has risen to prominence in recent decades amidst deepening concerns about the destructive relations between society, economy, culture and ecology. As discussed in detail elsewhere (see, for instance, Jackson, 2011), a key driver of scholarship on wellbeing, quality of life, happiness and related terms, has been the desire to understand and conceive of socio-economic ‘development’ differently. This impetus stems from the long-standing – yet wholly inadequate – practice of equating social progress with growth of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Since taking its modern form in the 1930s, GDP (a measure of the market value of all goods and services produced in a certain jurisdiction during a certain time, normally calculated at the country level) has been cemented as the key measure of national and societal health or success, often used as a shorthand by government advisors, policy makers, the media and others.

For much of the last century, a rise in GDP has been the ideological symbol of a nation that is doing something right. Even in a situation of deep inequality,

where some hold far more wealth than others, the conventional narrative holds that growing overall monetary wealth will trickle down to those who need it. A rising tide, it has been asserted *ad nauseum*, lifts all boats. On the other hand, declining GDP brings panic, anxiety and – in the context of capitalist mechanisms which necessitate growth – social and personal hardship. When an economy enters recession, it brings with it widespread unemployment, poverty, inequality and increased suicide rates (Oyesanya et al., 2015).

Such reliance on the growth of one simplistic measure is highly problematic, however, as has been meticulously explored by a growing stream of degrowth and steady-state economists. Going even further back in time, for instance, Latouche (2017) discusses how this link between national productivity and ‘wellness’ has historical antecedents preceding the work of Kuznets, in the Enlightenment and French Revolution. ‘The program of modernity’, he notes (p. 19), ‘which was to give rise to the society of growth, is nothing other than the greatest happiness for the greatest number.’ Fundamental problems with GDP were noted by the very founder of the metric, the economist Simon Kuznets, in the 1934 report in which he outlined and clarified the concept of national income. There, Kuznets spends considerable effort highlighting its partiality and fallibility, disavowing any logical relationship between national economic productivity and the quality of life in a nation. Given all that the measure excludes (domestic labour, non-monetary transactions, and so on) and all that it problematically includes (inhumane and unsustainable economic activities, the costs of repairing societal problems, cleaning up pollution, and much more), he expressly warned that it was susceptible to ‘oversimplification’ and ‘abuse’ (Kuznets, 1934, p. 6; see also the pioneering work of Waring, 1988). Kuznets went on to say that ‘The welfare of a nation can, therefore, scarcely be inferred from a measurement of national income’ (p. 7).

Recognizing this, much recent work on wellbeing has been explicitly grounded in an attempt to conceptualize social ‘wellness’ beyond its reduction to one problematic metric (Jackson, 2011; see also Grimes, Chapter 17 this volume for an evaluation of how policy and budget decision-making in different nations are incorporating wellbeing). If ‘wellness’ cannot be represented by GDP, then, in what other ways have societies and researchers tried to measure it? This has taken a number of forms, from the formulation of multi-dimensional indices – such as the UN’s Human Development Index (HDI) and the New Economics Foundation’s Happy Planet Index (HPI) – to the so-called ‘science of happiness’ (Miller, 2008), which focuses on gathering individual psychological assessments of wellness, usually through surveys. This ‘happiness turn’ has simultaneously permeated broader society, with books on positive psychology and mindfulness consistently entering bestseller lists, and numerous national commissions established to operationalize wellbeing as a policy-relevant concept (Smith and Reid, 2018).

However, critical voices have increasingly questioned these developments, not least for their tendency towards methodological reductionism, their grounding in individualist understandings of society, or their sometimes dubious quantifications (Carlisle et al., 2009). Fredrickson and Losada's positing of a singular 'critical productivity ratio', discussed by Brown et al. (2013), provides an infamous and high-profile case. Moving from the individual to the country scale, however, there has been a tendency to aggregate individual statistics and take the average figure to speak for the 'wellbeing' of the nation as a whole. If a country's average score is good, then wellbeing is good; a blunt instrument at best.

The production of such statistics holds its own assumptions, whereby '*Homo economicus*, the monadic, self-interested individual of late capitalist market societies all-too-quickly reverts to *homo felix*, the monadic, self-interested pleasure-maximizer' (Smith and Reid, 2018, p. 814). This is to replicate rather than challenge an already problematic research approach, with the variable of individualized happiness standing in for income. Other authors have questioned a tendency in the literature towards pathologizing negativity or dissatisfaction with the status quo (Davies, 2016; Ehrenreich, 2010; Purser, 2019). Yet there remains something about the concept that seems important to retain, if developed in conversation with these critiques.

The aim of this chapter is to move beyond narrowly individualistic and psychological measures, and to reclaim wellbeing as a shared socio-economic concept. Our approach to wellbeing research is to examine the concept through the lens of a particular school of heterodox economic thought: diverse and community economies. We explore how community economies scholars have engaged with wellbeing to open up a seam of radical economic possibility – most prominently through the formulation of 'surviving well together' and, methodologically, through action research approaches. After exploring the notion of GDP further, and introducing the diverse and community economies tradition, the chapter outlines how community economies and wellbeing scholarship are parallel projects which would benefit from continued dialogue.

(DE)LINKING GDP AND WELLBEING

You have taken over the job of creating desire, and have transformed people into constantly moving happiness machines. Machines which have become the key to economic progress. (Herbert Hoover addressing an audience from the advertising industry, 1928)

Just as GDP per capita came to stand in for collective wellbeing at the national level, so too has it been assumed – based on the assumptions of neo-classical economic theory (Guillen-Royo, 2007) – that being a financially rich indi-

vidual would inevitably equate to greater personal satisfaction. After all, in a market society inhabited by rational economic actors, cash facilitates access to ‘goods’ and rising income brings rising utility satisfaction. Despite the assumption in conventional economic discourses that the two are coupled, prominent findings in wellbeing, scholarship question any obvious or linear link between wealth per capita and ‘wellness’ (see Jackson, 2011).

Max-Neef’s ‘threshold hypothesis’, for instance, posits that beyond a relatively low point, increases in income are very weakly – if at all – connected with reported life satisfaction (Bruni, 2006; Max-Neef, 1995). Furthermore, the Easterlin paradox appears to show that life satisfaction increases with wealth within countries, while contradictorily not increasing in a similar manner when measured between countries (Bruni, 2006, Guillen-Royo, 2007). Given the contested and likely minor role of income in quality of life, Guillen-Royo (2010, p. 391) summarizes that ‘Research on the relationship between income and happiness has repeatedly indicated that in rich societies the wellbeing dividend can be obtained by changing the stress from increasing income to the promotion of those aspects that make life worth living’ (see also Rosa, 2018).

While the link between GDP and wellbeing appears shaky, a very real connection has been shown to exist between GDP growth, unsustainable resource use and over-consumption (Hickel and Kallis, 2019; Næss and Høyer, 2009; Raworth, 2017). Such studies underscore the radical necessity for human- and earth-centred economic alternatives, with a wellbeing orientation requiring a deeper shift than just replacing metrics. Sekulova et al. (2017, p. 160), for instance, note that ‘Gross domestic product growth is just the skin of a broader socio-economic process of expansion, and of increasing control of humans over nature and one another.’ As this implies, the economy and socio-ecological welfare are tightly and materially connected in a number of ways.

One such connection, which social critics have long noted, is the importance of instilling dissatisfaction and individualistic status competition as a key driver of GDP-generating consumption (Jackson, 2017; Löwy, 2015). Ewen (2001, p. 25) notes that, as industrialism developed, ‘Men and women had to be habituated to respond to the demands of the productive machinery.’ This consumption, in turn, is not necessarily for direct use, but often part of a vision of themselves as being happier or a ‘better’ person in possession of a particular product (see Watson, Chapter 4 this volume). The rise of aspirational and lifestyle-based advertising played a key role in Fordist mass production in the early 20th century, driving the reproduction of high-consumption societies over the last century (Ewen, 2001). Kimmerer (2013, p. 111) reminds us that ‘In a consumer society, contentment is a radical proposition. Recognizing abundance rather than scarcity undermines an economy that thrives by creating unmet desires.’

By basing an economy on ‘having’ over ‘being’ in this way (Löwy, 2015), a person is reduced to their role as an individual ‘consumer’, rather than, say, a community-member, denizen, mother, father or friend. Economic activity thus becomes cut off from wider social or community networks or needs, and is reduced to mere purchasing and consumption. As Gibson-Graham (2006, p. 166) argues:

All strategies [in mainstream economics] are pursued with the promise that increased well-being will trickle down from the capitalist sector and its employees to the wider community. And all are beholden to the conviction that economic growth... is unquestionably desirable. Underpinning the complex set of strategies, policies, and beliefs that constitutes development discourse is a particular ontological framing of economic dynamics that is rooted in the experience of Western European and North American industrialization. The relationships between production and consumption, investment and growth, proletarianization and material well-being, competition, technological change, and efficiency that ostensibly characterized these experiences have been reified as structural logics of economic functioning and elevated as universal principles.

Given exponential GDP growth since the industrial revolution, the world would seem destined for a state of high-consumptive bliss, to paraphrase WW Rostow (1960). The economic model has backfired, however, and its very foundations have proven not just false, but actively harmful. After all, if neo-classical assumptions around the market (operating optimally, left to the ‘invisible hand’) and individual (as rational, utility-maximizing market actors with insatiable desires) were true, then it’s difficult to see why such extensive consumer manipulation – through the PR industry – would be needed. Furthermore, in countries of the Majority World, these neo-classical assumptions simply do not translate, with ‘other psycho-social factors [playing] a major role’ (Guillen-Royo, 2007, p. 166). Even in the United States, a seminal text on the pitfalls of capitalist business-as-usual – Tim Kasser’s *The High Price of Materialism* (2002) – presents evidence that ‘the American dream has a dark side, and the pursuit of wealth and possessions might actually be undermining our well-being’ (p. 9; see also Atkinson et al., 2020).

The trans-disciplinary research agenda focused on community economies instead aims to reintroduce place-based ethics to the conversation around well-being, rescuing it from both this universalist neo-classical economic paradigm and the tendency to replace *homo economicus* with *homo felix* (the latter often measured in terms of Subjective Well Being [SWB]). The diverse and community economies approach converts wellness from a thing out there in the world – ready for measurement and objective analysis – to being something shared and dynamic: akin to a conversation. As the next section makes clear, this is ‘to

think about what our human lives are actually about, and how we should best live them together' (Tronto, 2017, p. 37).

FROM DIVERSE TO COMMUNITY ECONOMIES – SURVIVING WELL TOGETHER

What if we asked theory to do something else – to help us see openings, to help us to find happiness, to provide a space of freedom and possibility? (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 7)

Drawing from the seminal work of JK Gibson-Graham in economic geography, the study of diverse economies is a feminist economic project which sets out to appreciate the plethora of economic forms which constitute what we think of as 'the' economy. In particular, it grew from criticisms that swathes of economic thinking tended to focus on just the capitalist elements of social reproduction – namely, waged labour, market transactions and capitalist enterprise (Figure 6.1) – and ignore the more-than-capitalist world of social reproduction, exchange and provisioning that underpin it. The tendency to ignore the diversity of the economy and focus only on the capitalist tip of a larger iceberg has been described as 'capitalocentrism' (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 623). This parallels arguments that we live at a time of profound 'capitalist realism' (Fisher, 2009) where alternatives to capitalism are obscured, or viewed as deeply unrealistic, if not simply unthinkable in the first place.

In a diverse economies framing, the economy is seen as already full of possibility: it is a 'contingent assemblage of process, practices, and actors (human and non-human) that make possible the production and distribution of goods and services' (Community Economies Collective, 2019, p. 57). While capitalist accumulation occurs, the economy is understood as not necessarily only and inevitably structured by it. The well-known cast of exploitative capitalists, parasitic landlords and oppressed wage labourers feature as only part of the overall performance, present alongside subjects of other class processes – independent, communal, feudal, slave, and more (Gibson-Graham, 1996). In this work, local and participatory inventory exercises are often used to create a fuller appreciation of everyday and more-than-capitalist economic practices, highlighting the rich diversity hidden by conventional approaches (Figure 6.1). Of course, the uncovered diversity also includes class processes and economic activities that are racist and oppressive (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski, 2020). The question then becomes which of these diverse economic activities can seed different kinds of economies that are better for people and planet (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013) – what kinds of *community economies* can we imagine? And *how* can we build on parts of what is already there to foster these ethically rather than contribute to oppression?



Source: Ken Byrne, Community Economies Collective (Creative Commons License).

Figure 6.1 Diverse economies iceberg

By moving discussion from *diverse economies* to *community economies*, a series of more normative questions are raised by scholars and activists (see Box 6.1). Scholars of community economies thus pay particular attention to which diverse (more-than-capitalist) practices contribute to individual, community and ecological wellbeing and how they might be marshalled to enable communities to survive well together. This acknowledges ‘the plethora of hidden and alternative economic activities that contributed to social well-being and environmental regeneration’ (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 216).

The Community Economies Collective (2019, p. 56) defines a community economy as ‘a set of economic practices that... foregrounds community and environmental wellbeing’. The resulting scholarship in this field (which, at the time of writing, includes a network of researchers spanning various continents through initiatives such as the Community Economies Research Network (CERN) and the Community Economies Institute (CEI) (see communityeconomies.org)), has reinvigorated an interest in the diversity of local economies from which more-than-capitalist worlds could flourish, which are often dismissed as too small or too local in conventional theorizing. By looking at how economies are performed, and how they can be performed *differently* in the here and now, community economies scholarship evades the dilemma of either simply accepting the status quo, or waiting idly for some future revolution (Roelvink and Zolkos, 2015).

BOX 6.1 KEY CONCERNS OF A COMMUNITY ECONOMY

- How do we survive well? What do we really need to live healthy lives, in ways that don’t impinge on others’ health and wellbeing (including the planet)?
- How do we distribute surplus? What do we do with what’s left over from meeting our survival needs? How do we decide what to do with it?
- What kinds of transactions do we want to have? How do we secure the things we can’t produce ourselves? What kinds of relationships with human and non-human others do we create in these transactions?
- How do we consume sustainably? What do we use up in the process of surviving well? How do we do this with care?
- How do we maintain, restore and replenish our natural, social and intellectual commons?
- How do we invest for future generations? How do we store and use our surplus for the wellbeing of people and planet into the future?

Source: Gibson-Graham et al. (2013).

There are many parallels between disaffection with the hegemony of GDP, as described in previous sections, and this move beyond capitalocentrism, towards community economies. These start with the common aim of weakening the hegemonic economic narratives or discourses of the 20th and 21st centuries: away from reifying capitalism and conventional understandings of development in the case of the community economies school, and away from fixations on GDP in the case of wellbeing scholarship. These are not unrelated goals, of course: As Kuznets admitted, GDP sets up our understanding of the economy in a capitalocentric way, excluding the non-market and non-commodified. The assumption made by neo-classical economics – that access to money satisfies utility – excludes the role of the various non-monetized spheres which diverse economies scholars bring to light. This includes domestic reproductive labour, but also various forms of gift economies, barter, Indigenous modes of exchange, volunteering and mutual aid, to name just a few. Together, community economies and wellbeing research can thus shift our focus in a number of ways: from privatized profit to socio-cultural connectivity and equitable surplus distribution; from wage labour to good work and livelihoods; from private property to commoning; and from speculative investment and finance to investing in common future wellbeing.

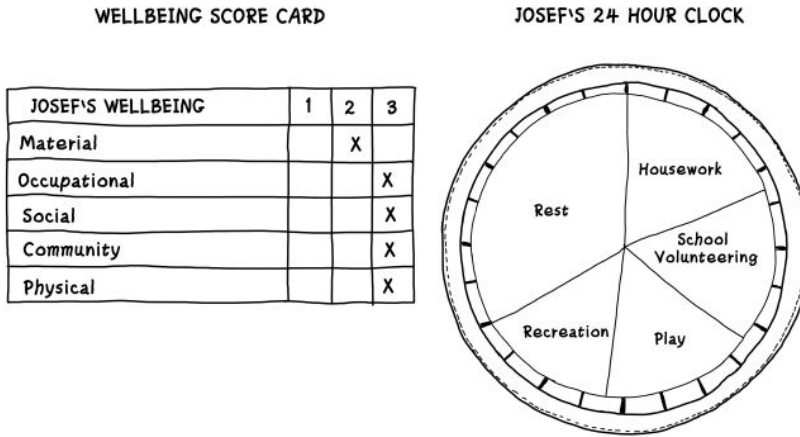
While sceptical of the rise of new quantified wellbeing indicators which ‘make a complicated world both knowable and manageable’ (p. 121), Gibson-Graham et al. (2016) appreciate that at least some of these attempts to assess wellbeing ‘move away from understanding happiness in purely individualized terms as a personality trait, and acknowledge the role that collective endeavours play’ (p. 117). Furthermore, while metrics such as the Human Development Index problematically maintain GDP as a constituent, other representations of wellbeing have concretely expanded our vision of ‘the economy’ in the way the iceberg diagram does. This has included, for instance, re-centring on the importance of unpaid and volunteer work, both in the home and the community. Gibson-Graham et al. (2016) cite the World Happiness Report as a positive development on this front and, while the 2020 report primarily relies on aggregation of individual data, it too pays attention to the ‘social foundations of happiness’ (Helliwell et al., 2020, p. 33), including social interactions, interpersonal support, trust, and (combating) inequality (see Ceislik in Chapter 5 and contributions in Part II this volume for research exploring these themes). Similarly, the inclusion of care and volunteer labour hours in census systems in Canada and New Zealand are helpful developments towards balancing the exclusions of GDP calculations in both countries.

While we can identify productive resonances in a broad sense, much contemporary wellbeing research sits uncomfortably with the theoretical commitments of community economies scholarship. First, the community economies tradition moves away from confidently asserting what ‘wellbeing’ is. There is

no *a priori* sense of what is at the heart of the good life, nor would it be possible to instrumentally and objectively ‘test’ or ‘verify’ a nation’s wellbeing (see Smith and Reid, 2018). Second, by individualizing and psychologizing notions of wellness, some wellbeing research naturalizes conventional representations of the economy and the rational actor, taking these as a seemingly neutral backdrop in the same way that capitalocentric economics does (Bruni, 2006).

By moving away from GDP and focusing on the context for wellbeing itself, community economic practices attempt ‘to meet local needs by delivering increased wellbeing directly (rather than relying on the circuitous route of capitalist industrialization)’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 193). Focusing on community practices for wellbeing, rather than indirect goals such as ‘development’ or ‘GDP’, is what Fischer (2014) describes as Aristotelian or ‘eudaimonic’. The eudaimonic approach contrasts with ‘hedonic’ ones by focusing on cultivating the context for flourishing and the quality of processes over time, rather than immediate and often short-lived individualistic sensations of happiness (Atkinson et al., 2020). As Amartya Sen (1985, p. 197) noted, ‘It is hard to avoid the conclusion that although happiness is of obvious and direct relevance to wellbeing, it is inadequate as a representation of wellbeing.’ This tradition thus seeks a more durable sense of wellness, often through shared eco-social and economic practices (Schmid and Smith, 2020).

More nuanced understandings of the ‘collective or relational aspect of happiness’ (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016 p. 118) are notoriously difficult to measure or track. Gibson-Graham et al. (2016) propose a ‘relational metrics approach’ (p. 122) as one way to ‘challenge the tenets of neoliberal government that promote individualism, austerity and disinvestment in social welfare as the rightful way to progress the nation’ (p. 119). Using a time-use clock and rudimentary ‘wellbeing scorecard’ (Figure 6.2) as examples, Gibson-Graham et al. assert that such tools could be used as a starting point for people ‘engaging in joint reflection on their lives as a prelude to collective actions to more effectively survive well together and in so doing achieve happiness’ (2016, p. 129). While the tools themselves are asking for individuals to reflect, the idea is that this happens within a process of communities together negotiating to enhance material, social, occupational, community and physical wellbeing. These sorts of simple facilitative tools can be coupled with other participatory exercises to understand the various economic practices which underpin community wellbeing. This includes the participatory creation of a specific ‘iceberg’ (Figure 6.1) using local terminology and practices (McKinnon et al., 2016), or conducting a community economic inventory broken down into categories such as transactions (whether market or non-market), labour (waged or non-waged) and enterprise (capitalist or non-capitalist) (Gibson-Graham, 2005). Such exercises play a performative role, intervening in social reality to create new ways of discussing, framing and, ultimately, enacting social



Source: Gibson-Graham et al. (2013).

Figure 6.2 Tools for thinking about wellbeing

possibility. They can, for instance, bring to light ‘the wide range of economic practices that support wellbeing directly, offer a social safety net and are vehicles for community celebration and civic engagement’ (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2011, p. 30). Furthermore, they can be crucial in revaluing those groups/practices/individuals which may be marginalized or even seen as unproductive, or shed light on the economy’s broad dependence on (or exchange with) ecological and more-than-human processes (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2011). They are designed to create conversations around difference and to negotiate community around shared concerns.

While it is not opposed to representations of the ‘good life’ and what it might entail, the community economies tradition does not merely replace one set of wellbeing metrics with another. Instead, the argument made here is that it draws on a fundamentally different and more open economic framing than orthodox neo-classical economics. ‘Being’ in the community economies tradition is always *being-in-common* and, thus *wellbeing* becomes reframed around practices of ‘surviving well *together*’ (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016). In the next section we provide an insight into the implications this has for undertaking wellbeing research.

Action Research: Negotiating (Well)Being-in-Common through Practices of Care

In a community economy of care, the relationality of livelihoods and economies are foregrounded, allowing us to focus on the ways that practices of economy create opportunities to care for human and non-human others. (Dombroski et al., 2019b, p. 113)

The notion of wellbeing was central to the recovery of the city of Christchurch in Aotearoa New Zealand following a series of devastating earthquakes in 2010 and 2011. While the major seismic events were the 7.2 megawatt (Mw) earthquake in September 2010 and the more devastating 6.3 Mw earthquake of February 2011, where 185 people died, the entire earthquake sequence over almost five years included more than 4,000 *noticeable* earthquakes and many minor shocks. Christchurch residents experienced an average of around 2.4 earthquakes per day for some five years (Dombroski et al., 2018). One can imagine how wellbeing might be under strain with such constant reminders of death and destruction combined with loss or damage of homes, battles with insurance providers, broken sewerage and drainage systems and recurrent flooding, ongoing erosion of citizen's rights under emergency law and deeply disrupted place attachment with over 80 per cent of the central city demolished.

As an indicator of the poor mental wellbeing of the population at this time, the Canterbury District Health Board reported a 69 per cent increase in the number of children and youth presenting for mental health services, and a 40 per cent increase in adult referrals after the 2011 earthquakes (Liberty et al., 2016). Indeed, while the initial community response to the earthquakes was to work in common for collective wellbeing, through both new organizing and drawing on older organizations (Carlton and Vallance, 2017), over time, the daily grind of living with significant, long-term disruption continued to affect people's mental health and wellbeing (Sepie, 2015). It was in this context that community economies scholars began a number of interrelated projects, working with community organizations in post-earthquake Christchurch to research – and support – different forms of being-in-common that were emerging in response to the many wellbeing deficiencies of the city. These interrelated projects sought to both *document* community economies of care and to also *research* in ways that *enacted* community economies of care.

Care emerges as one of the recurring answers to the set of questions asked by Gibson-Graham (2006), and later, Gibson-Graham et al. (2013) (see Box 6.1). In each of these key concerns, care might form part of the answer as communities marshal their diverse economic practices to carefully negotiate what a community economy might look like and what kinds of values might underpin how we survive well together. Indeed, in the ethical actions suggested by

Gibson-Graham et al. in each chapter of their activist handbook *Take Back the Economy*, care for (and with) planet and people is centred (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013). In the context of Christchurch, where so many people were struggling in response to the difficult circumstances, care was at once highly valued and clearly needed, while also operating in constrained conditions – everyone needed care, and while some needed more than others, the conditions were such that no one was likely to be operating with a ‘surplus’ of care (Dombroski et al., 2018). In such conditions, strategies aimed at the collectivization of care for wellbeing are the ones most likely to lead to surviving well together (see also Smith, 2019). The remainder of this section explores two key research projects in Christchurch, New Zealand where community economies of care were both documented and enacted.

Life in Vacant Spaces: commoning for urban wellbeing

While the post-earthquake *Alright?* campaign sought to alert Christchurch residents to the ‘five ways to wellbeing’ they could try to enact themselves, other organizations sought to provide spaces in the city that fostered wellbeing. These spaces would provide the material and social context for these ‘five ways’ to wellbeing to be enacted. Building on research on wellbeing, the Canterbury District Health Board’s *Alright?* campaign began in 2013 in the ‘disillusionment’ phase of the recovery (<https://www.allright.org.nz/about/history>). It encouraged residents to ‘connect’, ‘be active’, ‘give back’, ‘take notice’, and ‘keep learning’, promising that if the individual introduced these five strategies to their life they would ‘feel the difference’ in their wellbeing. While subsequent campaigns have been more collectively framed, the original *Alright?* campaign encouraged residents to take their wellbeing into their own hands. This individualist take on wellbeing contrasted with the work of organizations such as *Gapfiller* and *Life in Vacant Spaces (LiVS)*, which attempted to create wellbeing spaces in the city, through urban regeneration projects that fostered social transformation and community recovery.

Gapfiller is an organization that fostered community wellbeing through providing spaces for fun and connection in a city where most of the public spaces for social connection had been destroyed or shut down. Successful projects included the Pallet Pavilion, the Dance-o-Mat – a pop up interactive sound garden – ‘letterboxing’ activities, mini-golf and The Commons, all fun-enabling spaces through which quirky, community-led activities gave respite from the grind of post-quake life. *Life in Vacant Spaces* is an organization that came into being to foster urban regeneration spaces through carrying out the behind-the-scenes negotiation and legal work required for these kinds of fun projects to be carried out on private and public land that was not being used by its owners for the time being. As such both organizations emerged as collectivized forms of care that sought to promote community wellbeing

through *enabling* residents to have common spaces to connect, be active, take notice, give back and keep learning *together*.

Community economy scholars worked with Life in Vacant Spaces chairperson Irene Boles to document and analyse some of the work that LiVS and Gapfiller were doing. Using literature on commoning to document the work of these organizations in caring for common spaces in the city, the team argued that even if these were to be temporary at a project level, the reverberations were in the social transformation that occurred, where urban commoning comes to be ‘common sense’ for the people of Christchurch (Dombroski et al., 2019a). The relationship has continued, with the research team working out how to assess the ‘community economy return on investment’ of the work LiVS is carrying out with the Burwood community, co-managing a space in the ‘red zone’ (a vast area of unoccupied land where houses were demolished due to ground destabilization after the earthquakes). So far, the commons to be cared for has called into being a community of residents currently negotiating shared visions of their future community wellbeing.

Cultivate Christchurch: developing a community economy return on investment tool

Cultivate Christchurch is an urban farm and social enterprise set up in response to the lack of community mental health services in the post-earthquake period. It seeks to address youth mental health on multiple scales through providing internships to young people. These young people are welcomed into a community of urban farmers, working alongside others to grow nutritious food in soil literally built up from the green waste discarded by city-centre restaurants. In a research project in 2018, community economies scholars worked with the organization – both young people and staff – to identify the underlying values that they hoped to see enacted through concrete practices in their community, at the individual, organizational and wider community and environment scales. An assessment tool was co-created that articulated the ‘return on investment’ that these practices gave against the identified core values. For example, the values of sustainability were invested in through practices of ‘organic-ish’ farming practices, circular economies of waste, and low-carbon transportation. The values of community wellbeing were invested in through non-hierarchical practices of care and connection, slower ‘take notice’ production rates, active transport, inclusive work practices, and open days for volunteers to give back (see Healy et al., 2019).

Through this action research project, Community Economies scholars worked alongside Cultivate (both in the garden and in workshops) to identify and enhance the practices of care already in place, to enact wellbeing through being-in-common in the research process, and to create meaningful outputs such as community grant applications to foster wellbeing for others.

While the title of the funded project, ‘Delivering Urban Wellbeing through Transformative Community Enterprise’, was meant to refer to Cultivate as an organization delivering urban wellbeing, the research team negotiated with the organization as part of a community economy of care where wellbeing was co-delivered in the research action.

CONCLUSION

How do we shape social institutions and practices, from education to the allotment of work time, to see whether all people can care more? (Tronto, 2017, p. 38)

This chapter has introduced the community economies approach and highlighted what it can contribute to understandings of wellbeing. It presented parallels between how discourses of wellbeing counteract a focus on GDP, and the kind of heterodox economic re-envisioning undertaken by community economies researchers. In accordance with a focus on ‘surviving well together’, wellness was cast as something intimately tied up with our community, environmental and economic relations, rather than something individuals possess or are passively bestowed with. In some ways, this is a return to the discussions of ‘quality of life’ which preceded ‘happiness studies’ as a concern in the 20th century, albeit in a less positivist manner (Bruni, 2006; Smith and Reid, 2018).

The approach outlined here shares much with emerging work across a number of disciplines which connects wellbeing, community and relationality (Atkinson et al., 2020; Guillen-Royo, 2010; Rosa, 2018). Here we can follow Hoffmann and Metz’s (2017, p. 156) understanding of relationality: ‘if a person A has a relational property, then she has this property in virtue of her possible or actual interaction with at least one other person, B. Accordingly, a relational property cannot be found within either A or B alone.’ We would extend relationality beyond human relations, however, being irreducibly grounded in diverse connections with the more-than-human. As White (2017, p. 128) puts it:

Wellbeing is understood as arising from the common life, the shared enterprise of living in community – in whatever sense – with others... Subjective perceptions are anchored in material and relational contexts, producing a sense... of ‘life within limits’.

While care has been increasingly commercialized and marketized – and thus increasingly disembedded from community life – it can also be the connective tissue for liberation, commoning and slower, more sustainable economies. This community focus emerges in part from scepticism of national-level well-

being measures, which can mask inequalities, erode differentiated experiences or be driven by particular interests.

The question must be asked, in conclusion, as to why wellbeing measurement has so often been the tool of top-down governance, and not of communities themselves. There is no pre-existing definition of wellbeing for community economies researchers, and no optimized surveys which can capture it. Rather, it can be better understood through conversations and participatory exercises taking place close to the action. The methods used by community economies researchers require acknowledgement that wellbeing research is often implicated in the very thing which it studies, and not ‘objective’ in any distanced sense. By going beyond utilitarianism and methodological reductionism, community economies facilitate caring for the commons at various scales – a crucial intervention for times of social and ecological crisis.

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