

Ensuring the COVID-19 pandemic is the first phase of the next stage via a new role for government.

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Introduction: can COVID-19 be the first phase of the next stage?

Fred Swaniker is co-founder of African Leadership Academy. Back in October 2020, he was interviewed by the *Financial Times* – largely about the impact of COVID-19 on tourism to Africa and how the industry might emerge post-pandemic. He was quoted as saying, ‘**We have to reimagine the future, to make this crisis the first phase of the next stage**’¹ – words which aptly apply beyond tourism to as many aspects of life as it is possible to imagine.

The last year has shown the extent to which government can intervene in the economy, and that enormous shifts in policy are possible: policies previously dismissed as ‘unrealistic’ are being enacted, and levels of government intervention that would have been baulked at just a few months earlier are now being rolled out. There are higher expectations of how businesses behave and of their contribution to the wider community. COVID-19 has also highlighted the willingness of people to not only go without in order to protect individuals they will never meet but also mobilise in order to catch those at risk of hardship.

That such actions and shifts have been possible means Covid constitutes a perhaps unprecedented juncture for societies and economies around the world. Previous national traumas brought systemic change (the US’s New Deal after the Great Depression or the UK’s National Health Service and welfare state after the Second World War, for example).

After the trauma of Covid, one scenario would see calls for a return to normal heeded, and the subsequent era would all-too-closely resemble what went before. **The alternative scenario would see societies, politicians, businesses and individuals collaborate to ensure that a virus – having done immeasurable harm to so many – becomes the catalyst for overdue economic system change that prioritises human and ecological wellbeing.**

That is the choice facing us.

Normal wasn’t so nice

The words ‘I just want things to go back to normal’ are frequently heard. They may speak to a longing to be able to meet up with friends, travel to another city, visit local shops or simply hug friends and family, and in such contexts are entirely understandable.

In terms of the economy, to go back to normal would be a grave mistake.

The economy of pre-COVID-19 days was one designed for and dependent on economic growth, with GDP as its key performance indicator. This was an economy in which too many people were underpaid in precarious jobs: workers hitherto dismissed as ‘low skill’ - the couriers, the supermarket staff, the care workers, and the refuse collectors. Labour markets which operated in a way that failed to provide workers with enough to live on are just one piece of an economy that enabled wealth to be extracted. An economy which did not recognise, let alone reward, important activities such as care

¹ <https://www.ft.com/content/6a4f6c76-8a00-46cf-a645-23a5eda58825>

and social reproduction, and which sidelined the environment as merely an input to production or a place to dump waste. The economy of pre-Covid days created insecurity, despair and loneliness; it spurred desperate searches for ways to cope, whether at the pill box or the ballot box. It has driven the earth close to the sixth mass extinction² with the prospect of catastrophic climate breakdown looming large.³

Surely it is within our collective imagination and competence to envisage and build an economy that does not mistreat so many of our most essential workers and which no longer implicitly tolerates glaring inequalities? **When the efforts of scientists and health workers have created vaccines within unprecedented timescales, surely it is not beyond these same societies to reorientate economic systems towards one that concertedly benefits people and planet?**

A wellbeing economy

Such an economy – often termed a ‘wellbeing economy’ – is one that is designed to deliver social justice on a healthy planet. This constitutes a substantial *repurposing* of the economy away from its growth orientation. It demands major transformation in the operation of businesses, the design of infrastructure, the nature of work, decision-making mechanisms, international relations, provision of basic needs, and so on. **By reorienting goals and expectations for business, politics and society**, a wellbeing economy would benefit people’s lives, rather than causing harm which then requires much effort to remedy. For example, with less damage to the natural world there would be less cleaning up, sequestration, and remedial work to be done; with people’s fundamental human needs being met, there would be less need for costly downstream acute interventions to heal the lives bruised by an extractive economy.

Transforming an economy is a complex process that needs to cover all sectors and places. There will be new skills needed, new jobs and ways of working to embrace, new infrastructure to be built, new ways of measuring success to embed, and new ways of working together to be forged. Fortunately, there are pockets of good practice to build on and a growing movement is forming around the idea of a wellbeing economy. One example of necessary change, that provides both **an illustration of what a wellbeing economy needs to entail and proof that reorienting economies is possible, is the ‘community wealth building’ taking place in more and more communities**. Local leaders are proactively harnessing local spend and utilising procurement, ownership and employment to not just retain wealth locally, but to build the economy from the bottom up and out. This is in clear contrast to the extractive economy, which treats communities and people as inputs to profit-making; people who should be grateful for any wealth that trickled down (it rarely did).

Communities of place to the fore...but not on their own

Another contrast between pre-Covid ways and wellbeing economy ways⁴ is an explicit recognition that individuals cannot bear all the burden of change – that the onus cannot be on treating individuals who are bearing the brunt of circumstances beyond their control.

In a wellbeing economy, instead of policy prescriptions that *intervene* at the individual level, effort will be made to mobilise trust, connection, and power in communities. Communities will be designing and driving change. Examples abound of hitherto marginalised and deprived communities harnessing the ideas, energy, agency and solutions generated locally to deliver new ways

² Ceballos G, Ehrlich P, Raven P. Vertebrates on the brink as indicators of biological annihilation and the sixth mass extinction. *PNAS* 2020;117(24).

³ Ripple W, Wolf C, Newsome T, Barnard P, Moomaw W. ‘World Scientists’ Warning of a Climate Emergency’ *BioScience* 2020;70(1).

⁴ For more, see the Old Way New Way table here: <https://wellbeingeconomy.org/resources>

of doing things. In Linwood in Scotland, for instance, a group of local women have led community-up economic transformation on their terms.⁵

What could bolster such efforts – which so often exist despite rather than because of prevailing policy regimes and government measures – would be policy-makers proactively handing over power, resources, and direction-setting to communities themselves. **Instead of asking local organisations to leap through bureaucratic hoops and demonstrate their ‘innovativeness’, governments of all levels should underwrite community solutions.** This means providing financial support to underpin community-led change, rather than setting the terms of disbursement according to agendas determined by remote agencies. It means handing over assets and protecting common-good resources for collective management. When deployed with thoughtful and considered design, participatory budgeting is a good example, as are citizens assemblies, development trusts, cooperative housing, community gardens, and so on.

Communities are, of course, complicated, messy, and contradictory. **But with the top-down mindset that comes with traditional models removed, and with communities instead able to pursue their agendas knowing they are underwritten, they will be able to think long-term and upstream and mobilise and experiment in beautiful and creative ways.**

A poignant illustration of the potential impact of being able to move in the direction a community wants to go can be seen in Canada. Researchers sought to learn from those First Nations communities able to buck the trend of high suicide rates amongst young Indigenous men. They found that those communities able to rehabilitate their culture (underpinned by control being passed from government to the community, and deliberate preservation of heritage, including speaking local languages) have been able to celebrate their past and galvanise their collective future. This has effectively insulated young First Nations people from the risk of suicide.⁶ Surely there is no greater prize?

Conclusion

The window of possibility COVID-19 presents will quickly close. Without substantial shifts, politicians will rush to return to how things were, despite mounting evidence that people do not want this.^{7, 8} Change is hard, and people understandably hold on to what they know, especially those who derive status and privilege from the current setup. The risk is that an inability to break out of the conceptual straitjacket that offers only narrow and inadequate responses will perpetuate downstream, symptoms-focused mechanisms that prevailed before the pandemic. **Imagining a new role for government that turns the tables on previous power relations and has communities’ backs rather than holding them back, is a vital part of ensuring that Covid does prove to be the first phase of the next stage.**

⁵ <https://wellbeingeconomy.org/linwood-scotland-a-microcosm-of-the-beginnings-of-a-wellbeing-economy>

⁶ { <http://web.uvic.ca/~lalonde/manuscripts/1998TransCultural.pdf>

⁷ Harvey F. Britons want quality of life indicators to take priority over economy. *The Guardian*, 10 May 2020. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/may/10/britons-want-quality-of-life-indicators-priority-over-economy-coronavirus>

⁸ Proctor K. Just 6% of UK public 'want a return to pre-pandemic economy'. *The Guardian*, 28 June 2020. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/28/just-6-of-uk-public-want-a-return-to-pre-pandemic-economy?mc_cid=d0ac2e899e&mc_eid=ec726e8248