

Crafting resilient and healthier societies through empathy, community and culture

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In a world grappling with conflicts, climate crises, economic inequity and health disparities, the urgent call for a profound paradigm shift has never been more pronounced.

Enter the concept of the well-being economy – an economy that places the well-being of the planet and of the many, over short-term profits for the few.

Central to such a transformation is the recognition of empathy, a sense of community, global belonging and improved health as pillars for sustainable progress. Culture, including popular culture, plays a key role in achieving this.

Empathy as a cornerstone of a just society

Empathy, that is, the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, is a cornerstone of a just society and of a well-being economy. It is more than a mere sentiment: it is a fundamental aspect that can ensure that economic systems are designed inclusively and are sensitive to the needs of all, especially the most marginalized. Initiatives such as the poignant storytelling of Humans of New York (2) and the close-to-real encounters facilitated by the Museum for the United Nations – United Nations Live's Global We conversations (3) harness the power of empathy. They can foster a deep understanding of diverse life experiences, thus creating a sense of connection and global belonging that is crucial for the well-being of societies.

Fostering community for resilient societies

The feeling of community, belonging and contribution emerges as a crucial factor in fostering resilient, healthier and happier societies. Such recognition of our interconnected lives becomes vital when acknowledging that our actions, including economic ones, can have far-reaching impacts. We, for example, know from the United Kingdom (4), that volunteering is a direct contributor to individual well-being as well as to local economies – it embodies the spirit of collective responsibility. We also know from Iceland that a strong sense of community and contribution can lead to more gender-equal and safe societies (5). We know from Belgium (6) and the United Kingdom (7) that investing in community development approaches based on reinforcing social connectedness leads to increased trust and a sense of safety, improves mental health, and reduces loneliness and use of antidepressants. And we know how the Village Health Committees in central Asia have fostered collective action to improve the labelling and pricing of essential food ingredients and build social capital in communities (8,9).

Health as a foundation in well-being economies

Improved health, both physical and mental, is not merely an outcome but also a foundation of a well-being economy and resilient societies. Cities such as Copenhagen exemplify the integration of health into urban design, which fosters more physical activity and creates healthier, more engaged communities, including through well-connected biking lanes, green spaces and safe school ways (10–13). The COVID-19

pandemic highlighted the interconnectedness of health and economic resilience (14), as for example seen in New Zealand's response, prioritizing well-being over short-term economic gains, which resulted not only in saved lives but also in a quicker economic recovery (14,15). This underscores the necessity of health-oriented policies and considerations in infrastructure and economic planning.

Culture: a catalyst for change in well-being economies

A key driver in the transformative journey to a well-being economy is culture. Culture, in its broadest sense, shapes values, behaviours and societal norms. In particular, popular culture – including film, music, sports and gaming – can drive change with the many millions of people and help to shape and further a well-being economy by influencing norms and public perceptions, driving consumer behaviours towards sustainability and inclusivity, and through storytelling manifesting new narratives, thus raising awareness about social and environmental issues.

Engaging popular culture platforms, which the Museum for the United Nations – United Nations Live focuses on, can help to foster empathy, community engagement and political urgency that are crucial for changing our political and economic systems into systems that are not only robust but also inclusive, caring and conducive to the well-being of all citizens – in short, a well-being economy.

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