



An economics of living systems for human health and wellbeing

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Joint statement

Development has been pursued with the interest to improve human health and well-being, and it did, but seemingly only on a narrow bandwidth of what it means to be human.

Today we live longer than ever before in human history, but we also die lonely because our social security systems have freed children to take care of their parents.

We have reduced child mortality but cannot provide our children and youth with the opportunities of employment and a fulfilled life. The living conditions we have created for many of them are uncertain, unhealthy and dangerous.

We freed most people on earth from hunger but now more people suffer from malnutrition and obesity than from hunger and die prematurely because of a variety of lifestyle diseases.

Most of us on earth now live in cities. Urban environments which radically changed the ways we live, work, communicate and interrelate to another, as members of a society in which we are strangers to most others.

Today the biggest global health crisis in low- and middle-income countries are non-communicable diseases (NCD), also referred to as lifestyle diseases. Among them most prominently: cancer, diabetes, obesity. They kill millions of people prematurely. In addition, our immune system weakens and our fertility decreases – just to mention a few health symptoms of urban life.

We therefore need to ask ourselves, what it means to be human and why development has left us with unsatisfied human needs by focusing on the satisfaction of a narrow bandwidth of human needs and values.

The New Urban Agenda (NUA) “represents a shared vision for a better and more sustainable future – one in which all people have equal rights and access to the benefits and opportunities that cities can offer.” The NUA recognizes that multiple forms of poverty persist, inequalities grow and environmental degradation remains.

Stakeholders of the New Urban Agenda want to live in cities in which they can fulfill their needs of being human: subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participating, leisure, creativity, identity, spirituality and freedom. They want those human needs to be satisfied by various forms of having, being, interacting and doing: adequate, safe and healthy housing and access to food, drinking water and sanitation, as well as access to employment, education, transport, security and energy. They want to participate in political decision making and engage in civic and social life, develop a sense of belonging and identity, and culturally express themselves.

Unfortunately, economic development and urbanization has largely focused on ‘having’ by making use of a value concept which needs to be measured in monetary units. The narrow definition of value in economics is not able to reflect the variety of human needs.

Economic value today is built around the idea of “willingness to pay”. It is a demand-based concept which fits into an economic theory co-created by Leon Walras and others and which is supposed to be coherent and mathematically consistent. But the alleged perfection and precision of that economic theory captures only very little of what we, as humans, value in life. And as life is complex the more we attempt to capture it by precision and efficiency, the more it escapes us.

Complex systems are not complicated systems. They are not fully predictable and show novel patterns and behaviour from emergence – features which are not simply the result of the assemblage of system components.

Our current predominant economic value concept addresses very few basic needs like, e.g. subsistence and protection, mainly satisfying those needs by “having”. This allows greed, fear and competition to express themselves (naturally) in consumer behaviour.

By rapidly altering the environments we live in, we detach ourselves from what and who we are and where we belong: nature. That is unhealthy and leads to mental, social and physical health disorders. It also creates environmental health problems and destroys the ecological life support systems human health and wellbeing depends on.

People know that and are unhappy with that situation. That is why people, in the New Urban Agenda of the United Nations, call for urban environments in which they can be human, identify with and live healthy lives. They want and aspire to reconnect to what makes them human by satisfying through ‘being, doing, interacting and having’ the full range human needs.

That can be achieved by an economics of living systems at human scale.

An economics of living systems is a human-scale economics. It is not a new economics, rather the consilience of existing schools of thought, branches and disciplines of science and humanities.

It is, however, a new transdisciplinary and integrated approach to economics inspired by a wide range of scientific disciplines, including complex systems theory.

In an economics of living systems, “living healthy human lives” means addressing the full range of human needs by all forms of satisfying them: having, being, interacting and doing. Value, including economic value emerges from all forms of satisfying human needs.

In an economics of living systems, institutional change at all levels, from values, norms, conventions to property rights, legal systems and governance, needs to happen.

The Human Scale Development Index (HSDI) can help to assess the degree to which we managed to achieve a human-scale economics.

Institutional change for an economic of living systems will occur if people are given the freedom and are enabled to explore the opportunity spaces and their capabilities – by allowing people to be human, to use their creativity and talents to serve each other and the planet.

To achieve this degree of freedom requires an economy at human scale, one in which we are not obliged to grow irrespective of the changing environmental and social context.

Giving that freedom and enabling people, needs to happen by conscious choice and as an intelligent response to the state of the world we have largely created ourselves in this era of the so-called ‘Anthropocene’.

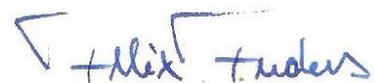
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