IT’S NOT (JUST) ABOUT JOBS: Education for economic wellbeing

Keri Facer, University of Bristol

ABSTRACT

What is economic wellbeing and what role can education play in achieving this? This paper draws on economist Kate Raworth’s argument that vibrant economies arise not from jobs and the market alone, but from the caring work of households, from the infrastructure and investments of the state and from the collective resources of the commons. A concern for the long term functioning of economies and of individuals and communities within them, therefore, requires a turn away from a narrow focus on ‘jobs’ towards a concern for a broader concept of economic wellbeing. While education cannot be reduced to a role that simply services the economy, there are important implications of this shift for educators and education systems. It suggests that education needs to attend not only to students’ capacities to participate in meaningful work in the formal economy, but to their capacities to create ecologically resilient and caring households. It suggests that attention needs to be paid not only to jobs, but to students’ capacities to sustain and defend viable states and to contribute to the maintenance of common goods. Even in the area of paid employment, increasing precarity and casualisation point to the critical importance for students’ economic wellbeing of being able to organise collectively to create conditions in which they are able to work and care with dignity. This capacity to organise will necessarily involve the ability to reflect upon broader economic questions; not least, whether current economic arrangements are oriented towards the goals of human dignity and planetary survival upon which economic wellbeing fundamentally depends.

1 The author can be contacted at Keri.Facer@bristol.ac.uk
INTRODUCTION

Education’s role in relation to the economy is contested. One position is that education should equip young people to compete for jobs in the commercial marketplace. A contrary position is that education is precisely separated from the market so that young people can develop the relationships and capabilities that will allow them to thrive in society more broadly. This paper argues that rather than getting caught up in this longstanding debate we may find common ground if we ask a different question, namely: what sort of education will enable young people to create long-term economic wellbeing for themselves, their families and their communities?

Economic wellbeing refers to the personal and collective ability to mobilise economic, social and material resources to achieve personal and collective wellbeing. This ability can be understood to depend upon what the economist Kate Raworth calls ‘provisioning practices’ that provide goods, services, care, materials, and the basics of living (Raworth, 2017, p. 67). These provisioning practices include paid work in the marketplace in exchange for money, but also access to goods and services provided by households, by the commons and by the state. Education for economic wellbeing, in this perspective then, cannot be understood as a question of preparation for work alone.

The first part of this paper thinks through Raworth’s four key provisioning practices - paid work, the household, the commons and the state - as a means to sharpen up the concept of economic wellbeing in ways that are useful for informing the educational debate. The second section looks at current insights into how these provisioning practices might be developing over the coming years. The final section discusses the implications of these changing provisioning practices for education for economic wellbeing.

The desk review upon which this paper is based did not seek to be comprehensive. Instead, it aimed to identify those theories and practices in new economic theory and the scholarship of the futures of work that are concerned in particular with the goals of human dignity and planetary wellbeing, and which address explicitly issues of technological change and environmental degradation. Insights from the Global South are less well-represented than they might be, as are conventional mainstream economic accounts. The first absence is as a result of language barriers (on my part) and inequalities in patterns of academic funding and publishing. The second absence is intentional given the failure of mainstream economics to provide for human dignity and planetary wellbeing. This paper is not intended to be the final word on these issues, but to provoke critical analysis and reflection upon the economic assumptions upon which instrumental educational goals are being premised.

ECONOMIC WELLBEING DEPENDS UPON FOUR FORMS OF PROVISIONING

Discussions of education and economics often centre around work and employment. For many around the world, however, having a job in the formal economy has long been seen as a fantasy; their financial income comes primarily from informal work, the grey economy and precarious employment. Indeed, it is likely that over 50% of the employment in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, is already constituted in the informal economy (Sidorkin, 2017). For many others, the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the 2008 financial crisis made starkly visible the fact that jobs in themselves are not enough to provide economic security. Jobs can and do disappear overnight, leaving workers stranded – from banking industry professionals in the United States, to airline workers in Europe to migrant labourers in India. Under these conditions the other ways in which people create security for themselves – the care and material resources of the household, the resources of the commons and the underpinning infrastructures of the State become clearly apparent, alongside their fragilities. Indeed, this is what a new generation of economic theorists (e.g. Hickel 2020; Waddock, 2020; Raworth, 2017; Chang, 2010; Boyle and Simms, 2009)
are arguing. Namely, that economic wellbeing and security does not come from an attention to the formal economy alone, but comprises, in Raworth’s terms, at least four different forms of provisioning for the household:

- **Paid work** – what we tend to think of as ‘the economy’, or ‘the market’, namely, forms of employment and exchange through which households are resourced with money and/or goods with exchange value. This might be both formal work, acknowledged through taxation and by the state – or informal work, providing access to money and/or goods in the grey economy.

- **Household provisioning** – this is the work within households that provides care for the person: the labour of looking after children and older adults; the production and preparation of food; for many women and children in areas of ecological stress, the gathering of water; or the creation of safe shelter to live within. This labour is essential to the capacity of the body to take on paid work.

- **Provisioning of the commons** – this references the resources that are held in common by local and global communities. This includes, for example, access to clean air, water, trustworthy sources of information, common lands for food production, a viable ecosystem that sustains agricultural production. These resources create the conditions for all other forms of provisioning, their sustenance is therefore economically critical.

- **Provisioning by the state** – this references the infrastructural resources such as transport systems and roads, welfare and health care, or long-term research and development, legal rights and freedoms – which create stable conditions to enable the effective functioning of the other three forms of provisioning (Raworth, 2017).

Economic wellbeing, in other words, is not something that can be achieved - either for individuals or states - by thinking about jobs alone. Rather, as economists such as Kate Raworth and Maria Mazzucato argue, the domain of formal employment and ‘the market’ is deeply embedded in and dependent upon the provisioning activities of these three other domains: the household, the commons, and the state. These economic analyses make visible the critical importance of thinking holistically about economic wellbeing.

This sort of thinking is not simply theoretical. Instead, these ideas are already being practically applied in a number of different cities and regions. Cities such as Brussels, Sao Paolo and Barcelona, for example, are developing post COVID-19 recovery strategies based upon these analyses. A new platform and action lab to facilitate cities sharing expertise with each other has been established, along with an online community for collaboration that has seen participants from Colombia to Malaysia. The city of Amsterdam is taking the lead, and making real change on the ground with new legislation and practices, implementing everything from new approaches to pricing in stores to reflect the previously invisible ‘external’ costs of impact on environment and social wellbeing, to shifting towards circular economy models for new construction.

If, as educators, parents, policymakers and researchers, we are interested in education’s role in building economic wellbeing for individuals and communities, therefore, we need to understand that this requires nurturing and developing all four provisioning practices, understanding their interdependencies, and critically, how they may be evolving. The remainder of this piece presents a discussion of these practices, including current insights into how these may be changing over the coming years, and their implications for education for economic wellbeing.

**CHANGING PROVISIONING PRACTICES**

**PAID WORK AND THE MARKET**

The last decades have been characterised by a set of trends that have been changing the nature of work. This includes:

- restructuring of employment in the light of new technologies

---

3 This work forms part of what Raworth calls the ‘Doughnut Economics’ approach – which aims to balance planetary and social boundaries. See the Doughnut Economics Action Lab [https://doughnuteconomics.org/](https://doughnuteconomics.org/)

4 The following provides an accessible overview of how these policies are being applied at city scale; there is no discussion as yet of their application in educational settings [https://time.com/5930093/amsterdam-doughnut-economics/](https://time.com/5930093/amsterdam-doughnut-economics/)
- global increases in women’s participation in the formal economy
- increases in polarisation of the economy between highly paid, highly mobile capital and employment as compared with growing mass low-wage work
- the globalisation and increasing complexity of supply chains
- growth in informal economies and under- and precarious employment

It is possible, as Buchanan and colleagues argue, that the current pandemic will act as an inflection point equivalent to the 1970s oil crisis to intensify such changes and generate a significant phase shift towards a jobless recovery (Buchanan, 2020). Even without the pandemic, however, technological developments and climate change were promising to bring significant disruptions to formal and informal employment (Woodcock and Graham, 2019) and wealth inequalities have been systematically deepening since the 1980s (Sayer, 2015; Brown et al., 2012).

In envisaging possible futures for paid work, then, three key potential developments and challenges are worth particular attention:

First, the failure of recovery to bring a return of jobs, alongside experiments in universal basic income currently being trialled in a number of countries, suggests the potential intensification in the Global North of patterns of employment already visible in the Global South. Namely, a re-orientation towards casualised, voluntary and precarious employment (Sidorkin, 2017) in which informal labour (as well as optional and voluntary labour in richer countries) plays an even more significant role in household incomes. Indeed, the intersection between precarity and digital technologies is pushing towards the emergence of a gig economy that both ‘creates new labour markets and transform[s] (some) old ones’ and offers ‘the capacity to exploit and alienate workers in new and innovative ways’ (Graham and Shaw, 2017, p.6).

Second, the urgent need to move away from carbon-based industries to achieve compliance with Paris Climate Agreement targets will bring significant employment challenges to areas with high levels of dependence upon such industries as well as increases in employment in areas able to exploit the potential for green energy and growth (Bezdek, 2014). The demands and drivers for a just transition, namely a massive investment in employment transitions for those affected to enable them to transition towards sustainable work, are likely to grow. Third, the adoption of artificial intelligence, while unlikely to be as universally transformative as its proponents suggest, is likely to bring a major and swift restructuring of employment in those countries and industries with the resources to adopt rapidly. This restructuring is likely to further exacerbate inequalities in the short term and demand new working relationships between humans and non-human-like-intelligence in the long term. The virtualisation of working practices driven by the pandemic may further continue the dislocation in service and knowledge work from place and intensify trends towards 24/7 working in industries previously protected from this.

The aim here is not to predict the future – indeed, two significant wildcards not currently discussed in the economic or employment literature are the role of quantum computing and developments in fission energy. Their combination brings the possibility of a radical transformation in the knowledge base and the energy base of society – such a transformation will necessarily create highly unpredictable new trends – some of which may be desirable. What is clear, however, is that the worlds of paid work are changing in ways that may radically intensify existing inequalities. Political and social responses – of which educational strategy is an important part - will significantly determine the social impact of these developments.

HOUSEHOLD PROVISIONING

The market of paid work, both formal and informal, however, does not survive without the work of household provisioning – from rearing children, caring for the sick, growing and cooking food, to, in many places, walking miles for water. Childcare,

---

5 See the Royal Society for more information: https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/data-and-ai/artificial-intelligence/
supporting the infirm and elderly, is unpaid labour without which the narrower economy of the formal workplace cannot function. Household provisioning also takes the form of household food production in many parts of the world, with household resources playing an important role in complementing market goods. In many situations, those with access to land and gardens for food production have been able to demonstrate greater resilience to economic shocks than those without (Galhena et al., 2013). Economic wellbeing, in other words, is not just about income from work, it is also about the labour involved in households being able to care for and feed themselves.

As women have entered the workforce, and as food production has been delocalised, household provisioning has become dependent upon a wider infrastructure of access to care and health services, and to commercialised food supplies. As Raworth argues, this aspect of the economy “matters because when – in the name of austerity and public-sector savings – governments cut budgets for children’s daycare centres, community services, parental leave and youth clubs, the need for care-giving doesn’t disappear: it just gets pushed back into the home” (Raworth, 2017, p. 69). Such a change often, as we have seen during the pandemic, withdraws women’s talents and skills from the wider community and workplace. Creating conditions in which households can provide or access care and develop food supplies that are resilient to marketplace shocks, without removing women and girls from their rights to participate in and contribute to the wider community, is therefore a foundational element of economic wellbeing.

In envisaging critical impacts upon household provisioning over the coming years, a number of significant trends require attention:

- **Aging populations.** The impact of aging populations promises significant impacts on household provisioning (UN, 2019). The increasing numbers of older people across industrialised nations, combined with declining numbers of younger people, may bring more opportunities and demands for older adults to remain in the workforce – as well as removing grandparents from caring roles and generating more demands on households to provide care for older populations. The challenge of childcare that has characterised the last three decades as women entered the workforce may be paralleled over the coming decades by the challenge of elder care. New forms of household may evolve such as co-operative living, and informal forms of household caring such as extended families and merging families, may become increasingly visible.

- **Inter-country demographic difference.** If inter-country demographic differences are dealt with through immigration policies open to youth, with richer older countries actively ‘importing’ young workers – then these demographic imbalances will be exported globally. Such dynamics will intensify trends towards migration and cross-country/remote relations of care. Inter-country practice of household provisioning, with transfer of wealth and increasing role of strangers in family care-giving practices, in other words, may intensify.

- **Food vulnerability.** Failure to keep climate heating below 1.5 degrees will disastrously impact the ability of households dependent upon local and household food production to provision themselves, increasing food vulnerability and migration. Equally, water shortages are already making communities in areas of water poverty increasingly unviable. When households are not able to access water for themselves, the consequences will be extreme. These developments are not inevitable – climate action remains possible, appropriate water stewardship is achievable with regenerative and permaculture based agriculture and the growth in micro-farming and urban farming demonstrate the potential for households and communities to resist these trends.

Household provisioning – caregiving in particular, but in the majority world also access to non-market based food supplies – underpins the capacity of individuals to cope with shocks, enables participation in the market, commons and state activities, and fundamentally shapes gender relations. Education for economic wellbeing, therefore, can be understood not only as concerned with work and the market, but with the day-to-day, embodied practices of caring, growing, nurturing and sustaining bodies and families. Gardening and learning to grow, child-rearing and elder-care, as much as computer skills, matters for economic wellbeing.
THE COMMONS

The commons are shareable resources that a community collectively cares for and which provision households with important resources essential for economic wellbeing. Such resources might be land or water supplies or use of shared buildings that are managed by a community. They might be information resources that are governed and shared by a particular community, whether indigenous knowledge or a community tended website. At a global level, they include shared collective resources such as the World Wide Web (WWW) also known as the Web, the biosphere, and the collective products of science and culture. The commons provide the underpinning ecological and epistemological foundations for all forms of economic wellbeing – without air, inherited knowledge, or a healthy biosphere no form of job or household or state provision can provide security.

The commons, both local and global, are sites of increasing struggle as movements of both enclosure and rejuvenation are visible. Two possible future trajectories might be envisaged, both can be seen in the present.

The first trajectory sees a reversal of the centuries long tendency towards marketisation and enclosure of common goods. We are already seeing, for example, a significant increase in land rights and earth rights movements that frame land, seas, rivers and lakes as commons that have to be cared for by all. These bring new possibilities and new legal structures and protections for entities that can be understood as common goods or as requiring care in as persons (depending on your ontological perspective). The 150 year battle to consider the Whanganui River a person in New Zealand, the declaration of the Colombian Amazon as a person, and other similar developments around the world, lay a new foundation for protecting the care of ecological commons/non-human beings in our communities. Alongside this, the development of community owned energy and community supported agriculture are demonstrating the capacity for communities to develop commons provisioning for food and energy and enhance their local resilience. At a global level, the development of global digital infrastructures that enable rapid sharing of information and knowledge demonstrate the capacity for community-stewarded information to provide an important collective knowledge resource. The convergence of this digital commons with developments such as 3d printing and local manufacture starts to open up the potential for radical impacts of digital commoning practices on the capacity of individuals and communities to collectively share information and develop resources that address their needs – this is demonstrated, negatively, in the use of 3D printing to create drones in the conflict situations and positively in a mass movement to create protective equipment for healthcare workers.

The second trajectory sees ever greater exploitation, enclosure and expropriation of the commons, a direction that is likely to radically undermine the capacity of individuals and communities to build and defend their own economic security. We can see its emergence in the increasing closure of the Web into walled gardens, in the proposals to vest management and ownership of a ‘digital commons’ with commercial companies such as Google. We can also see this in the privatisation of water and land resources that were previously held in common, and in the harm caused to important ecological commons such as the arctic by fossil fuel exploitation. Such moves, alongside the ongoing pollution of the ecological commons by industrial farming and production, suggest that the provisioning role of the commons is increasingly vulnerable and requires defending. The UN decade on biodiversity, for example, highlighted that none of the Aichi Biodiversity Targets for defending biodiversity have been achieved. Indeed, the director of the Convention on Biological Diversity argues that ‘earth’s living systems as a whole are being compromised’ (United Nations, 2020). A graphic representation of the global failure to care for the biospheric commons is the work on nine planetary boundaries from the Stockholm Resilience Centre.

---

6 See for example, the work of Earth Rights International: [https://earthrights.org/](https://earthrights.org/)
7 See for example, the Community Supported Agriculture movement: [https://communitysupportedagriculture.org.uk/](https://communitysupportedagriculture.org.uk/)
8 See the work of the Fablabs movement: [https://www.fablabs.io/](https://www.fablabs.io/)
which first articulated where we currently stand in relation to nine key areas of planetary resilience. This has since been updated to demonstrate the fragility of both our current behaviours and our understanding of the tipping points that have the potential to cause catastrophic and cascading harm to our global commons (see Figure 1 below). The commons, in other words, is under attack. Without the protection of local and global ecological commons, the creation of long term economic wellbeing is not achievable.

Figure 1: Global map of potential tipping cascades, with arrows showing potential interactions

Source: Steffen et al., 2018

THE STATE

Failed states provide a clear example of the active and foundational role of states in the creation of economic wellbeing. Life in countries without functioning healthcare, police, education or welfare systems is far from secure, however high an individual’s income or secure their job. Moreover, even in seemingly thriving countries, the fallacy that markets drive innovation in isolation from public investment and infrastructure has also been systematically debunked. Instead, the foundational role of state investment, in particular publicly funded research and development has been documented as central to all aspects of the major technological breakthroughs of the last half decade (Mazzucato, 2017). Any coherent analysis of how to create economic wellbeing for citizens and communities, therefore, must address the significant and formative role of states in securing basic quality of life and in the long term investment projects that are not delivered by market forces alone.

Looking to the longer term, the 30 year trajectory of states is evidently impossible to predict. We can, however, see clear competing trajectories growing in the present – towards states as instruments of oppression, control and extraction of their citizens' talents and work, or towards states as transparent and accountable platforms to sustain and support their inhabitants capacities.

Looking to the 30 year trajectory of states, we can see clear competing trajectories growing in the present – towards states as instruments of oppression, control and extraction of their citizens’ talents and work, or towards states as transparent and accountable platforms to sustain and support their inhabitants capacities.

9 For more information see: https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries/planetary-boundaries/about-the-research/the-nine-planetary-boundaries.html
at any time, although extractive economic regimes encourage the former. What is particularly evident, however, is that the capacity of states to fulfil economic provisioning infrastructural roles, however, is no longer a national issue alone. Rather, it is dependent upon states' interactions with each other globally and their interactions with other actors, such as global corporations. Ensuring the long term viability of the state as a resource for economic wellbeing will depend on the development not only of national but international regulatory and investment mechanisms.

EDUCATION FOR ECONOMIC WELLBEING: ENGAGING WITH THE FOUR FORMS OF PROVISIONING

Even in an instrumental economic analysis, an education that attempts to fulfil the familiar promise that it can contribute to the longterm wellbeing of its students must fulfil a more expansive role than simply preparing them for formal employment in the marketplace. Instead, education has a critical responsibility to create conditions for young people to understand, reflect upon and explore how to strengthen this wider repertoire of provisioning practices. Let us therefore examine the four forms of provisioning, foregrounding the educational implications of each of them.

PAID WORK: CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR DIGNIFIED LABOUR

The world of formal and informal employment is changing – there is no doubt that learning to work alongside non-human-like intelligence will continue to be a feature of the workplace – whether advanced forms of artificial intelligence or the routine use of internet search engines and the algorithms they employ. Equally, there is little doubt that a significant transition away from carbon intensive work will be required and that those young people and adults who are equipped to envisage and create ecologically sustainable forms of employment will be better equipped for a low carbon world.

Building students' economic wellbeing over the coming decades, however, will require educators to acknowledge and address the increasing precarity and polarisation of contemporary work. Given this, education for economic wellbeing will also be understood as nurturing the capacity for students to respect themselves, identify what constitutes valuable work for themselves and their community and develop the personal and social capacities to organise collectively in order to create conditions in which they are able to conduct such work with dignity. Creating viable working opportunities can no longer be seen as the job of the individual in isolation, or the subject simply of individual ‘careers', but is also dependent on the collective capacity to negotiate fair wages, working conditions and employment rights.

THE HOUSEHOLD: STRENGTHENING CAPACITIES FOR CARE AND MATERIAL AUTONOMY

Topics that have historically been relegated to the margins of educational interest are foregrounded as essential components of economic wellbeing when we recognise the role of household provisioning. This includes, for example, attention to questions of personal, sex and relationship education and the capacity of students to build and form longstanding and robust caring relationships. It requires attention to parenting and care-giving. It also includes attention to issues such as food and water resilience – drawing attention to the capacity to create materially autonomous or resilient households. Attending to how such processes might be coordinated within communities and across households will also be critical to build in resilience and redundancy. Learning to care – for both people and for the creation of food, in other words – is not simply a 'nice to have' attribute of education, but a hard-edged recognition of the practices that enable individuals and families to create economic wellbeing for themselves in difficult times.
THE COMMONS: DEFENDING AND CARING FOR LOCAL AND GLOBAL COMMONS

Education for economic wellbeing means foregrounding for young people, the role of local and global commons in creating the conditions for long term survival, autonomy and flourishing. Learning what constitutes a common good, how to defend and steward that good, how to enrich and sustain that commons becomes a priority. This might see students engage with practices such as learning how to recognise and sustain their digital commons, engaging with and sustaining common land and ecological resources, or exploring how to establish common ownership of key infrastructures – from energy to buildings. Understanding the concept of the commons rather than just the work of the individual as a critical form of economic provisioning is a primary conceptual shift required in education.

THE STATE: MAKING STATE PROVISIONING PRACTICES WORK FOR HUMAN DIGNITY AND PLANETARY FLOURISHING

Understanding that economic wellbeing emerges not just from individual actions and behaviours, but from wider social and state infrastructures becomes a more important element of educational practice in this analysis. It means engaging with issues that have often been seen as citizenship education – from understanding where and how state activity can be actively supportive of creating viable livelihoods to how it can manage the negative impacts of markets. It might also involve experience of democratic participation and scrutiny of organisational and state decisions as well as examining the role of states in supporting people in times of crisis alongside other provisioning practices. Such a role goes beyond conventional citizenship education in its interrogation of what might be needed to challenge corruption, defend free media and recognise the trade-offs between short-term and long-term economic and social benefits.

For education to respond to this reality means that it is time to let go of the idea that an education oriented towards ‘jobs’ is sufficient. Instead, it is time to focus on the whole person in their context as well tending to their skills and knowledge for work in formal and informal economies.

Understanding and engaging with State provisioning practices will also necessarily involve reflection upon broader economic questions – not least, whether current economic arrangements and legislation are oriented towards the goals of human dignity and planetary survival upon which economic wellbeing depends. Education for economic wellbeing, in these conditions, needs to offer opportunities for students to consider not only how economics is currently organised, but how it might be rethought and re-organised to meet these broader goals of human and planetary flourishing.

CONCLUSION

Education for economic wellbeing requires attention to the real world challenges that people are facing around the world – challenges of precarity, under-employment, exploitation and significant economic and ecological disruption. For education to respond to this reality means that it is time to let go of the idea that an education oriented towards ‘jobs’ is sufficient. Instead, it is time to focus on the whole person in their context – on their capacity to build relationships, to form social alliances, to act as alert and engaged citizens and as custodians of local and global common resources – as well tending to their skills and knowledge for work in formal and informal economies. Only this holistic attention to what constitutes economic wellbeing can begin to fulfil the age-old promise that education can help to create a better life.
REFERENCES


The Education Research and Foresight Working Papers contribute to global debates on education and development in a world of uncertainty, complexity and contradiction. They serve a wide audience of policy analysts, academics, and practitioners. The series also provides insights into key issues within the framework of both the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as well as the Futures of Education initiative.

The papers carry the names of the author(s) and should be cited accordingly. The views expressed in these papers are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of UNESCO and its affiliated organizations, or those of the governments it represents.
