



# CREATING CONDITIONS FOR THRIVING COMMUNITIES

Linking economic and societal outcomes for sustained positive change

For communities to thrive, it will be necessary to properly tackle socio-economic inequalities and lack of access to opportunities, both of which have been underscored and exacerbated by the pandemic. COVID-19 has not only highlighted the unmet needs of communities around the world, it has focused attention on people most likely to suffer negative consequences from unexpected events, in terms of health, economic activity, incomes and general wellbeing. With this understanding comes a window of opportunity to rethink strategies for communities and create the mechanisms to effect meaningful change in cities everywhere.

Advances in digital technology and transportation have enabled a globalised economic system to emerge, but there are major shortcomings in many local environments. Allowing socio-economic inequalities to not only persist, but in fact to deepen, will bring enormous costs—borne to a large extent by those affected directly, while putting additional pressure on social and healthcare services, community safety and government spending more generally.

Societies already have a huge challenge to deal with—slowing down the impacts of climate change. If deepening socio-economic inequalities are piled on top of this, the problems will multiply, increase in their complexity and ultimately become even more difficult and costly to address.

The challenge therefore is for societies to create conditions where constituent communities can take advantage of future opportunities, whether these are economic, social, environmental or

cultural. This effort is multifaceted and requires eliminating barriers to inclusion and participation—a step change that will fundamentally alter how societies and economies operate. The resulting progress will reinvigorate local economies and build in economic and societal resilience, thereby helping to combat the twin threats of climate change and possible future pandemics.



## ***Bringing Meaningful Change***

Removing these obstacles requires action through policy solutions that firmly associate economic ‘health’ with societal health and wellbeing. To achieve meaningful outcomes, new business models are needed to create more inclusive communities; economics must be linked with the key societal drivers of healthy, resilient communities, such as good-quality, affordable housing, fairly rewarded and stable jobs, skills development, cultural opportunities, and transport. How do governments enable access to quality housing, education, jobs, and transport? Governments can strengthen capacity and build a strong local economic foundation by actively partnering with the private sector, based on the perspective of helping people get what they need.

This process also entails infrastructure-related enhancements that develop and sustain the local urban fabric and anticipate how it may change in the future or need to respond to shocks. Placemaking actions such as creating more green spaces are certainly vital to supporting physical environments for health and wellbeing. Planning and designing public spaces and new uses for existing buildings must consider shifts in traditional economic activities, with more remote working and accelerated online commerce. These trends are continually altering how businesses function, how households receive incomes and how people interact. Communities and places must evolve too, in order that everyone can take advantage of and respond to these shifting trends.

By instilling a sense of how places need to provide opportunities for the whole community, stakeholders can then configure other infrastructure needs such as public transport. This holistic view of communities themselves and the interactions between communities will open up new opportunities for inclusion of people perhaps otherwise not well considered or not considered at all in both policy and commercial terms.

## ***Dynamics of Change***

A number of dynamics are becoming more important in our ability to create more stable, cohesive and equitable communities.

Governments, associated public agencies, and corporate players around the world have readily established net zero commitments supported by science-based targets. There is still much to do to understand what net zero pathways for countries and localities actually look like and how to implement them in practice—what action to take and when. One thing is certain, net zero necessitates decarbonization of the economy, categorised into key strands such as transport, energy, the built environment and industry. This

undertaking can, in turn, generate huge numbers of new jobs, providing the basis for new forms of enterprise, new business models and a complete upgrade of national and regional skills bases.

Therein lies the much-needed opportunity for broad and inclusive economic participation—a substantial volume of new economic opportunities made available, potentially to all. This, however, needs accelerated—but careful—planning in terms of education, training, behavior change management, mobility and access, open and flexible work, and contractual processes that do not discriminate either directly or indirectly.

Key to enabling a realisation of new opportunities is the role of education and how it is delivered to the breadth of people across communities. Now, at last, the much-touted idea of 'lifelong learning' should be promoted and taken up fully. But this activity needs places and locations that serve the learning needs of diverse populations across all age ranges. As corporate chain-retail continues its long-term departure from town centres and high streets, these spaces could be requisitioned—via meaningful public/private arrangements—for net-zero-focused education and training.

Aligned to this topic is the broader question of access and mobility. To achieve more socio-economic inclusion, communities will need to re-think current models of transport and access. In a post-COVID world, where net zero is the overarching target, we are likely to develop more hybridised work and social lives. Economic activity will no longer necessitate a uniform daily commute, as different ways of working—remote and face to face—blend to accommodate given job tasks and remits.

So, transit systems, which typically prioritise movement from suburb and urban hinterland to the city centre and central business district (CBD) at peak times, may not work in the same

way; more variation in routes and modes will be needed. Alongside this shift, technology-induced changes to consumer retail and leisure services will also affect how cities prioritise movement between different places and urban nodes. A key question arises as to the future business model for public transportation in urban areas, when the nature of our movements around the city become much less predictable. Yet, achieving net zero emissions will necessitate a greater modal shift onto such networks.

A 'hybridised' future of work, where work can be undertaken from a mix of locations—blended as both the job and personal circumstances dictate, including home working—may make certain types of jobs more available to more people. If there is no longer a need for consistent daily travel to a city centre, perhaps new opportunities in rapidly developing high-value services such as financial technology (fintech), cloud computing, materials science and design technologies could be open to those previously constrained for personal, geographical or care-related reasons. This could finally generate a truly diverse workforce, even in the most closeted and elite of industries.

### **Common Denominator of Change**

All of the above requires close communication and understanding between government, the private sector and communities themselves. Policies must be shaped with societal inclusion in mind, thereby allowing the efficient operation of the market to be guided in a way that is societally beneficial. Including 'social value' outcome requirements in major public sector procurement of services from the private sector is a start, but this needs to become more sophisticated and reflective of real 'on the ground' challenges in individual places. The public sector's use of privately provided services—such as waste and environmental management, landscaping and highway maintenance—should act as a conduit to more

targeted social value generation; what is really necessary in a particular location to improve outcomes for disadvantaged communities, and how can this be generated via service delivery that is shaped with these ends in mind?

This sea change will be supported by a rapidly changing investment environment; environmental, social and governance (ESG) outcomes are being rapidly adopted in investment criteria and decision-making; the idea of 'impact' investment is quickly gaining traction—both commercial and societal return on investment are of increasing interest to a large cross section of the investment community. Hopefully, societies the world over will all reach a point where financial return goes hand in hand with positive, shared social impact. This process needs to be galvanised further, with more evidence and intelligence generated to support effective decision-making that steers investment into the right products and projects. Demonstrating and quantifying social value and its direct link to economic gain needs further exploration and a sounder evidence base to generate the conditions that enable communities to thrive. Places that are equitable and inclusive and socially robust will generate high values for communities themselves, for investors, for countries and for the global economy.

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