

Beyond the Economy: Why Collective Capacity Should Be Our Political Goal

Politicians promise economic growth. Parties debate tax policy, GDP targets, job numbers. Every election cycle, we hear the same refrain: grow the economy, and everything else follows.

But what if we've been measuring the wrong thing? What if "the economy" is too narrow a lens for what actually matters—and focusing on it is actually holding us back?

Consider what we really want: the capability to live well, to solve problems, to adapt to challenges, to build a future worth having. This is collective capacity—and it's a far more fundamental goal than economic growth.

The Ratchet of Society

Collective capacity works like a ratchet—it clicks upward and holds. When humans learned to control fire, that capability didn't disappear with the individuals who discovered it. It became permanent substrate for everything that followed: cooking extended the range of edible foods, warmth enabled survival in new climates, heat enabled metallurgy. Each capability became the floor for the next.

This is how all human progress works. Language enabled the sharing of knowledge across time and space. Writing made that knowledge permanent. Permanent knowledge enabled law. Law enabled coordination among strangers. Coordination among strangers enabled cities. Cities enabled specialization. Specialization enabled science. Science enabled medicine. Medicine enabled longer lives. Longer lives enabled deeper expertise.

Each layer persists. Each layer becomes the foundation for the next. The ratchet clicks and holds.

Notice: none of this required money. A society that develops writing has more collective capacity than one that hasn't—regardless of their economic system. Communities that share knowledge grow their collective capability through exchange, but not exchange of goods: exchange of understanding, of solutions, of ways of doing things.

This is the deeper process. The economy participates in it, but the economy is not it.

Why the Economy Is Not Enough

Gross Domestic Product measures money changing hands. That's it. When a factory pollutes a river and a company gets paid to clean it up, GDP counts both as growth. When you care for your aging parent, GDP sees nothing. When a community builds trust through years of cooperation, GDP is blind. When a corporation extracts value from workers and environment alike, GDP applauds.

This isn't a flaw in measurement—it's a fundamental mismatch between the tool and the goal.

People already feel this. They watch GDP rise while their neighborhoods decay. They see record corporate profits while their wages stagnate. They hear about economic recovery while their children face worse prospects than they did. The numbers say things are getting better. Their lives say otherwise.

This isn't a paradox. It's what happens when you optimize for the wrong target. The economy can grow while collective capacity shrinks. You can have more money changing hands while the shared foundation that enables flourishing erodes beneath everyone's feet.

The Cycle and the Extraction

In ecology, nutrients cycle. Plants take nitrogen from soil, animals eat plants, decomposers return nitrogen to soil. The pool of available nutrients is the commons—everything depends on it. When farmers extract without return, soil depletes. Productivity drops. Everyone suffers, including the farmer.

The same logic applies to collective capacity. Resources, knowledge, and capability cycle through society. When they cycle well—when surplus gets reinvested in the commons—collective capacity grows. The ratchet clicks upward. Everyone benefits, including those who contributed most.

But when extraction dominates, the cycle breaks. A pharmaceutical company that prices a vaccine beyond most people's reach captures short-term profit, but slows the rate at which collective health advances. A billionaire who parks wealth in passive assets removes resources from the cycle that generates new capability. A corporation that extracts from workers and environment without return depletes the commons that made its own success possible.

This is not just unfair. It is self-defeating. The extractor depends on the commons too. Their own future quality of life depends on how fast collective capacity advances. By slowing that advancement, they undermine the very foundation they stand on.

The economy celebrates extraction as success. Collective capacity reveals it as everyone's loss.

A Different Political Focus

This reframing changes the questions we ask.

Instead of "will this policy grow the economy?" we ask: "will this grow our shared capability to adapt, solve problems, and flourish?"

Instead of measuring GDP, we measure: can more people access healthcare? Is knowledge spreading faster? Are institutions more trustworthy? Can communities coordinate better? Is the environment more resilient? Do people have more genuine security?

These are the questions that matter. These measure whether the ratchet is clicking upward.

Economic growth is welcome when it serves collective capacity. But economic growth that depletes trust, concentrates power, extracts without return, or degrades the shared foundations of flourishing is not progress—it is the opposite of progress, wearing progress's mask.

The Economy Is a Tool. Collective Capacity Is the Goal.

We have been mistaking the instrument for the purpose. Money is useful for coordinating activity and measuring some kinds of value. But it is not what we are ultimately after.

What we are after is this: a society that can solve its problems, adapt to challenges, and create conditions for everyone to flourish. A society where each generation inherits more capability than the last. A society where the ratchet keeps clicking upward.

That is collective capacity. That is what politics should aim for.

The economy can serve that goal. But only if we stop confusing the servant for the master.