Surviving well: From Diverse economies to Community Economies in Asia-Pacific

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This special issue showcases the rich diversity of livelihood practice and more-than-capitalist economic activities enabling communities to 'survive well' in the Asia-Pacific. In times of intense social and environmental challenges, where inequality is rife throughout the region, it seems more appropriate to speak of seeking to 'survive well' than to 'flourish' or 'thrive'. It is not that flourishing or thriving are not worthy goals, but that the words ring hollow when humans flourish at the expense of non-humans, or when some groups of people flourish at the expense of others, and when so many are seeking merely access a 'decent livelihood' (Duojie, 2022). We return to Miller's (2013) point that in thinking about surviving *well* we must distinguish between necessity and sufficiency (see also Vunibola, Steven and Scobie, this volume). While we have shied away from speaking of flourishing or thriving, bare survival – where species and ecosystem get only what they need to continue in coercive and terrible conditions – is not what we mean by surviving well. Rather, surviving well implies sufficiency – where species and ecosystems, including humans and their environments, get what they need for surviving well *together.* Togetherness entails effort to achieve justice, equality and ongoing sustainability not just in and between human communities but in wider more-than-human networks of labour, value and livelihood. In this collection of articles, we see the ingenuity and empathy of communities throughout the region, seeking to survive well not only as individuals, but as collectives.

Many of these practices of 'surviving well' draw on centuries-old social and environmental relations that have developed in response to long relationships with places and regions. Practices of listening to the land and sea (Do and Dombroski, 2022; Vunibola et al, 2022), formalised traditional modes of sharing applied in new contexts (Sharp et al, 2022; Placino and Gibson, 2022; Drake et al 2022), commoning practices from rural areas reapplied in the city (Alam and Waliuzzaman, 2022), care for people, country, land and sea in good times and bad (Fidali and Larder, 2022; Hill and Gibson, 2022; McKinnon, 2022), and cooperative enterprises for collective wellbeing (Chitanshi and Healy, 2022); Vunibola et al, 2022). In the height of the development era, such ancient practices were often framed by academics as remnants of traditional economies that would naturally die away with modernisation.

Clifford Geertz (1962), for example, outlined traditional sharing economy and rotating credit practices in Indonesia, but sought to do so only as a record of a dying practice that he saw as being inevitably subsumed into more individualistic forms of capitalist economic rationality. James Scott applied the concept of moral economy to describe the push back against capitalism from subsistence farmers in several places in Southeast Asia, articulating the moral outrage and despair as the right to subsistence was dismantled. In China, the diversity of economic practices among ethnic groups were understood to be effects of class and economic inequality: such cultural differences would "wither away" with socialist modernisation (Shakya 1999). In the Pacific Islands, Bertram and Watters (1985) described the economies that would rely on global linkages of access to modern lifestyles – the MIRAB economies, for example, where migration, remittances and jobs in bureaucracy would make up the majority of household livelihood strategies. While each of these contributions has scholarly value, the overall effect of describing and redescribing teleological predictions of destruction and replacement of Indigenous and traditional economies is limiting, to say the least.

The performative effects of repeating narratives of disintegration and smallness can result in more research and more policy that emphasises and performs disintegration and smallness, reducing the visibility of other narratives and possibilities that might perform something quite different. As Epeli Hau'ofa argues in his influential essay 'Our sea of islands' (1994), the way we frame a region has consequences, especially if it is 'derogatory and belittling' (1994: 149). What are the effects of framing, for example, the Pacific Islands as "small island states", emphasising only the smallness in terms of Western measures of value such as size of the economy in dollars, size of the bounded land mass in square kilometres? Such a framing of smallness has consequences on the ways both insiders and outsiders view the place, on residents' sense of self-worth and possibility, and on the types of economic and political agendas of these states and others. Indeed, Hau'ofa echoes the language of surviving well, citing the problems belittling Pacific people's efforts to 'survive reasonably well' within an international system built on values and practices that have their source outside the Pacific. Hau'ofa effectively reframes the Pacific as a collective, expansive region – a sea of islands, where "smallness" and "remoteness" are matters of perspective and differ depending where you stand. If you stand on the deck of a waka traversing the well-known and loved currents in the interconnected ocean, things look quite different from a small map on the wall of a grey office building in downtown Wellington, Washington or Wuhan. Hau'ofa's work is one example of perspectives originating from the Asia-Pacific that challenge the Eurocentric and teleological ways in which economies in the region have been imagined. In recent times, such teleological notions have given way to more diverse and open-ended accounts of the economic activities in the region, no doubt because of the work of scholars such as Hau'ofa. In particular, scholars of Indigenous and traditional economies, postcapitalist, postdevelopment and degrowth, and postcolonial scholars concerned with the politics of knowledge production have all raised concerns about the ways in which such economic activities have been framed.

We see a lot of resonance between approaches such as Hau'ofa's and the diverse economies approach showcased in this special issue: both grapple with economic

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performativity and the desire to think about economies were people can 'survive well'. Diverse economies scholars refuse teleologies of place and economy, the kinds of imaginings where everything is necessarily going to end up looking the same capitalist colour (Dombroski and Do 2019). J.K. Gibson-Graham, the authorial persona of feminist geographers Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson, pushed back against forms of political economy where capitalism was imagined as the only possible form of economy, even by those who problematized it and despised it. In their ground breaking text *The End of Capitalism (as we knew it)* (1996), Gibson-Graham argue that theorisations of 'the economy' had become single-mindedly 'capitalocentric', overlooking the rich diversity of economic activities that people all over the world engaged in every day. As Duojie (2022) discusses in this volume, they used the iceberg to illustrate the 'invisible' non-capitalist and alternative capitalist activities that were 'below the waterline' in economic theory-making. The diverse economies project came into being to start inventorying, documenting and theorising these important economic activities that contribute to livelihoods in very real ways (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020).

Of course, not all economic activities in such a diverse economy are necessarily good and useful for surviving *well*. Surviving well, in diverse and community economies thinking, has emerged from a concern for livelihoods that balance the different needs of households and communities. While gleaning and poaching might be noncapitalist economic activities that contribute to livelihoods, they might not be suitable if non-human life is under threat of extinction or if gleaners are ostracised and excluded from the society in which they live. The diverse economies inventory becomes a set of ingredients that might be selectively used to cook up a different, shared and *decent* livelihood (Duojie, this volume) recipe, based on community negotiations around shared concerns. As a term, it has emerged from Marxian concepts of necessity and surplus (see Chitanshi and Healy, this volume). In community economies framings, it encompasses a strong sense of surviving well *together.* Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy (2013) frame community economies as the kinds of economies negotiated from diverse forms of labour, transaction, enterprise, property and finance, which are assembled in place to address the question of surviving well together. Such a community economy includes livelihoods that provide what is needed to survive *well*, where communities, households and individuals can secure material, occupational, social, community and physical wellbeing for themselves and the ecosystems in which their livelihoods are embedded. Such livelihoods are made through ethical encounters and transactions with others so that all get what is needed for surviving well. This involves negotiating the use and distribution of surplus for community wellbeing, caring for common resources, and investing in the common wellbeing of communities, now and for future generations. Expressed in such ideal terms, one can see how such a framing is sometimes misunderstood as romanticising communities and commons (Joseph 2002). In this special issue however, the contributions offer empirical weight to the value of pursuing scholarly investigation of how diverse communities already invest energy in the difficult, complex, and often fraught work of figuring out how to survive *well*, and to surviving well *together.* , are indeed key concerns of our time of rapid climate change and environmental crisis.

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In what follows, we discuss some of the key themes that have emerged in contributions to this special issue. In our view, these themes both illustrate broader trends in diverse and community economies research, and offer something new through engagement with empirical and theoretical work in and on the Asia-Pacific region. We discuss the explicit exploration of more-than-human communities and networks, the extension of thinking on commoning, and the reconceptualization of care and being-in-common across geographical distance. These themes round out the *together* aspect of surviving well together, extending *who* is surviving well into the more-than-human and the *how* of surviving well into the collective and relational.

More-than-human research

As it becomes clear in reading through this issue, surviving well is a more-than-human endeavour. As many of the contributors note, the non-human entities and more-than-human networks that enable livelihoods demand recognition. From turtles in the Solomon Islands (Fidali and Larder, 2022), to baby rice plants in Vietnam (Do and Dombroski, 2022), to rocks and typhoons in the Philippines (Placino and Gibson, Hill and Gibson, 2022), the more-than-human nature of surviving well together is highlighted. This attentiveness to the hybrid, more-than-human aspects of surviving well emerged clearly in community and diverse economies research in the early 2010s. In particular the influence of ecofeminist Val Plumwood and ecohumanist scholar Deborah Bird Rose are evident in the edited books *Manifesto for living in the Anthropocene* (Gibson, Rose and Fincher 2015) and *Making other world possible* (Roelvink, St. Martin and Gibson-Graham 2015). These edited collections mark a collective shift in community economies focus, inviting scholars to openly experiment with different ways of thinking, researching and storying in times of ecological crisis and disruption. Highlighting the problematic norms of Western scholarship and Western cultures of environmental domination, or “management” as it is presumptively known, these texts initiated a more-than-human critique of the ways of knowing in the Anthropocene. But, like the spirit of curious generosity Julie Graham brought to the workshops that prefigured the books, these texts do not *only* critique. As Alhojärvi and Siviö (2019) have written, an affirmative political ecology for our times must have both the ‘hatchet’ of critique and the ‘seeds’ of something new.

This special issue indeed continues in that vein of affirmative and (re)constructive more-than-human research for surviving well together. Hill and Gibson develop the concept of ‘Earth-attuned livelihoods’, where humans ‘accept the planet is self-organising’ and have attuned themselves in adapting livelihoods to their specific environments. This notion is also exemplified in Do and Dombroski’s contribution, tracing some of the attunements that farmers ‘listening’ to their environments make in climate change adaptation in rural Vietnam. Vunibola, Steven and Scobie’s contribution points out that for livelihoods in Papua New Guinea and Fiji (and many other parts of the region), *land* is central to life and sustenance, and ‘values, beliefs, traditions, and history are interwoven with the natural and supernatural worlds anchored by land’ [pg #]. Reciprocity in livelihoods emerges from and gives back to the land in the Pacific, but also on the Qinghai-Tibet plateau, where Duojie’s contribution is based. In this part of the plateau land-based livelihoods of peasant

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agriculture are preferred to the more recent seasonal migrant construction work and wild caterpillar fungus harvesting, which are not seen as decent livelihoods for either land or people. Fidali and Larder discuss the connection between human livelihoods, land, and the lives of turtles in a conservation area in the Solomon Islands, highlighting the work that women do to contribute to sustainability and conservation of their customary land. The contributions from Drake, Liunakwalaua and Hango Hango Community Association adds that kinship ties extend the connection to land even for people living far from their customary land. In all these places, our contributors agree that 'the traditional economy is part of everyday life' (Drake et al, this volume, pg). Thus customary land joins other non-human entities in making up the more-than-human economies and livelihoods that feature in this special issue, where traditional practices of attunement co-exist with contemporary livelihoods and globalised economies.

Commoning

While such customary land is often understood as 'commons' in literature on noncapitalist and more-than-capitalist economies, in this special issue the contributions trace the relationships and practices that are engaged in creating commons – the practices of *commoning* that enable shared human and planetary wellbeing. As Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy (2016) have argued through the example of commoning the atmosphere in the face of the ozone hold, thinking of *commoning* rather than commons emphasises the *actions* and *activities* that enable us to think of caring for our shared existence. In this volume, Sharp, Petersen, Mclellan, Lewis and Cavadino explore surplus fish 'waste' as a resource that has been commoned and redistributed to communities who value it. They trace how marine spaces in Aotearoa moved from commons management under Māori, to open access after colonialism, to a form of privatisation in the current quota management system where corporations mainly benefit from access to quotas. Yet this privatisation is not complete: iwi owned Māori organisations have access to quotas, sometimes negotiated as treaty settlements. Alam and Waliuzzaman, in the context of urban Bangladesh, continue this theme of engaging with commons literature in novel ways – they apply Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy's (2013) commons identi-kit as an aid in identifying commoning practices in informal settlements in urban Dhaka and Khulna. Without 'letting the government of the hook', they honour the important self-organising activities of urban commoners caring for their extra-legal territories. In the Philippines, Placino and Gibson describe the system of *pwesto*, where informal miners share aggregate mining resources via community negotiations with an eye to livelihood needs – those without a *pwesto* allocation are given access to resources and space as *nakikipwesto*. Yet *pwesto* access is not customary land: the informal miners come to their commoning arrangement in quarries that are actually publically owned, turning a resource of public ownership into a commons. In constant fear of being ousted in enclosures, a community economy of care is nevertheless enacted. Such attention to the diversity of commons can provide inspiration and encouragement to communities experimenting with commons management all over the world.

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Caring and connecting across place

The need for new ways of being-in-common at a global scale have never been starker. As Chitranshi and Healy recognise, not only are we facing the shared human disaster of the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenge of negotiating the different territorialised responses to it, we are also still facing questions of being and acting in common as humans in the face of climate change.

Chitranshi and Healy offer a way to articulate the connections and commonalities across places, and in ways that cross the perceived divide between locales in the Global North and Global South. Building on Latour's idea of the Terrestrial and Chakrabarti, Dhar and Cullenberg's idea of the World of the Third (WOT), this paper proposes a language for thinking from outside the global/local, north/south binaries, or narratives of progress that so often capture imaginations of development. In this contribution, diverse economies is understood as a 'third' perspective that orients scholars to 'what might be' when we abandon the pretence that global/local is at all meaningful in the face of climate change. The challenge presented to assumptions that binaries of local/global, North/South, and so on, are also extended by the work of Drake et al who challenge the perceived divide between rural and urban. Reporting on community based disaster relief in Vanuatu, the authors demonstrate the integrity of traditional agricultural practices across rural and urban settings, and elaborate the human and more-than-human relations that link non-contiguous spaces and places. Drake et al use diverse economies to show how traditional agriculture is sustaining life and livelihoods well beyond the boundaries of customary lands. McKinnon's analysis of the international connections of care in a health programme in Laos (2022) also offers insights to the commonalities and shared concerns that challenge perceived divides of West/East, developed/underdeveloped. She attends to the relationalities of care, and the hybrid community of development actors that support maternal health between Australia and Laos. Rather than a case of western aid to a struggling nation, her analysis draws out the collaborations that are quietly questioning the dominance of biomedical and bureaucratic solutions to maternal wellbeing. This, and other contributions to the issue, encourages scholars to explore analyses that orient us to finding the commonalities and connections that exist across geographically disparate efforts to negotiate the conditions of our shared interdependence with one another as more-than-human communities or hybrid collectives (see also Dombroski, Healy and McKinnon 2019).

Surviving Well Together in the Asia-Pacific

From Aotearoa in the southeast, to the Tibetan plateau in northwest, and many other Asia-Pacific places in between, the examples explored in this special issue demonstrate the compelling potential of already present non-capitalist practices of shared survival, and the foundations there for shared solidarity towards surviving well together amidst shared vulnerability. We conclude with some thoughts about surviving well together as expressed in this issue and moving forward.

Surviving includes paying attention to livelihoods, to subsistence, to necessity and sufficiency. In this issue, the contributors have paid careful attention to diverse ways of

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making a living, which go well beyond paying attention to diverse sources of *income* – such as the MIRAB model of migration, remittances, aid and bureaucratic jobs. The land emerges as a core source of living in Asia Pacific, with diverse ways of creating what is needed for life from it. This insight will not be new to Indigenous, Pacific and rural understandings of making a living – indeed, Emalani Case reminds us that the 'Ōlelo Hawai'i word *'āina*, while translated as land can also mean 'that which feeds' (Case 2021). But it is an insight too often overlooked, even now, in the rush to upskill for the knowledge economy, to join the global economy, or to create pliable workers keen for jobs. Surviving well together includes paying attention to diverse ways of getting what is needed for life – whether it is free fish heads (Sharp et al, 2022) or access to quarry materials (Placino and Gibson, 2022). Such access to what is needed for life is embedded in many different kinds of relationships and transactions beyond waged labour and market exchange.

Surviving *well* includes paying attention to relations of care. As McKinnon (2022) notes in her contribution on a birth attendant training programme in Laos, bare survival of infants and mothers is not nearly enough – and not nearly the full picture. For some, there are things *worse* than death, and these include being subject to practices of healthcare that do not respect cultural knowledges and understandings of dignity, the spirit world, and wellness. She outlines a form of 'development' assistance in healthcare that centres relationality, care and the 'well' part of surviving well. To be well, to survive well, includes care for more than just survival and for more than just humans.

Surviving well *together,* as we have said, includes paying attention to who is included in the surviving well, and extending that beyond the human. It includes paying attention to collectives, to justice, to more than just individual wellbeing through processes of commoning and caring for commons. Such being in common is implicit in Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy's initial use of the term in *Take Back the Economy*, where work-life balance was the focus of what it might mean to improve wellbeing beyond bare surviving. But this issue has more explicitly drawn out the *together* aspect of surviving well – where relations and practices of economy across the Asia Pacific region are drawn into new formations in which collectives are front and centre (Hill and Gibson, 2022).

Finally, there are many ways to read the kinds of economic practices that are described and analysed in the contributions to this issue. All the papers are all dealing with areas where tensions and difficulties exist, in places where injustice and power and despair and hope coexist. In Fiji, for example, alongside the social enterprises on customary land mentioned in this issue, there exists poverty and exclusion mentioned in an *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* issue this time last year (Mausio 2021). But the framing of 'surviving well' invited authors to focus on the strengths and capacities of communities and economies in their purview, and to imagine as well – what might surviving well look like? This includes an ethical decision to represent the kinds of things Hau'ofa has encouraged us to see: the strengths and ways of understanding the world that emerge in place, through research partnerships that honour community framings and perspectives, always haunted by the faces of students, as Hau'ofa was, asking for another way of being in the world. With an eye to the vastness of the Pacific Ocean and the land mass of Asia, our contributions focus on what *could* be and how it

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connects to those overlooked things that are *already here*. We invite readers to explore this issue with an eye to 'making other worlds possible' (Roelvink et al. 2015), to 'multiplying possibilities' for change (Dombroski 2015), and with consideration of what it might mean to build economies that enhanced our ability, as more-than-human communities, to survive well together.

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