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insight.

Community

Letter from the Editor-in-Chief

We're back with the 24th issue of Insight Magazine and what a semester it has been!

This semester's issue focuses on community - a salient aspect of the past couple years. Community spirit has been rediscovered through the series of national lockdowns, been activated to unite climate efforts, and been vital in supporting Ukrainians during crisis.

This publication explores not only communities around the globe, but takes a deep dive into our university community, with updates on what is happening in the world Buccleuch Place.

I hope you enjoy reading this semester's issue, and on behalf of the Insight community would like to thank the School of Economics for their continued support for the magazine, without which this publication would not be possible. And a special thank you to the student authors and editors for all their hard work in making this issue come to life.

If you would like to be part of the Insight community for the next academic year, applications are open for all editorial and production positions. Check out our facebook page for all the details.

All the best,
Serena Grover

Serena Grover

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Divided Communities

Community divides have been prevalent throughout history, whether that be based on geographical, political, societal or faith differences.
In this section, Lucy Hannah explores the implications of the UK rural-urban gap, Nina Davies illustrates how a violent military take-over triggered large-scale economic protest and community unrest in Myanmar, and Rory Small examines the effects of Northern Ireland's troubled past on its communities today.

Divided Communities

The Difficult Divide

Lucy Hannah discusses the urban-rural gap in the UK, and what can be done to close it.

In recent decades, the fading salience of the debate about the 'Urban-Rural Divide' has hindered the potential development of rural communities, leaving behind the individuals who are deeply rooted within them. Despite the shift to remote working increasing relocation possibilities, there are still many barriers to making the urban to rural switch, uprooting family and community commitments to name just one. Moreover, the relative weight of economic activity and income level growth within cities, creates not only economic disparities, but also strong social differences between the two environments. 14 of the 23 Scottish regions are below the average income and productivity levels for the UK, the majority of these being rural areas. This figure highlights the lack of support and opportunities for many rural communities. In the education sector, residents aged 16 or over are more likely to have an apprenticeship as their highest qualification, in comparison to urban residents having a higher average proportion of level 3 or above qualifications. There continue to be disparities of living standard outcomes between those in less densely populated areas and urban populations, but what are the factors that are affecting this gap? And is there anything that can be done to stop it?

There continue to be disparities of living standard outcomes between those in less densely populated areas and urban populations.

Close-knit Communities

Rural living does provide potential upsides that can help to reduce the impact of regionally induced disparity. Communities within these areas provide a sense of belonging; a significant factor in constructing the identities of individuals. The trust levels in rural communities are also generally higher, due to decreased asymmetries of information, as opposed to urban communities who may not know their neighbours as intimately. The social benefits communities provide can tackle many of the biggest issues faced today; safety, stability, relationships and social networks that neighbourhoods provide are crucial in tackling disconnections from society. Having these social benefits can also induce greater economic benefits. For example, local authorities have claimed that networking between communities and small businesses is beneficial for long-term financial sustainability.

Challenging Changes

Unfortunately, the benefits experienced by those in rural communities rarely outweigh the economic burdens they face. Look at the diminished share of high-skilled job opportunities. This is further emphasised by declining rural populations and the rapid ageing of the community. Over the last decade, 94% of data zones, which represents 34 small areas within Scotland, reported having become older in terms of median age. As a consequence, tackling the challenge of rural poverty is becoming more difficult.

Debatable Developments

There is no doubt that the construction of metropolitan economies creates positive externalities that benefit the progression of society. After all, cities have been constructed to maximise efficiency. Densely concentrated urban areas yield increased energy savings through decreased heating costs resulting from designing efficient apartment blocks and through the optimisation of transport. Not only are there savings in heating and energy to, say, a detached rural house, but natural habitats are also less affected than if the population of the building all lived in detached rural houses. Furthermore, economic productivity is higher in cities due to the channels of sharing information, markets and the infrastructure of areas. Therefore, some may argue that cities create developed markets. Having many jobs in one location is beneficial in terms of economies of scale, perhaps providing some justification for social disparities between areas. Cities help to develop the economy not only on a national scale, but often as global hubs of trade and commerce. Perhaps the perks of urban areas could encourage people living rurally to relocate where greater opportunities await, while preserving rural areas for those less economically motivated.

Pivotal Prospects

Economic development is difficult without urbanisation; countries with a higher per capita gross domestic product (GDP) are generally more urbanised. Looking at the future of communities, in order to most efficiently reduce inequality, deprived communities should be prioritised for support. If not, we may experience even deeper social divides, with the potential to bring about greater political polarisation and inferior health care provision. As opposed to looking at the issues with urban areas, there should be a focus on developing support and services for people isolated from such opportunities. Creating pathways into different environments can help reduce issues such as disconnections from society and the overall affordability of living safely and securely. Evidently, there are issues within the UK of economic developments, but recognising and overcoming these barriers will ultimately help diminish such a discrepancy.

Trigger Warning

Nina Davies explores how a violent military take-over in Myanmar triggered large-scale economic protest and community unrest.

A little over a year ago, dreams of democracy in Myanmar shattered as a military coup d'état began to unfold. In a move reminiscent of developments in Thailand in 2014, the Tatmadaw—the national military of Myanmar—seized power from the democratically elected National League for Democracy (NLD), arrested party members and declared a state of emergency.

Since then, in its effort to impose 'disciplined democracy,' the Tatmadaw has done what decades of ethnic conflict could not: united the country against itself. The junta has adopted an aggressive counterinsurgency policy to maintain control, which involves terrorising villages with deadly violence and mass arrests. According to the Assistance for Political Prisoners, a non-profit human rights organisation based in the region, over 1,500 deaths and 12,000 civilian arrests have occurred since the Tatmadaw took control. The extensive brutality has led an estimated 400,000 people to flee Myanmar.

Tit-for-Coup d'tat

Despite violent crackdowns, much of Myanmar has refused to be intimidated. Younger generations have been particularly resolute in their defiance of the junta, and resistance movements opposing the Tatmadaw have gathered momentum. One such movement is the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), a concerted effort by workers in Myanmar to shut down the national economy to pressure the Tatmadaw. The CDM has attempted to translate economic influence into political power by encouraging workers to disrupt sectors of all kinds; retailers, trading houses, railways, dockyards and even schools have been affected by strikes organised by the CDM.

Most subversive perhaps were strikes organised by hospital staff, who were among the first to take to the streets in protest of the coup. Many healthcare workers remember the neglect faced by their sector during the previous period of military rule, during which they were allocated one of the lowest national healthcare budgets. The initial "white coat revolution" involved close to 70% of all staff at state-run hospitals going on strike. The National Unity Government (NUG), a government in exile founded by ethnic minorities, young people, and former NLD lawyers, reports that close to 400,000 civil servants have resigned—a purportedly inflated statistic that nevertheless represents the scale of disruption inspired by the CDM. Some 2,000 soldiers and police have also sided with the CDM.

These counter-movements have not gone unpunished. The Tatmadaw has raided homes, sought arrests, and interrogated workers. Many striking workers have had to flee their homes and now live in exile, where they rely on community donations that typically cover less than half their foregone income. The families of striking workers are also subject to persecution. The willingness to endure such sacrifice reflects the depth of desire for democracy among workers in the CDM.

Discounting the Future

For all the harsh penalties imposed by the junta, what may ultimately hurt the people of Myanmar most is the crippling of their national economy. In the face of infighting, poor governance and a global pandemic, the country has seen its budget deficit grow. The World Bank estimates that Myanmar's economy has shrunk by as much as 30% due to the political and health crises. The coup has threatened business interests in the country and spooked foreign investors. Chevron and Total, both multinational energy companies, have withdrawn from Myanmar's largest offshore gas project. Human rights groups fear that such withdrawals will lead to further concentration of the economic control held by the Tatmadaw—something observed in other countries, such as Iran. The military already controls a sprawling network of businesses in Myanmar, the largest of which yield US$435million annually. Tortoise media suggest that sales from oil and gas could generate five times as much revenue for the junta.

The exodus of foreign businesses is a focal point of concern for the people of Myanmar. Norwegian telecoms giant Telenor has expressed a desire to leave the country, which civilians argue would put personal data, such as phone records, in the hands of the Tatmadaw. In a country already subject to strict Internet censorship, the loss of access to the independent services provided by international businesses could further curtail individual freedoms and threaten personal safety.

The bitter reality is that, as it seeks liberation through collective economic action, the CDM is compounding the harm already inflicted by the Tatmadaw on the economic prospects of Myanmar.

Myanmartyrs

The future is fraught with poverty, persecution and even death for the people of Myanmar. Communities face an impossible choice between sacrificing their immediate economic future or relinquishing ideals of freedom and self-governance. It remains to be seen how the people of Myanmar will decide and what this decision will yield. What is clear is that the recent glimpse of democracy under the NLD has captured minds; as one 18-year-old describes the situation in an interview with the BBC, "they may have guns, but we have people; the power of minds and unity."

More Than a Mural

Rory Small examines the effects of Northern Ireland's troubled past on its communities today.

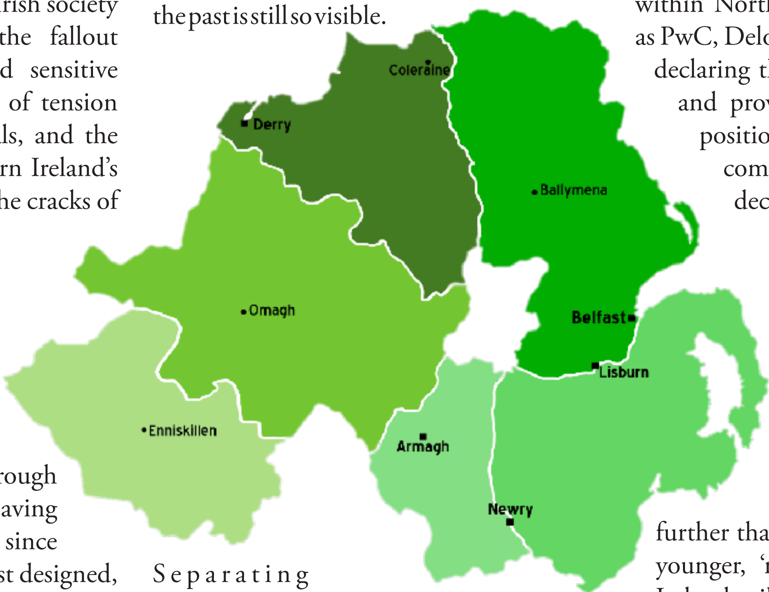
From 1969 until the late 1990s, 'The Troubles' presented Northern Ireland as a divided community. Fractures of religion and politics remain significant, while economic issues surrounding the conflict linger more faintly over the Northern Irish community. Even in its inception, Catholic civil rights movements in the 60s were campaigning for social and economic parity in what was already an unequal state. Nearly 25 years after peace was finally achieved, Northern Irish society continues to struggle with the fallout associated with this dark and sensitive period. The most visible signs of tension are seen in 'peace walls', murals, and the battle-scarred streets of Northern Ireland's cities, but pain still lies within the cracks of this strained community.

Paying the Price

On an individual, business, and even governmental basis, the indirect effect of the Troubles can be recognised through shifting spending patterns. Having been on threat level 'severe' since terrorism classifications were first designed, security costs have been disproportionately high compared to the rest of the UK. Both individuals and businesses have purchased large amounts of surveillance and property-protective equipment, while increased spending on the police service has diverted funds away from more constructive government initiatives. Median annual earnings in Northern Ireland lag compared to the rest of the UK – £29,000 vs £31,000 in 2021 – and further expenses are inflated due to the region's lack of development during the Troubles. On an individual level, this has had particularly onerous consequences for workers, with leisure time and spending also falling below other home nations. As the UK region most affected by mental health problems, with more related deaths in 17 years than fatalities during the conflict, a chilling ONS statistic also shows the community to be the biggest spender on alcohol and narcotics with nearly 3% of total household expenditure in 2016. Clearly, both the behaviours of those who have and haven't experienced the conflict directly are impacted by the scars left on Northern Irish communities to this day.

Divided and Multiplied

Another significant wound of the Troubles lies within Northern Ireland's education system, in which the legacy of the past is still so visible.



Separating pupils from their contemporaries as toddlers, the majority of NI's schools are aligned along religious beliefs. While the existence of religiously segregated schools has noticeable political impacts, its most damning effects on the community can be seen in the divergence of school performance along such lines. When accounting for other variables such as gender, the difference in school performance between faiths is stark, with the percentage of low-income Catholic and Protestant boys achieving 5 or more GCSE grades of Cs and above at 47% and 37% respectively (girls share a similar yet less pronounced variation). While laws such as the 2010 Equality Act enforce quotas for religiously diverse staffing, disparities in academic achievement follow these young people into adulthood, where greater risks of unemployment and low-paying jobs roll a continuous snowball of economic decline for those areas worst affected.

Despite these problems, with the highest spending per head in the UK on education, Northern Ireland has consistently outperformed the rest of the UK during the past decade in examination results. This pool of talent has spurred many companies to re-evaluate their investment within Northern Ireland, with firms such as PwC, Deloitte and various IT companies declaring their confidence in the region, and providing a wealth of beneficial positions and opportunities for the community unseen in previous decades.

'May The Wind Be Always At Your Back'

But even if their own education and future prospects stretch so much further than that of their parents, do the younger, 'new generation' of Northern Ireland still see a future within such a community? According to local think-tank Pivotal, of the on-average 17,000 NI students who choose to study away from home every year, around three-fifths continue to live abroad after completing their studies. As expected, these students are again disproportionately split by religion (53% Protestant to 34% Catholic) and such a divide may induce future inequalities between communities. Unlike their peers in the Republic of Ireland who on the whole return home in seeking employment, Northern Irish leavers seem to continue the stereotype of the Irish migrant known centuries prior. Such a youth-led disdain for the region's perceived future provides a bleak reminder of the fractures and difficulties that remain within this troubled community.

Power of Communities

Unleashing the power of communities is a tricky business, often neglected by big governments.

In this section, Blanka Mona investigates the role of philanthropy in the welfare state, Evan Bennet discusses the necessity of sustainable transport in developing interconnected communities, Arthur Johnson explores the influence of numbers when joining communities to elicit change, and Andy Bridger explores how remote working influences community spirit.

Power of Communities

Billionaire Philanthropy: Society's Golden Ticket or A Drop in the Ocean?

Blanka Mona investigates the role of philanthropy in a modern welfare state.

Philanthropy is rapidly growing in its scale and importance. A practice that operates at the extreme margins of society—think multi-billion-dollar investments by the Rockefeller and Gates Foundations—has taken on new meaning in the wake of recent financial and health crises as philanthropic ventures have had to fill voids in government spending.

The COVID pandemic highlighted the positive role that dynamic and flexible charitable giving, which helped fund vaccine research and rollout, can play during times fraught with hardship. But the rhetoric that often surrounds philanthropy, that it is a wholly good and efficient substitute for public funds, is being called into question. There have been increasingly loud claims that donations by the massively wealthy have had, in fact, only limited social impact. A similarly disparaging assertion is that philanthropy is an undemocratic force that threatens to undermine the sovereignty of governments and public agencies.

The question now facing many societies is whether they would be better off if the vast sums directed to philanthropies were instead taxed and redistributed by governments.

Chicken Little

Charitable giving has had an undeniably positive effect on certain aspects of wellbeing; after all, the Rockefeller Foundation practically founded the field of public health and spurred early efforts to eradicate hookworm, yellow fever, and malaria. The Gates Foundation has more recently improved the lives of millions of women living in deprived countries by providing contraceptive services. These efforts are laudable, as is the experimental approach that many philanthropies take when approaching social problems.

Willingness to tolerate higher levels of risk than government agencies—who have to justify spending to taxpayers—often translates into daring and sometimes quizzical projects. An eye-catching example of this came in 2016 when the Gates Foundation donated 100,000 chickens, vaccinated against common agricultural diseases, to rural families living in extreme poverty in sub-Saharan Africa. The project aimed to ameliorate food poverty in the region by raising stocks of healthy chickens. Ultimately, the number of vaccinated chickens bred increased by 5%. If you are left underwhelmed by that statistic reader, you are not alone. Despite attracting remarkable headlines, it is not clear that the Gates Foundation substantively changed the fortunes of sub-Saharan families by putting "beaks on the ground."

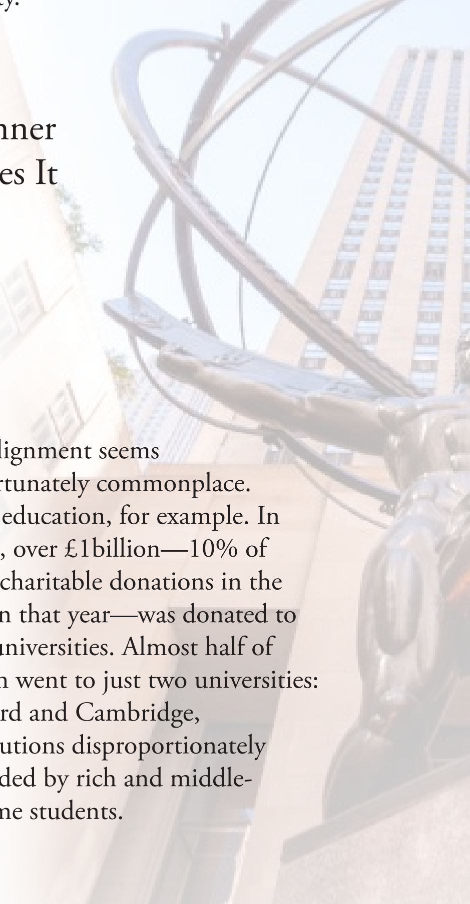
A concern for many is the lack of accountability facing such ambitious ventures. As Rob Reich, a professor of political science at Stanford University, points out, "private foundations are frequently nontransparent." To this end, more than 90% of the roughly 100,000 private foundations in the US have no website. Whilst public servants may envy the carefree, give-it-a-go attitude of philanthropists, it is important to recognise that members of philanthropic organisations are not elected and yet often make decisions that affect millions of people. Projects that may otherwise be considered wasteful and not receive public support are allowed to go ahead without approval. It is not hard to imagine that a government-sponsored program to send chickens to Africa would receive widespread condemnation and backlash from disgruntled voters if it produced the same results as that of the Gates Foundation.

Before the Ink Is Dry

It may, however, be that philanthropies add higher value in other domains. As noted above, an often-cited virtue of philanthropy is its ability to react quickly during crises, which stands in stark contrast to slow-moving bureaucracies. Fast Grants, a program launched in April 2020 to expedite funding for scientific research, is a prime example of the agility of philanthropic initiatives. Amid a global health crisis, Fast Grants allowed researchers to apply for funds in under 30 minutes and receive a decision within 48 hours. Successful applicants typically receive funding within a week. In the nine months since its inception, Fast Grants secured over $50million from donors and issued 260 grants. Conventional government funding for scientific research, by contrast, often takes up to a year.

The responsiveness of philanthropy may be key to understanding its apparent success over the short term. Programs like Fast Grants, which bypass government bureaucracy, are evidence that philanthropies offer a viable—and perhaps more attractive—substitute to public funds in the immediate response to crises. Nevertheless, most philanthropic funds do not intend to fill temporary shortfalls in government spending, but instead target long-term and deeply rooted social issues. A dilemma naturally arises if the issues that wealthy philanthropists wish to address are different from the priorities of the rest of society.

The Winner Takes It All



Misalignment seems unfortunately commonplace. Take education, for example. In 2018, over £1billion—10% of total charitable donations in the UK in that year—was donated to UK universities. Almost half of which went to just two universities: Oxford and Cambridge, institutions disproportionately attended by rich and middle-income students.

Religious causes received the lion's share of charitable donations in the UK in 2018—19% of total donations in that year—despite half of the population indicating on a recent national survey that they do not subscribe to any religion. It may be that these donations come predominantly from private donors, such as alumni networks, but the objectives of philanthropic foundations themselves are prone to differ. UBS, a multinational financial services company, finds that 18% of philanthropies identify the arts and culture as a top funding priority, whereas only 16% identify poverty alleviation as warranting a similar focus.

For some, embracing philanthropy means accepting its inherent shortcomings. They acknowledge that philanthropies will sometimes allocate funds inefficiently, at least from the public's perspective. But, on the whole, support for underfunded causes must only be a good thing. This reductive reasoning overlooks a worrisome aspect of philanthropy.

The freedom to disproportionately allocate vast sums to issues that the wealthy deem "important enough" may undercut democratic ideals. Elected governments have the implicit consent of their voters to spend public funds according to the priorities they campaign on. Philanthropies afford wealthy individuals the power and means to advance their visions of the future, to decide what is and is not good for societies, whether those societies agree or not. This raises an important ethical question about the deepening role of philanthropy in modern societies; as German billionaire Peter Kramer puts it: "Is the transfer of power from elected politicians to billionaires morally right?"

The answer to this question would be more straightforward if opinions about social welfare were similar across income levels. Research suggests that this tends not to be the case. Using results from a survey of the top 1% of Americans by income conducted in 2013, Benjamin Page, a professor at Northwestern University, finds that the views of wealthy Americans deviate substantially across a range of welfare issues from those of Americans in other income groups. Notably, the top 1% were more in favour of cutting social welfare programmes and considerably less supportive of minimum wage laws and other forms of income support. It seems natural to question how socially impactful charitable giving by elite donors can be when their metric for success is so disparate from the rest of society.

Free to Choose

A frequent response to concerns about the ideological motivations behind philanthropy is that wealthy donors have the right to decide how to spend their wealth. Notwithstanding arguments about how much of this wealth is earned through hard work and how much is derived from strong economic growth and public investment, charitable donations are often not independent of other social obligations. Most charitable donations offer significant tax advantages; in the UK, donations to charities are tax-free. This means that private donations may crowd out public spending if the funds used by philanthropies, subject to tax relief, would otherwise be collected and redistributed by governments. A cynical view is that philanthropists are giving away vast swathes of taxpayers' money; for example, tax subsidies on philanthropic donations cost the US Treasury $50billion in foregone revenue in 2016—almost equal to the amount spent on education annually in the US.

These are not small sums, but it is important to consider the practicalities of alternatives to tax-free philanthropy. It is not a given that money spent on philanthropy could be recouped through taxation. Much of this wealth would likely be spirited away to overseas tax havens—where it would serve nobody but its owners. A more balanced approach may be to evaluate the effect of philanthropy at the margin. If the benchmark is to improve society through any means, then philanthropic spending is a net positive even if it does not meet the same standards as government spending.

Sharing the Love

The word philanthropy literally means "love of mankind," but relatively recent trends in income inequality suggest that this "love" is not shared equally. Global income inequality has risen to unprecedented levels. The poor's share of real income has declined—in part due to falling real wages. In the US, while the top 1% of US individuals hold over 20% of national income, the bottom 50% take home only 12%, almost half of the share of national income they held just three decades ago. Historically, philanthropy has been a mechanism through which prosperity in the upper echelons of the income distribution reaches the poorest in society. Yet, despite over two-thirds of the world's philanthropies being founded in the past two decades, income inequality has continued to worsen. This is, of course, not a direct indictment of philanthropy—much of its positive impact may not be reflected in statistics on income inequality—but the data suggest, at least, that philanthropy is not doing enough to alleviate relative poverty.

The need to address growing income inequality is one of the strongest arguments in favour of taxing funds that would otherwise go to philanthropies. There is abundant empirical evidence to support the view that countries with larger welfare states, which typically have better public education, healthcare, and social security, have higher living standards and greater social mobility. Although there is no evidence to suggest that philanthropy cannot achieve the same ends, the evidence on the social impact of philanthropy is scant. A straightforward interpretation of the facts is that it may be more sensible to support larger welfare states through increased taxation on charitable giving than to leave addressing pressing social issues to the whims of wealthy donors.

Balancing the Books

Philanthropy evidently deserves a place in modern society. It has changed the lives of millions of people for the better and likely will continue to do so in the future. The flexibility, generosity and unmatched ambition of philanthropies have especially shown their worth during recent years. Nevertheless, we should not take the merits of philanthropy at face value. It is right to question the motivations of wealthy donors. Philanthropies should be accountable for failures, and they should be open to exploring new ways to harness funds for greater social impact. In this instance, it's ok to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Power of Communities

Won't You Be My Neighbour?

Evan Bennett discusses the necessity of sustainable transport in developing interconnected communities.

On September 8th 2000, the United Nations published the Millenium Declaration, a list of 60 far-reaching goals that the organisation would pursue over the new millennium. Eight of these goals were titled the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) and were to be completed by the UN's partner states by 2015. Included in these goals, among other things, were tasks of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, reducing child mortality, and combating deadly diseases such as HIV and Malaria. While hopes were initially high for the MDGs, 2015 came and went, and little global progress had been made. In response to the marginal failure of the MDGs, and mounting pressure from the global community to address the looming climate crisis, the United Nations crafted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2016. Like the MDGs, the SDGs aimed to make sweeping improvements across the developing world, but this time, placing greater emphasis on sustainability and environmentalism. The SDGs also built upon the MDGs by involving more specific measures that spread across multiple sectors, accompanied by detailed metrics to measure global progress towards the completion of these goals. However, while the SDGs were lauded as a significant improvement upon their predecessors, there was one area that was noticeably absent: the transportation sector.

While the Sustainable Development Goals include measures to assist in the development of nearly every facet of society, there is hardly any mention of the transport sector across any of the 17 SDGs. This is particularly surprising given the sector's impact on global crises and development. Some reports hold transportation accountable for around 25% of global carbon dioxide emissions, so no wonder it has been identified as a "cross-cutting" sector – one that has the potential to catalyse or thwart progress towards the completion of the SDGs. As a result, the sustainable development of communities around the world is dependent on a comprehensive effort to increase the sustainability of the transportation sector. While much progress is needed, success stories from across the globe highlight the transportation sector's ability to stimulate progress towards sustainable, interconnected communities.

From The Outside In

At its core, increased access to sustainable transportation infrastructure has the power to create new opportunities and connections in and between rural communities. For individuals, the ability to commute between villages and into major cities can have profound impacts on their local economies and wellbeing. In fact, one of the largest hurdles to overcome extreme poverty in underdeveloped areas is reforming this lack of connectivity with people beyond the locale. While limited access to technology and the internet create a "digital divide" between one another, the physical barrier of poor transportation infrastructure remains the most prominent form of isolation that these communities face.

Despite its absence from the SDGs, there are already examples of programmes directed at improving transportation and national connectivity. In 2012, China's Ministry of Transport initiated a huge development of their T-Union bus system, alongside contactless travel cards to encourage ease of payment. The system, commonly referred to as TU, has recently been expanded to all rural villages in China, providing affordable access to both small towns and major cities. Accompanying the TU is China's Transport Telecommunication & Information Centre (CTTIC), which has approved significant investment into rural roads to facilitate private travel. The CTTIC has also authorised plans for the implementation of more substantial practices throughout the country, targeting cargo and public transport in particular.

While many of the CTTIC's efforts to make the nation's transportation sector more efficient and sustainable are yet to be realised, there is evidence that the expansion of TU has been a success. The project has allowed for villagers to travel to and from major cities, fostering interconnectivity through the exchange of ideas among those who were once isolated. In turn, China has observed positive results, specifically in the agricultural industry, where villagers have been able to widen the market for their goods.

A (Driver's) Seat at the Table

The direct impact of sustainable transportation infrastructure in developing countries is certainly a positive one. Moreover, on account of the interrelated nature of the SDGs, increasing transport opportunities is likely to have knock-on effects on other sustainability goals. Perhaps one of the more unexpected products of the advancement of the sustainable transport sector is that on SDG 5: gender equality.

To see where gender equality has been improved by the transportation sector, one should look no further than Ms Esenam Nyador, the founder of Miss Taxi Ghana. Nyador started Miss Taxi in 2017 wanting to reduce gender segregation in Accra by providing taxi services to the women of Ghana, by the women of Ghana. Since its inception, the grassroots organisation has grown into a national brand and is now one of the largest private taxi services in the country. To ensure Miss Taxi always has enough drivers on hand, Nyador has introduced a wide array of educational programs for Ghanaian women, which culminates in students' certification in one or more transport-related industries. Women can become taxi drivers, commercial truck drivers, or forklift operators by completing one of Miss Taxi's classes. And while the company has achieved its goal of equality by increasing women's involvement in the industry, Miss Taxi has created something even more important for female commuters: safety. By staffing a strong network of like-minded Ghanaian women, those who use Nyador's service feel more secure, furthering the impact that this program has had on clients and employees alike.

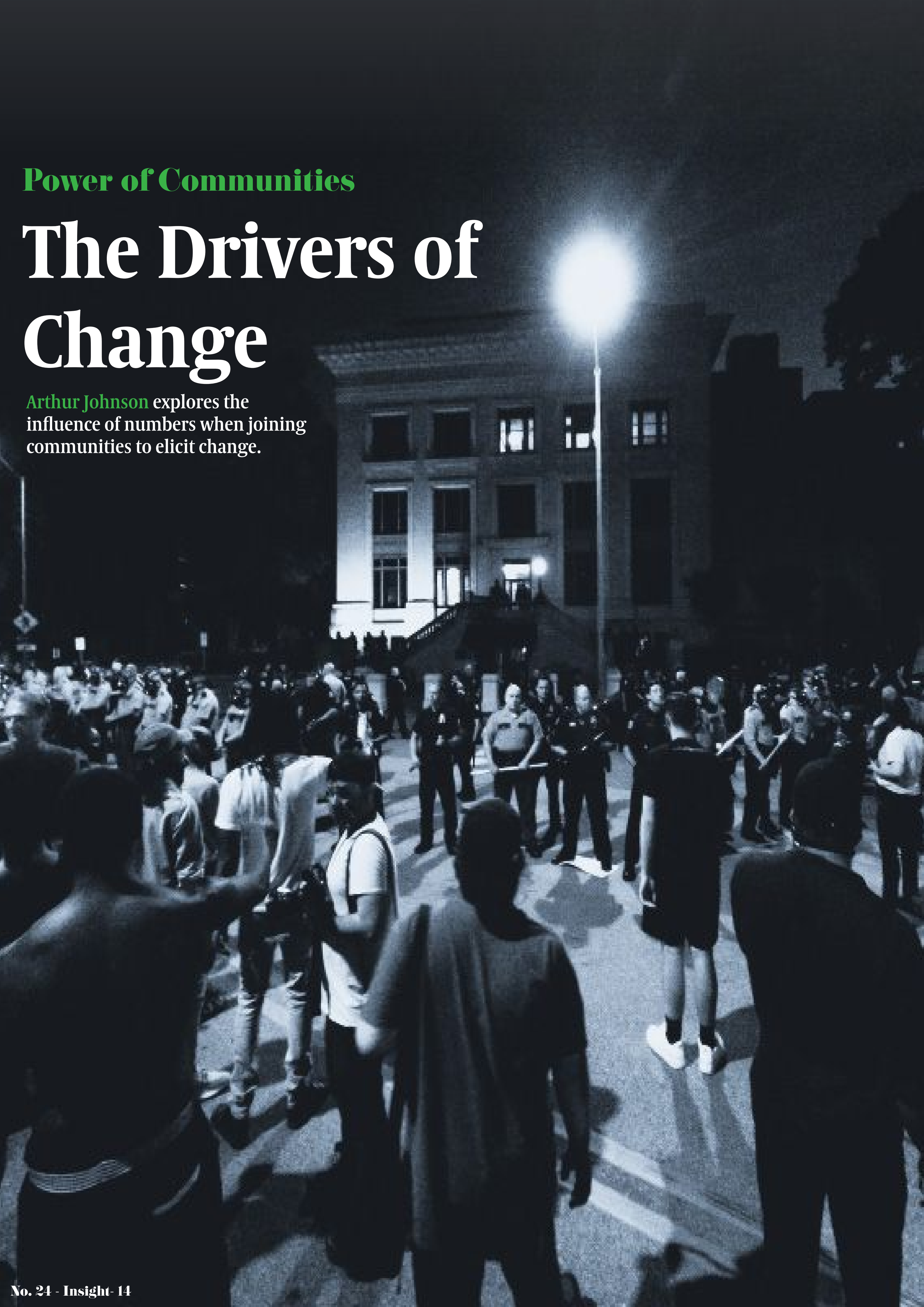
We Can Be Green Too

The most substantial impact that investment in a sustainable transport sector can have on the progress of the SDGs is through the sector's greenhouse gas emissions. In fact, when they met in the fall of 2020, delegates to the UN's Second Global Conference on Sustainable Transport commented that the balance between economic growth and carbon neutrality is fundamental for sustainable development. While the act of striking this balance is a daunting task, many significant projects across the world have demonstrated that it is possible.

In Europe, the Netherlands is largely leading the charge towards carbon neutrality. At the conference, Barbara Visser, the nation's Minister of Transport and Water Management touted drastic improvements to the nation's expansive network of cycleways and celebrated wide public use of the cycling system. Visser also praised Dutch incentive packages and public programmes that actively encourage private citizens to reduce their carbon footprint. In Asia, various nations are working closely with Western organisations to invest in low-emission light rail and bus transport in order to create a more sustainable and equitable transportation sector. In Nepal, for example, the government has received sizable investments from Western companies and foundations to drastically improve Nepali transportation. With these grants, the government hopes to construct light rail and monorail systems throughout the country and into China, allowing for community building and trade across borders while cutting down on carbon emissions.

Are We There Yet?

Although not specifically mentioned in the SDGs, it is evident that the transportation sector will play an integral role in the sustainable development of the world's nations throughout the 21st century. By examining emerging laws and initiatives, such as China's intention to build the Global Innovation and Knowledge Centre for Sustainable Transportation, it is clear that we are beginning to realise the power that the transportation sector holds moving towards a "net-zero" age. Furthermore, as we enter what is hopefully the latter stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become especially apparent that community building cannot happen without transportation, either digital or physical. The United Nations continues to strive for the completion of the Sustainable Development Goals, and one thing is clear: continued and increased investment in the sustainability of the global transport sector remains paramount.



Power of Communities

The Drivers of Change

Arthur Johnson explores the influence of numbers when joining communities to elicit change.

Historically, communities have driven change. Steve Jobs wasn't the only founder of Apple. Tarana Burke wasn't the only person behind the #MeToo movement. Branch Rickey wasn't the last sports executive to sign an African American baseball player. But Jobs was the initiator behind Apple, Burke was the pioneer of the #MeToo movement, and Rickey was the first to sign an African American player – Jackie Robinson – breaking the colour barrier in doing so. These people are whom we will call the 'Zeros,' they're the individuals who don't need anyone to go before to induce them to stand for, or do, something.

This idea can be extended to those who need just one person to initiate change before becoming involved themselves. The previous examples would include Steve Wozniak for Apple, and the Cleveland Indians being the second MLB team to sign an African American player. We will call these the 'Ones.' This follows on through the 'Twos' and 'Threes,' all the way to the 'Infinites' – those that will never change their opinion or stand for change. It is often impossible for us to know where exactly we lie in this ordering; I may think I am a 'Two' and find that I am actually a 'Seventy.' Equally, one is unlikely to have the same value for all movements/ideas. I am far nearer a 'Zero' in joining an Effective Altruism strike than I am in joining the QAnon movement.

Making the next move

In reading about this topic, it reminded me of a few age-old sayings; 'I'll do it if you do it'; 'you do it first;' or my mother's favourite, 'if they told you to jump off a cliff, would you?'. Perhaps my answer should have been: 'how high is the cliff? Is there water below?' Or, more importantly, 'how many people have already jumped off it?' It also made me think about the Black Lives Matter movement, Sarah Everard, and the university strike(s).

Last year saw a huge push from thousands of students to have university fees reduced in line with the perceived value provided, or lack thereof, by universities over the pandemic. But universities have not shifted; the drive was not large enough, and there was a missing band of numbers. There was a 'Zero,' and there were 'Ones' and 'Twos,' all the way to the 'Hundred-of-Thousands,' but I never joined – I must have been in the latter Hundreds-of-Thousands, or possibly the Millions. The petition to lower the £9,250-a-year fees for universities gained 581,287 signatures. Perhaps with more people coming together, we would have seen a change. Maybe that change would have come about with votes in the millions, or possibly all it needed was the 581,288th vote, who's to say? There will always be a figure that will form a threshold, but deriving this figure is somewhat harder than denoting it 'x,' especially before an event plays out.

The same reasoning can be applied to industrial strikes currently taking place in universities throughout the country, with the strength of the movement measured through its numbers. The influence of unions has been depleted ever since the times of Margaret Thatcher, where policies were introduced to reduce the power each individual has in propelling change. Now, the drive of communities provides less torque and as such, requires greater numbers to produce an equal effect. The University and College Union (those spearheading the strikes) need more supporters than they would have previously. They will be relying on a greater population of lower-numbered individuals to ensure that those more reluctant (the higher-numbered people) join the force and, in doing so, increase the likelihood of change being invoked within the system.

There will always be causes to stand for. Some may seem odd, wrong, or completely preposterous; you'll have a number (or be an 'Infinite') regardless. You'll join if that person does, or if x-many others do. Maybe it's in publicly standing for BLM, Sarah Everard, or Ashling Murphy, or to get cheaper vaccines to third world countries. You may never join for some movements – a world full of 'Infinites' implies we live in a world that needs no change, a world where tomorrow should be exactly the same as today.

Power of Communities

You’re on mute:

Working from home and its impact on the communities

Andrew Bridger explores how our relationship with remote work influences communities, and what the future of work means both for the countryside and the city.

In the years before the industrial revolution, working from home was the default, whether it was on the family farm, in the household, or Luddites weaving in their quarters. It was only with the emergence of factories, and later offices, that the idea of workplaces, central business districts (CBDs) and business parks came along. However, recently catalysts such as the long-term decline in online communication costs, accompanied by pandemic lockdowns, have pushed many workplaces back into the home. Recent data from Australia gives an insight into how the pandemic has shaped the way we work. Due COVID-19 measures, a staggering 40% of jobholders in Australia are now working from home, compared to just 8% prior to the pandemic. It is likely that this proportion will continue to be at a much higher level than before COVID-19. How will this shift to working from home impact our cities, inequality, and work-life balance?

Escape to the country

Eerily quiet CBD streets were a hallmark of 2020, as “knowledge” jobs were relocated online. Many countries experienced higher migration from congested cities to regional areas (regions outside the metropolitan area of a major city). Coastal house prices in regional Australia skyrocketed. Many regional areas that have traditionally lost young workers to the city in search of employment have found these young people returning, but this time with their

Poor access to services, lack of infrastructure, and increased exposure to natural disasters, extreme climate and weather events are just some reasons that could drive knowledge workers back to CBDs.

city jobs. Along with the migration of people, economic activity also moved, with well-paid city workers looking to spend their money closer to home. Like most of the world during the pandemic, Australian consumer spending shifted away from services to goods, with increased spending online. Rather than saving for an international holiday, people renovated, redecorated and kitted out home offices. The regional unemployment rate in Australia is now 3.8%, below the city unemployment rate of 4.1%. Regional job advertisements in Australia are now 73% higher than their pre-COVID-19 average. Demand for professionals is strongest — accounting for one-quarter of all vacancies in regional areas. But the challenge for these regions is whether they can accommodate this growth. The economic realities of shallow labour markets, distance and geographic inequalities that have held these regions back in the past have not disappeared. Poor access to services, lack of infrastructure, and increased exposure to natural disasters, extreme climate and weather events are just some reasons that could drive knowledge workers back to CBDs.

This increased economic activity could provide local governments with the much-awaited funding to address these issues, through enabling the creation of adequate climate-resistant infrastructure, along with the necessary disaster response plans. Funding digital health technologies in these regions could also help alleviate inequalities between health outcomes of urban and rural populations, while reducing costs associated with delivering health care. Community, health and economic outcomes are linked. It's difficult to participate in the workforce if you are unwell, while it's difficult for an individual to be healthy if their local community is unhealthy. Health technologies could improve patient outcomes, prevent chronic disease and improve the community's overall quality of care, particularly in regional areas.

But does this potential boom for the regions mean a bust for the city? The death of the CBD is exaggerated. The rules of supply and demand still hold and will mitigate a mass exodus of businesses. Declining office rents will attract new businesses to relocate to CBDs. In the short-term, many firms - such as bars, cafes and restaurants - that relied heavily on the nine to five-foot traffic will suffer financially. However, this abrupt change also presents an opportunity for CBDs to transform themselves: to become a place not only where you work, but also live and play. The best cities in the world are not only hubs for economic activity but also for social activity. According to Nestpick, an on-demand housing platform, Melbourne, Australia's second-largest city, is the best city in the world for remote working. Melbourne scored highly due to amenities such as safety, health care, culture and leisure activities.

Many firms and employees prefer a hybrid model, which will continue to link workers to cities. Surveys from Australia indicate that a significant proportion of employees would prefer two or three days a week at home, with many firms expecting to maintain CBD offices because of accessibility. Most knowledge jobs are likely to remain connected to the city. Industries, such as finance, law, and IT, are less likely to be located in regional areas because they benefit from knowledge spillovers, deep labour markets, and economies of scale that only CBDs can provide.

Work-life (un)balance

Working from home can improve people's lives by giving them more choice and control over their day. Australian city workers' average commute was 67 minutes a day in 2019. Instead of spending this time travelling on overcrowded public transport, the increased flexibility could also provide more time for involvement in the local community, such as a parent coaching their child's football team. This is arguably a more productive use of time. Congestion and time spent travelling to work have significant economic and wider societal costs. Freeing up this time for workers could provide the flexibility they need to spend more moments with their families and in their local community. Despite the pandemic, one-quarter of Australians participated in unpaid voluntary work through an organisation in 2020. However, headline economic indicators such as GDP and employment exclude non-market activity such as volunteering in the local community. The most used measures of our economic welfare ignore the value generated by formal volunteering and informal help. This could contribute to society undervaluing unpaid work, which is arguably a productive use of time.

Flexible work arrangements can also increase participation in the workforce for certain demographics, such as people with disabilities or those with caring responsibilities. But when working from home, individuals may take on more housework and caring responsibilities. Data from Australia shows that during lockdowns, disproportionate amounts of household labour fell onto female workers, with women more likely to have spent time on unpaid indoor housework, cooking, and the supervision of children. However, remote work could allow for a combination of paid and unpaid work in a way that a factory or office might not. History shows that as factories spread throughout the industrial world, female labour-force participation fell. As remote work spreads, perhaps female labour-force participation might increase. A report by Nous Group, an Australian consulting firm, found that flexible work arrangements can help close the gender and unpaid work gap while saving businesses money.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to look over one crucial aspect of this trend: people with high-income jobs were more likely to work from home during the pandemic than those on the lower end of the income spectrum. Occupational data from the United States shows that low-wage jobs tend to have low remote workability, while high-wage jobs tend to have higher remote workability. In the near term, it appears that the benefits of the shift to working from home are likely to flow disproportionally to higher-income workers, further deepening the inequalities and divisions in our societies.

Flexibility is key

Unlike many other forced changes in our lives due to the pandemic, it appears that the number of workers working from home is likely to remain higher than before the pandemic. As with most technological changes in the workplace, the outcome of this shift will likely be positive. Policymakers should support, not block, the transition to working from home. However, governments should also monitor the labour market and regulatory environment to ensure they remain suitable; that they are fair, flexible and efficient for workers and the wider community.

Edinburgh Economics Community

The next three articles are written by some members of the Edinburgh Economics community. Muski Dowlan reflects on her time as President of the Economics Society, rounding up the work of all Econsoc's affiliates. Yongxin Guo discusses the progress of EDI EconSoc throughout the past couple years. Finally, we have an exclusive interview piece with members of the Economics Department exploring favourite research topics and Edinburgh-local recommendations.

Economics Society: Year in Review

Muski Dowlan

This academic year has been extremely exciting for the University of Edinburgh Economics Society. As the committee came together to discuss the direction of the society, it was clear that we shared a common goal of reinvigorating a sense of community within EconSoc through a range of interactive events, as restrictions on social gatherings were slowly being lifted. We envisioned the society to be an engaging platform that enables students to come together and meet people with shared interests through speaker events, careers events, sport and socials.

The Economics Society has become an integral part of university life for Economics students in Edinburgh and stands as the largest academic society in Scotland, with over 1200 active members and hosting more than 100 events each year. We aim to cater to a myriad of interests through the events that we host and aim to broaden our focus to foster a greater level of inclusivity each year.

Following a year of lockdowns and restrictions where the option to host and attend in-person events was limited, we were determined to have an action packed first semester. The society took a hybrid approach in an attempt to maximise engagement amongst students. In-person socials have proved to be the most fruitful way to rebuild the community while speaker events hosted virtually have allowed us to host events with academics based around the globe.

Alongside our weekly events, we were excited to oversee the return of our flagship event: The EconBall. Hosted at the Intercontinental Hotel, this was definitely a night to remember. Bringing together 200 students for a night of drinks, dinner and dancing two years into the pandemic was an exciting way to bring the academic year to a close.

Looking forward, we are excited to host our Annual General Meeting on the 6th of April to elect and welcome the new committee that will guide the direction of the society next year. Undertaking a role on the committee represents an exciting way to take charge on projects that you are passionate about and is a great avenue for personal and professional growth. To those interested in joining the committee, we encourage you to reach out to the current committee to hear more about what the experience entails.

My role as the President of the Economics Society has been the highlight of my third year at university. Rebuilding the EconSoc community two years after the pandemic has been extremely rewarding. I am extremely grateful for the friends I have made along the way but also to have played a role in this unique opportunity to bring people together. During my time as President, I have constantly been pushed outside of my comfort zone to navigate new scenarios and this has provided me with an opportunity to develop a range of transferable skills. I would specifically like to thank all of the EconSoc committee members. Each and every member of the committee plays a crucial role in the way that the society functions and has enabled me to achieve the goals I set out for my time as President.

Weekly Socials

The Economics Society has really enjoyed a return to its weekly socials. We've hosted socials ranging from a poker night to friendly competitions of beer pong. It has been amazing to see students from different year groups come together every week.

Speaker Events

The Economics Society has hosted several speaker events this year, both online and in person. This ranged from career talks on consulting to more academic presentations discussing the importance of integrating the social sciences and history into understandings of economics. Online events included speakers such as Deirdre McCloskey, Ian Bell and Imad Moosa. In person events have included talks with Mark Bell and Edinburgh alumn Sir John Kay.

EconFC

Econ FC has bounced back from last year's COVID disruptions emphatically. With over 65 members and two mens teams, regular training and socials, the year has been a huge success. The Saturday team won their first league title too. Econ FC is more than about winning though, the club all came together on the 19th February for a charity game against rivals GOZF. It was a great day for the club as we were able to show everyone what all of our hard work goes into.

EconWomen

This year, EconWomen has succeeded in creating a supportive environment where university students can form connections with anyone from their peers to company associates and speakers.

IBC

IBC returned this year with in-person meetings and a new drive to attract people from all backgrounds interested in a career in financial services. The Club maintained its traditional offerings of M&A Discussions and the 2022 Case Competition, with five teams competing in total!

Buccleuch Banter

The Buccleuch Banter podcast is now in its second year and has seen the introduction of new hosts and a discussion of COP26 with Matthew Lawson a representative from the University's Social Responsibility and Sustainability Department

Consulting club

The EUCC ran consulting projects with Edinburgh based and overseas clients, invited several consulting companies such as BCG and Capgemini to hold case workshops, and ran a mentorship programme through our Women in Consulting initiative.

EDI

This year, EdEconSoc EDI kept growing and provided a range of speaker, social, fundraising, and career-oriented events themed on diversity and inclusion. EDI also recruited a team of students for a research project relating to equality. In order to give back to the local community, EDI secured another year of partnership with Edinburgh Women's Aid and formed a new relationship with AdvoCard, two Edinburgh-based charities. EDI has also built up good relationships with other student organisations, in particular, ESL PALS has formed a stable, long-term partnership with EDI.

EconPals

During the first semester, EconPALS went back to holding in-person sessions. However, we accommodated students who could not attend in-person sessions by running one of our sessions simultaneously in-person and online.

What we are most proud of is that attendance to our sessions has been consistently high throughout the whole of semester 1 - for a total of 540 attendees!!

Moreover, we organised two in-person leader socials thanks to which we really got to know one another and managed to bond. We also organised a small Secret Santa, which was a really nice way to celebrate Christmas as a PALS Scheme.

Edinburgh Economics Community

Two Years of Econ Soc's EDI

The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee (EdEconSoc EDI) was introduced in the 2020-2021 academic year, making it one of the youngest affiliates of the Economics Society.

The first Head of the EDI Committee, Francesca Pagnotta, was truly devoted to making the Economics Society more inclusive and diversified for its members. During her tenure, she successfully formed a partnership with Edinburgh Women's Aid (EWA), on behalf of the Economics Society, and organised two fundraisers. She invited speakers from different backgrounds to give events on diversified topics and organised Yoga sessions themed on mental health. She contributed to the organisation of the Equality Panel – a panel discussion focused on equality issues in different job fields, collaborating with other societies. Generous support in launching EDI was provided by the previous president and vice-president of the Economics Society, Sofia De Martin and Jasmine Kazantzis.

At the end of last academic year, I was elected as the Head of EDI for 2021-2022. This academic year, other than securing another year of partnership with EWA, I have formed a partnership on behalf of the society with another local charity, AdvoCard. I also established a stable partnership between EdEconSoc EDI and ESL PALS – a Peer Learning Support scheme designed for helping students who don't speak English as their first language. We collaborated and organised a range of social events themed on mental health, diversity and inclusion. Other than speaker events, EDI also had its first career event for international students, featuring Angelina Lu – a former McKinsey consultant and Revolut manager, who has a lot of experience interviewing people and knows exactly how international students are struggling with their job applications. This event attracted undergraduate and postgraduate attendees pursuing 20+ degree programmes. In addition, the first EDI research project, which will be investigating the importance of equality on economic growth and business success, has been launched this year. Many thanks to the researchers of this project, especially the Project Lead Sarah Aida Sah-Hadiyatan and the Research Lead Chenchen Zha. Their research outcomes are highlighting the beneficial effect of equality within economies and businesses. Sarah and Chenchen are writing an essay to summarise some of their findings, with a particular focus on the impact of a strong community spirit. We are grateful to Insight magazine for supporting our project - especially the Editor in Chief, Serena Grover, who has been so kindly supportive of EdEconSoc EDI and our research project.

As the second year of EDI is drawing to a close, I would like to give my best wishes to everyone who supported and contributed to EDI in the past two years. I believe EDI will keep growing and giving back to its local community, fostering a more equal, diverse, and inclusive environment at EconSoc and the University of Edinburgh.

Yongxin Guo
Head of the EDI Committee
The University of Edinburgh Economics Society

Edinburgh Economics Community

Conversation with
Gabriel Ziegler

Why did you choose to study economics?

That's a very good question. Now I think that maybe I should have prepared for this interview *laughs*. Let me start with my history. I started my undergrad doing business and was interested in finance, but some of the business stuff I wasn't so interested in and the economics courses were much more interesting to me. Slowly but steadily I moved towards economics. I thought it's nice to have very interesting and relevant questions about everyday life to answer. But it's also interesting to be able to look at the bigger picture, asking questions like, 'what is GDP?' and 'why are countries rich?' I found the combination of having interesting questions and formal tools to analyse them quite nice. That was the main reason I switched from a more business-oriented outlook to an economic one.

What questions do you try to answer in your own research and what fields are you interested in?

For quite a long time–during my undergraduate and master's, and even a little bit of my PhD–I was interested in more macroeconomic questions like GDP, growth, and inflation. I found that I was interested in trying to understand models: what they are, why we have them, and what we learn from them. I found it very hard to understand macroeconomic models in this way, so I eventually went about trying to understand microeconomic models because I found them easier to understand. Actually, most of my current research is focused on addressing foundational questions about our theoretical models. In particular, game theoretic models. Ultimately, it is more abstract research than addressing direct questions about the economy. My motivation is to understand the foundations of these models to be able to answer the big questions, but I'm not there yet.

I think a lot of students would be sympathetic to your experience with macroeconomic models. Do you think that the process of picking apart models and gaining a deep understanding of them is something that all economists should do?

I'm not sure actually. For a while I thought that, but I'm actually not sure. I'm spending all my research time doing exactly that. I'm mostly doing it because I think it's a lot of fun to do. But I also realise that if you want to address something in the real world you need to accept some trade-offs. Economics is all about trade-offs, after all. Understanding the models deeply takes a lot of time. Some of the questions you want to answer in the end may not require you to understand all the details of a model. In some sense it is a bit like engineering: not everything has to be perfect and if you get very close to perfect, that's already pretty good. I think that you can answer some direct questions without having all the nitty-gritty insights into a model. I don't think everyone has to go down my road. I actually would suggest that it's not a good approach, on average, because no one would address the more direct questions related to the economy, and that would be pretty bad *laughs*. I think it's important to figure out what you're interested in. In the end, there is always some division of labour. I'm always happy to talk to economists who are interested in understanding the models in detail but who don't necessarily have the time to explore them in depth. It's interesting to see what models they need and what they themselves find interesting in the models. It's a good compromise.

Is there anything that you've done so far that you're most proud of?

Finishing my PhD is a big achievement in my life, overall. I'm the first one in my family to get a PhD. In fact, my parents didn't go to college and the whole academic world was new to my family. It was very daunting in the beginning. I'm lucky that I had good friends who helped me throughout. I think it would have been really difficult without them, so achieving that with them was pretty good. Then, after that, getting a job at a very good university was, in some ways, even more rewarding. I guess in an academic sense that was a very big achievement for me, and probably my biggest so far.

What do you find most difficult about economics?

Working on research alone. I find that very boring. When you are doing your PhD, it's very common to write one big paper and it's generally viewed as a good thing if you write that paper alone. It's been getting better recently but I thought it was the most boring part of my whole PhD. Now, I always try to find some people to work with. That motivates me. I like to just discuss ideas and research with people. I think that research is better that way, and it's definitely more fun. Naturally, a lot of stuff you're doing as an academic is done alone. So that's one downside. Especially with COVID, it was hard to interact with people, but students know that all too well.

Is there anything about doing research in Edinburgh that you find particularly exciting?

One thing I found really cool when I came here for my interview is that it's unlike many other universities, which very often have groups of economics doing macroeconomics, econometrics, microeconomics and applied economics that are working completely independently of each other–almost like different departments within a big department. Here it feels like everyone is talking to everyone. We have a nice general seminar, which everyone comes to and it's very interactive. It's nice to have that kind of interaction between different fields of economics. It's sometimes very hard for me because we have talks on macroeconomics, which–as I mentioned earlier–is quite difficult for me to follow in seminars. I don't always know what's going on, but trying to understand how macroeconomists think about problems is really stimulating.

What have you found to be the most enjoyable aspect of living in Edinburgh?

I moved here at the end of the first lockdown, so there were definitely a lot of walks happening at the time because there was not much else to do in the first year or so. I like going hiking. I'm from Austria, so going hiking is quite a natural thing. I did my PhD in Chicago, which is completely flat, so it's been nice to move to Scotland which offers a more diverse landscape. I haven't been to the Highlands yet, but I would like to do that. Just being around here is great. You can go to the Pentlands, which is very easy, or you can just go up Arthur's seat for a short walk, which is great to have. The city is also very well connected, through trains and the airport, so let's see how travel goes in the future. There is a lot of history to this city, which is nice too. I like the bar scene, there are some great pubs in Edinburgh. Sometimes I like to work at coffee shops, but they close quite early in the afternoon, which can be a bit frustrating at times. In general there are good coffee shops but I can't point to a single one right now. I'm still trying random places to see what's good and what's not.

If you would like to share with our readership, what book are you currently reading?
I actually don't read that many books. I suffer from starting books and not finishing them. I started reading one before Christmas and I should get back to it, now that I think about it. It is a book by Thomas Bernhard who is a famous Austrian writer. It's strongly based on Austrian culture, so it's quite funny and interesting for me. Unfortunately, I read a lot of academic papers, which isn't really that interesting unless you're an academic *laughs*

Which journal do you read most often?
Econometrica, for sure. But really I like reading anything to do with economic theory, especially game theory.

Finally, what advice would you have for either undergrads interested in academic research or maybe someone considering doing a masters in economics?
One thing I think that would have been good to know is that if you're considering doing postgraduate studies, it's good to start planning early…even in the second year of your undergrad. The earlier you start preparing for that, the better. That relates back to what I said before, if you are aware of how the academic system works, you'll probably plan ahead but I didn't…at all. I was lucky during my undergrad to talk to professors who recommended that I do a master's. I did, and it turned out well, so everything worked out very well in the end. But, there was definitely a lot of luck involved. I think you can replace some of this luck just by starting to think early on.

Conversation with
Dr Jonna Olsson

Why did you choose to study economics?
I didn't choose to study economics at first. I started studying engineering and I have a Master of Science in engineering. When I started my first year I thought engineering was interesting and I enjoyed it, but there was something lacking. It was the social component. I wanted to learn economics in addition to my engineering studies because I realized that whatever I'd be working on–even if I stayed in engineering–would involve some economic analysis. So, I started studying for a degree in business science and economics. Whilst I was studying, I thought, 'uh huh… this is what I want to do.' Everything sort of fell into place for me. For me, economics is about analysing the important questions, like 'what do we choose to do as societies?', 'how can we optimise for good outcomes in society?', and 'how can we structure systems so that things work out for the best whilst taking into account what people want to do and are willing to do?'. For me, the decision to study economics was more of a random event but it's been very interesting so far.

Do you think your experience with engineering has informed how you approach economics?
Actually…yes. I'm happy about having studied engineering because I got some training in tools that I still use, like programming and math. Engineering takes a similar approach to problem solving. Like, 'OK, let's divide that into smaller problems and then see where we can go from there.' I think you become more open minded and a broader thinker generally. I think that it's good to have a broader background, so I'm super happy to have a background in engineering as well.

What is your research focused on and what questions are you interested in?
This is so broad and so difficult to answer… I'm interested in trying to figure out questions about inequality, like 'where does inequality come from?', 'what can we do about it?', and 'what does inequality look like to begin with?'. Inequality has so many dimensions. There's projects in health inequality and how health inequality is jointly distributed with other types of inequality. For instance, in the US, richer people live longer and black life expectancy is seven years shorter than white life expectancy. There's different things going on there: we have straightforward health inequality, wealth inequality, and income inequality, but we also have health inequality driving wealth inequality. For instance, if people expect a shorter life why should they save as much? I'm interested in looking at these things and trying to understand the different forces, the drivers and explanations. The facts that are sort of what sparked my interest in inequality. Economic research is a little bit dependent on what kind of methodological school you adhere to. I am totally into looking at microdata and then trying to understand the microdata with macro models that still take general equilibrium effects into account and can capture the big picture. So in essence, micro data combined with macro models.

Is there any piece of research that you are particularly proud of?
Laughs
In some sense, it's very difficult to say. Because you are your own work's biggest critic. You start a project that you think is super interesting and you find an "answer." But you know how many caveats there are with this answer! That's why we as economists can never give a straight answer. It's always, 'well it depends,' 'assuming this and this and this we can say this…but on the other hand we cannot be sure about that.' This is why we sometimes get a bad rep for being so annoyingly bad at giving straight answers. In some sense, I am very proud of a paper that is still on the way to be published. In it, we look at female labour force participation in the US, which is a question that many people have looked at before. I'm bringing in a new methodology that we should use to analyse these questions. Every time I present the paper, I feel proud of the results and the methodology. It's always a great feeling when you present something and you actually want people to ask questions because you want to have the chance to explain even the details. If people are interested, it's always a great feeling. With that paper, I always feel like, 'yeah, ask me about the details!', because I'm happy to talk about it. In that sense, any piece of work you're willing to discuss the details of is the work that you're proud of. Because with some certainty you can say that it's good work and it contributes to our body of knowledge.

Are there things you find particularly difficult in economics as a discipline?
The difficulty is in some sense exactly what I mentioned before, you can never get an easy answer and that is somehow difficult especially when teaching. You are always

trying to find a balance between giving the short answer that sounds straightforward and is easy to digest and the answer with a bunch of caveats. It's difficult because some answers are straightforward and trying to complicate the picture doesn't help anyone and doesn't really lead to a deeper understanding. Sometimes it's kind of fun to dive down into details and look into the assumptions we make and assess if we could make some crazy assumptions so that the theory isn't true anymore. Sometimes this helps, sometimes it doesn't. I think it's a challenge to get the balance right in terms of teaching. This is because economics is a discipline that is somewhere between social sciences and STEM. We use the tools from hard sciences but we are analysing social science questions. For me that is what makes it so interesting, but it also makes it more difficult. In math 2 + 2 is four…which is never really the case in economics.

What excites you most about the economics community in Edinburgh?

So, technically, I've been here for one and a half years. Mentally it doesn't feel like that at all! I arrived during COVID and arriving in a new place during a pandemic is, obviously, a bit different. Now both the city and the workplace are opening up, and finally I have colleagues in the corridor. What I'm most excited about in terms of the school economics are the colleagues. It's a super good group working here and I'm still really only starting to get to know people. I'm looking forward to getting to know more people. There are so many good people here. It's the same for the city. I'm looking forward to exploring both the city and Scotland. I like hiking and I've heard there's some great spots around here.

What has been your favorite discovery in Edinburgh so far?

I guess to reveal my preferences…it's walking up Arthur's seat. It's like being immersed in nature within the city. It really feels like being out in nature.

If you would like to reveal more preferences, what book are you currently reading? It doesn't have to be economics.

That is actually a very interesting question, because I read very few economics books. I think it is good to read a little bit broader. Right now, I'm reading a book about the history of Ukraine. Before that I read some criminal novels which are set in Edinburgh… so they're interesting for that reason. A good book I read, which was a couple of books ago, is 'On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous' by Ocean Vuong. That one I can definitely recommend.

Finally, do you have any advice for students studying economics or someone who wants to go into academic economics?

Find what you are excited about. I think that really is the key. Find out what questions make you end up sitting there in a flow state, wanting to figure them out. Those are the questions you should focus on.

Conversation with
Dr Pawel Gola

Why did you choose to study economics?

I guess I asked myself 'why economics?' when I was deciding on my undergraduate degree. The reasons were, at least in part, pragmatic. I was always good at maths, and I enjoyed it. At the same time, I was always very interested in social and political issues. Economics seemed like an obvious choice. It would let me combine these two things. I was also thinking of law, but I thought I really need some maths in my life. I also thought of things like physics, but I felt it was a bit too dry and I wanted to think about current issues. I read lots of Polish weeklies, which were quite focused on economics. Academic economics is a different story. I really enjoyed the research part in my masters. I really enjoyed doing the dissertation but it didn't quite go as well as I wanted. I made a classical mistake, which I would advise everyone not to do, which is trying to do too much. I felt like there was some unfinished business and I enjoyed it, so I decided to do a PhD. I enjoyed that as well and it went well. I sort of thought, 'let's give it a more serious effort' and that brought me here. Economics has its upsides and downsides. It's obviously very stimulating. Within academia, academic economics gives you a lot of independence. You don't really get this independence in proper sciences. Especially as a theorist: you can research what you find interesting. It's a little bit different for empirical researchers, because they work in bigger teams and they are a little bit more constrained by data, but overall it's still very independent.

What fields of economics are you interested in and where is your research focused?

Broadly speaking my research is in the intersection of microeconomic theory and labour economics…although the 'micro' definition gets stretched at times. It's mostly theoretical. There are sometimes some data aspects, but they would be more in the sense of calibrating theoretical models rather than running regressions. The theory is pretty much exclusively about labour markets. It started with a particular topic I was interested in and then after that a lot of it is path dependency. Once you start thinking about something for a long time, you just start knowing more about it. You get better ideas and it continues like that. I have had some very exciting ideas not focused on labour economics, but I typically find that I need a co-author who is an expert in that particular topic because it's hard to know if what I'm doing is really new to people…or whether it's something that was discussed 50 years ago! I became interested in a particular topic just after the financial crisis, when I was doing my graduate research. I attended a seminar about the reasons for the crisis… it wasn't very technical, but there were some practitioners there and they were discussing the type of people involved in finance at the time. Things like maybe these people had something to prove because they weren't the most popular kids at school and other similar ideas. That got me thinking about selection. Things like, 'who goes in to which occupation?' and 'what role does status play in their decision?'. That's where my interest started.

Is there anything in your research or in your academic career so far that you're particularly proud of?

In a way, that's very easy.I'm still trying to promote the insights of it…but I have one publication I'm very proud of which has been published as well as it can be published in economics. It was extremely hard work, it took eight years to get it there, three major revisions, and probably 100 pages of responses to referees. I'm proud of that one, definitely.

Are there things you find particularly difficult about economics as a discipline?

There are two things that come to mind. One is about doing research–probably not just in economics, but I think it might be worse in economics because of the independence I mentioned earlier–it's very hard to separate work and free time. It's actually easier during the teaching semester because then you have a structure: you do your slides, your prep, your lectures, and then you're free for the day. When you do research, you feel guilty during your free time because that's time that could be spent thinking about your research. I remember thinking this whilst playing computer games during my PhD, 'if I have time to relax, I also have the time to think.' That's definitely difficult. In terms of research, difficulties are countless. Starting with the fact that we cannot really do any experiments. Even when we can, there are always problems with them because there are always issues with external validity, etc…We can't do experiments the way that, say, physicists can. We end up relying on observational data to test the theory, and there it's really hard work to determine causality. Research in any field that is not experimental becomes more difficult in a way.

That really resonates. When I think about my future and I think about an academic career, there is no divide between work and relaxing. It's just not for me, I'm very bad at that.

I think it actually gets better with time, much better. What helped me was getting married and having other "constraints"...then again, my wife is also an academic, so sometimes that doesn't help. But it just takes time. Sometimes, it takes achieving just a little bit of your goals to feel better about this. Generally, it's the biggest challenge. It has gotten better, but I wouldn't say it's ever disappeared.

What excites you most about being at the University of Edinburgh, whether that's being in the Econ school or just Edinburgh as a city?

When I was deciding whether to take the job or not, the biggest pull factor for me was actually the department. It's a pretty great fit for my research interests. There is a very strong theory group in the department, there is a very strong labour and macro group in the department, which is very rare. There are two people other than me working on some sort of social status, relative concern space. Overall it's a great fit. I knew Edinburgh was a great city but I don't think I ever fully appreciated just how beautiful it is. By now, the city is equally high on my list of things that excite me about this job. I was also a bit tired of living in a country (Norway) where I didn't know the main language.

Are there any parts of Edinburgh that you've discovered or any places that you really enjoy visiting that you would like to share with our readership?

The completely obvious ones are just Old Town and New Town. Maybe the less obvious choice is the path just below Dean Bridge, next to the river in Stockbridge. That is quite stunning. I was looking for somewhere my wife and I could go for a run and randomly picked this path. We started running, and it is easily the prettiest place I've ever been on a run. I really like that path and love the view of Dean Bridge.

Would you like to share with our readership what book you're currently reading?

Laughs I wish I hadn't started this very embarrassing book…

You can also just share your favourite book!

It's not really embarrassing…just somewhat embarrassing…anyway, I really enjoy reading in my free time. I especially like fantasy and science fiction novels. I usually try to read good science fiction, but just a few days ago I was just looking for something easy to read so I picked something not very good…so won't talk about that. My favorite book is a book by Roger Zelazny called 'Lord of Light'. I've read it 10 times I think.

Finally, do you have any advice for either undergraduate students thinking about an academic career or just people interested in economics?

I have too much advice. *laughs* Maybe the obvious thing–although it wasn't obvious to me when I was an undergrad–is that to get into top US PhD programs it really helps to have a very strong background in math. In Edinburgh, I think you could do this by taking maths courses like Advanced Mathematical Economics. In In Poland it would have been best to take a double degree in economics and mathematics, which is something…I maybe don't exactly regret…but if I could take what I know now and rerun things, I would have done that. Learning more maths at a time when your job is to just learn things is a good thing. Yes, when doing research, you will pick-up the lacking maths quite quickly. But learning new maths always comes at the cost of time spent researching. Another thing is to keep in mind that a lot of the reward of the job is simply enjoyment of the work. If you do your dissertation and find you don't actually enjoy it, there are certainly jobs that will pay as well or much better than academia. You might end up doing things that you don't enjoy, but at least you will be rewarded more for it. The best parts of this career are the enjoyment, the flexibility, and the freedom. If those are things that you don't really care about, you should think about the opportunity costs. Otherwise, it's an amazing job!