

Cultural perceptions – discussion piece

At Friends Provident Foundation we believe that the UK is not prepared for serious discussions about the large scale economic systems change that we need; to talk seriously about why we fixate on a measure of activity (GDP) instead of measuring what successful outcomes for society might look like, to question how far and fast we decarbonise our industries, or to challenge if we are comfortable that inequality keeps growing and growing.

The recent general election campaign has shown us that there is a real reluctance in the mainstream to engage with anything bold that could really transform some of our pressing issues. Yet we know there are pockets of conversation across the country about how we could do better through thinking bigger, thinking systemically.

At Friends Provident Foundation we feel that the way our economy operates is the underlying root cause of most of our other problems in society. Fix this, or improve it, and we will have a better chance of improving other outcomes.

So what will it take to get us there, to a position where we can imagine and think seriously about large scale changes we could make to our economic system?

How we see the economy now

We feel that the economy, in general, is seen as something external to people's everyday lives, often compared to the weather, it is something that happens to us and we must navigate or bear with it. Much of this is the result of the discipline of economics being promoted to a quasi-science which makes it feel like it cannot be challenged and only a few, specifically educated people, can really understand how it all operates.

There are common stories, metaphors and perceptions that are frequently used to talk about the economy, from the idea of the national credit card to the household budget or the magic money tree and more. These cultural norms are very powerful and have dominated how we feel about the potential to change our economic system.

Is it possible to change opinions and mindsets?

It may be that most people are not really interested in engaging with the economy in any deeper way, much like general interactions with technology, we simply want it to enable our daily transactions but are not interested to explore the complexity beneath this.

But we think there are signs people do want to engage more, particularly younger generations who are not satisfied with the answer of this is just how it is. There are examples of shifting social attitudes on issues which allow important changes to happen that we can look to. In public health we could look at public opinions on smoking or seatbelts. The climate emergency is a discussion point on which people generally acknowledge we need to be taking some action. It is on the mainstream agenda, though we of course feel it should be much more of a priority.

We are interested in exploring what it might take to get people asking questions about why our economy is structured the way it is and how we could do it differently. We want to explore what those cultural perceptions and mindsets mean to people, how those conversations can be shifted and what a more constructive way of thinking about the economy might look like. We will do this through our grant giving programme, inviting a cohort of organisations to come together to explore this with us.



Cultural Perceptions - Discussion Piece

This is a new area of exploration for us. We invite people to come with us on this journey, to learn and share together so that we can further deepen our understanding of what it might take to shift cultural perceptions of our economy towards a fair and sustainable one.