

Exploring the Foundational Economy for a just transition

Introduction to this issue by the guest editors

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The Foundational Economy and its development and further refinement in recent years responds to the urgent need to find a way to make sense of why so many foundational infrastructure systems are currently in trouble. Collective problems of under-investment, financialisation, privatisation, and neglect are putting increasing pressures on those parts of the economy that keep us safe, sane, and civilised. The foundational-economy approach seeks to provide a positive reframing of these essential infrastructures, highlighting the importance of social and policy innovations to cope with complex problems.

This line of thinking relates to a broader understanding of the current crisis of everyday liveability, challenging traditional policy concerns of growth, employment, and 'business-friendly' supply-side interventions. The redesign of essential services and social infrastructures is crucial across services to recast the debate around people as well as quality and access to foundational infrastructures (see Froud in this issue). In this context, the transformation of welfare states to cope with environmental challenges while simultaneously securing the prosperity and wellbeing of citizens, protecting them from a range of old as well as new social and social-ecological risks, is a major challenge (Hirvilammi et al. 2023). Strengthening public infrastructure and improving public services are essential building blocks to enable an affordable, climate-friendly, and socially just life for all (Hickel et al. 2022). In the 21st century, a sustainable welfare state must, above all, be concerned with identifying and facilitating synergies between social and environmental goals, while balancing associated conflicts (see Koch in this issue, Bohnenberger 2023).

Against this backdrop, feminist debates can enrich foundational thinking, based on the shared goal to move from a careless economic system to a caring society (see Dengler in this issue). Similarly, deepening the debates on economic democratisation is crucial to strengthen the foundations of a life-centred economy (see Lawrence in this issue, Rahman 2016). Ultimately, these issues are embedded in political-institutional contexts, in territories

and places, relating as much to the task of creating freedom in complex societies (Polanyi 2001) as to questions of community needs.

Drawing on these recent scientific and policy-relevant debates, the Department of Public Finance and Infrastructure Policy (Forschungsbereich Finanzwissenschaft und Infrastrukturpolitik, IFIP) at TU Wien's Institute of Spatial Planning together with the Competence Centre for Infrastructure Economics, Public Services and Social Provisioning (<https://alltagsoekonomie.at>), established in 2022, and a wide range of supporting institutions, organised the 6th Foundational Economy Conference in Vienna in September 2023. The conference was held as a scientific and policy-oriented event with plenary keynote speeches, parallel sessions, and self-organised workshops and discussion groups. More than 250 participants attended the 2.5-day event.¹

Since its establishment in 1972, the department has been working on issues related to the foundational economy. A major area of research concerns the economics and policy of all types of infrastructure, including technical, social, and legal/institutional. In the context of today's multiple crises, from the care and ecological crises to dwindling social cohesion, new infrastructures, and conceptualisations thereof, have emerged, highlighting the importance of the foundational economy as an analytical, empirical, political, and evolving concept.

Held under the theme of "Exploring the Foundational Economy for a Just Transition", the conference brought together academics, policymakers, practitioners, and activists to discuss a wide range of approaches to shaping a just future through alternative economic development. Conference keynotes and participants discussed the role of accessible, affordable, and sustainable foundational infrastructures in the context of an eco-social transformation, while exploring ways to defend, strengthen, and transform them.

¹ For more information about the conference and a recording of the keynotes please visit the website <https://alltagsoekonomie.at>.

At a time of entangled crises and increasing insecurities, with social-ecological crises being accompanied by the rise of right-wing populist movements, strengthening our shared foundations is a prerequisite to provide security, stability, and a sense of solidarity for the unavoidable transformations ahead.

This edition of the journal “Der öffentliche Sektor – The Public Sector” is devoted to documenting the conference and keynote speeches. We would like to thank the keynote speakers, the supporting institutions, all participants, and the organising committee for contributing to the great success of the conference.

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