What do we all want for our communities and for our people?

We want prosperous economies, healthy environments and full opportunities for all our people.

Most importantly we want those to last. We want sustainable communities.

What are the challenges to that? They differ around the world but largely spring from man made factors – resource and energy depletion, pollution and climate change effects, and inequalities within our communities – and those exacerbate each other.

Advancing technology is replacing traditional jobs to the extent that work and careers as we know them are in doubt. Many people won't have work in the future.

So our communities are changing drastically and those challenges make it even harder to ensure our communities will be sustainable.

What challenges beset contemporary communities – both in developing and in developed countries?

Homelessness, including in some of the richest countries.

Poverty and widening income gaps.

A rise in non-communicable, environmentally caused diseases like diabetes, cancers and obesity.

Environmental degradation.

Alienation and rising crime.

Pressure from climate change effects like rising sea levels.

All caused by humans.

Often the response to such social challenges is to call for higher economic growth.

Understandable and clearly a strong economy is necessary for a sustainable community, but it is not sufficient on its own. In fact, the ways the economy works is at least partly responsible for the environmental and social situation we are in.

For instance food – its production, processing and distribution is treated in the same way as any other consumer product but it is not a normal product. Profit, efficiency and consumer appeal take precedence over nutrition, equity and environmental effects.
So we have health issues such as obesity and diabetes arising from high sugar consumption, we have environmental degradation caused by monoculture production such as palm oil. And side by side with enormous waste of food in some parts of the world, we have widespread famine and malnutrition. The global food system is not sustainable.

Communities who are members of the UNESCO Creative Cities network are developing ways to leverage their creative resources to strengthen not only their economies but more importantly to make their communities more robust and resilient.

How are they doing that?

The creative sector encompasses an enormous range of disciplines and endeavours – literary, graphic and performing arts.

Design, film, folk arts and crafts, literature, music, media arts and of course gastronomy are the seven streams of creativity expressed in the UNESCO Creative Cities network.

Often that involves an utilising our cultural backgrounds and values.

Here are some examples of how UNESCO cities are using that creativity to confront social problems.

Santos (Brazil) City of Film – not just the professional film industry but getting most deprived communities involved even street kids involved and into community film projects and promoting social cohesion.

Adelaide (Australia) City of Music – identified music as a strategic factor for sustainable urban development. They have revitalised the town by encouraging all types of musical expression.

Dundee (Scotland) City of Design – is using it to address homelessness.

Interestingly both Adelaide and Dundee are cities with their industrial heydays in the past and are now reinventing themselves.

Shanghai (China), also a City of Design, is developing initiatives linking design and folk arts to demonstrate the importance of combining modern design and cultural heritage.

Dunedin (New Zealand) City of Literature – has a strong literary and educational tradition. We are:

- using our writing tradition and combined it with other disciplines
- combining with film production (natural history film producer NHNZ has its headquarters in Dunedin but is the biggest foreign natural history film producer in China)
- exploring our cultural and literary history, which has regenerated a significant area of Victorian and Edwardian commercial buildings which now house all sorts of cutting edge designers – architectural, fashion and video games and features new contemporary international street art.

That’s how growth in one creative sector breeds growth in other sectors and where collaboration between different streams of creativity within the UNESCO Creative network has enormous potential.

None of those initiatives were designed just to make a profit. They did expand the economy but they were actually intended to make our communities more resilient and sustainable. And they do.

Specifically how might innovation and creativity be applied to food, and contribute to the sustainability of our communities?
The spectrum of creative activity runs from purely individual expression, through social enterprises that develop innovative but not-for-profit business models to achieve their social ends, through to creative businesses. What they have in common is that the main purpose is creating something new and contributing to the community.

Food has been commoditised, produced by specialised production systems and often heavily dependent on remotely sourced chemical pesticides and additives.

It is shipped all over the world with the result that even countries that produce enormous amounts of food still depend largely on imports for local consumption. That’s not resilient. It makes us susceptible during supply disruptions like earthquakes, wars, droughts etc. And it is not working.

For example, on a small scale, after the Christchurch earthquakes, Dunedin shops were empty of staples within days.

In respect of poverty, even in the richest countries on earth distribution of income and especially food is so uneven that many people are undernourished.

The cheapest food is usually not nutritious – even unhealthy – high in empty calories and sugar, causing obesity and other health issues. And an enormous amount is wasted.

So the food system is failing all around the world.

We have Foodshare in Dunedin. It collects food that is not quite good enough to sell – i.e. slightly dated so about to be thrown out by supermarket or restaurant – but is certainly good enough to eat, and they distribute it to people who can’t afford to buy the most healthy and nutritious food anyway. Now a massive business in several cities.

Farmers markets all over the world demonstrate demand for locally produced healthy food. They are hugely successful.

Community gardens have numerous benefits:

- they provide opportunities to work and acquire skills by contributing to gardening effort
- they are more cohesive supportive and sustainable community
- more people have involvement and activity
- increased house values
- supply of quality fruit and vegetables
- local production increases food resilience.

Wellington business set up selling original and wholesome lunches and every time you buy one, an additional lunch is provided to a child in need of food at a local school.

Local artisan and community food production benefits the producer, the consumer and the community.

Most importantly taking a creative view on food production and presentation means that the food produced in a particular place is distinctive – it expresses that place. Not only do the people of that place enjoy the fruits (literally) of their historical and cultural background, but so do visitors. Why would tourists interested in food, travel across the planet to eat exactly the same fare that they get served up regularly at home?

Given the subject of this forum, food is the obvious example of the potential of the creative sector to enrich and enhance the potential of our communities. But I believe that there are even more opportunities in collaboration across the creative sectors and coordinating them with economic development efforts for the benefit of all our communities.

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