

CHAPTER 11

THE *PUBLIC VALUE ATLAS*: MEASURING THE COMMON GOOD?

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I. TOWARDS A NEW APPROACH

In fall 2017, the third *Public Value Atlas Switzerland*, using 14,500 respondents, was published. In Germany, the next post-2015 Atlas is in preparation.¹ A similar study is also being planned for Austria.

In these *Atlases*, a representative population sample of people aged between 18 and 90 evaluate in each case between five and six of the largest and best-known organizations and companies in their country. On a

scale of 1 (disagree) to 6 (agree), this determines to what extent an organization is seen to contribute to the common good in four dimensions: task fulfillment (“performs well in its core business”); quality of life (“contributes to the quality of life in country x ”); social cohesion (“contributes to the social cohesion in country x ”); and morality (“behaves decently”). The respondents could only evaluate organizations if they had sufficient knowledge of them. This produces a classification comprising 100 to 120 institutions.

The extensive media response and companies’ and organizations’ intense interest in these studies indicate the increased need for focus and reassurance when it comes to the topic of the common good. Why is this?

On the one hand, the very concept is undergoing a renaissance in a world that is increasingly felt to be unsafe. For example, Pope Francis I often evokes the common good in his sermons. As he insisted most recently during his visit to Colombia in September 2017, the individual, their value, and respect for the common good must be at the heart of all political, social, and economic activity. In the papal encyclical “On Care for our Common Home,” Francis uses the term no fewer than 28 times.

On the other hand, while the academic world debates (over and over again) whether businesses

should be subject to the common good, business practice itself blazes a trail and develops new approaches. It is not a question of whether top management wants to take on board its own business's contribution to the common good. Today, no one can any longer escape this debate. Indeed, a company neglecting its contribution to the common good could, as a result of negative consequences in its economic performance (customers staying away, the company not being prioritized by employees), create a liability case for the management.

The economic giants themselves demonstrate how they now incorporate the message of the common good in their work. For example, it is Google's stated aim, "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful." McDonald's regards itself as a "*Weltbürger mit Verantwortung*" [world citizen with responsibility], and Bayer stands for "Science for a Better Life." Today, there is hardly any major business that would not want to be seen as partnering society in the management of global challenges. Not least, the digital world's disruptive business models contain value propositions that aim directly to improve living conditions on our planet. We should constantly examine whether word and deed are consistent with each other. Many accuse global businesses of cynicism,

but why should we not give them the opportunity to prove themselves?

This is where the idea of the *Public Value Atlas* comes in. If we look at the current Swiss findings, we can see that much has changed with regard to the common good in Switzerland since the last survey in 2015, and also the extent to which this has happened. Today, Swiss citizens are much more concerned that too little attention is being paid to the common good in Switzerland: 73 percent are of this opinion, a rise of 12 percent. But alongside this concern there is a simultaneous growth in the appreciation of what already exists: most organizations and businesses increased their positive rating. This may be because of the overall increase in insecurity due to global events by comparison with 2015, which led to circumstances in Switzerland being regarded less critically than hitherto. It should also be noted, however, that in all previous studies civil society institutions, whether public or semi-state-owned, or even cooperatives, were held in the highest esteem, while commercial enterprises attained medium to lower ratings.

But what actually is the *Public Value Atlas*? Who benefits from it? First of all, it is not just another opinion poll among many others that organizations commission and use for their own ends. Addressing

the topic of the common good means something more and something different. There are three interconnected functions linked to the *Atlas*.²

1. PLACING THE COMMON GOOD ON THE AGENDA IN A NEW AND DIFFERENT WAY

Since Aristotle's discussion of the common good in the *polis*, the concept has been on the agenda and has concerned anyone who engages with the way large social groups function. Thus the history of the concept is long, ambiguous—and forward-facing. However, one should not oversimplify it and ultimately reduce the common good to one defined thing, in the sense of "...is nothing other than...." Such a fixed definition would guarantee but a short half-life. We need only think of the attempts by economists, politicians, or even lawyers to co-opt it.

An approach that is more likely to succeed, albeit more laborious, is to understand the common good in Immanuel Kant's sense of a regulatory idea, that is, one of the intellectual concepts that regulate human coexistence. As such it is certainly not abstract, but rather develops its power through the emotions linked to it. This means that it is dependent on the people who

can develop and change it. In principle, it is first and foremost a mechanism of large groups without which sociality is not possible.

The common good is a necessary fiction—providing a focus, as it were, on the greater good, which only then takes shape, and which as a result has a regulatory effect. To evoke an image, the idea of the common good is like the function of a polestar that can never be reached but can always indicate a direction. This functional meaning is particularly relevant when everything all around is changing, nothing seems constant, and many things are placed in doubt. At precisely this moment, we should look for a deeper reason why, in times of great uncertainty but also of big opportunities, the focus on the common good reveals its motivating and organizing power. We might even say that if complexity is the challenge, the common good is the answer.

A society is unable to function if its members do not develop an idea of the common good that supports the community. This is well known to all in a secular community who (have to) deal with the common good, ultimately through complex trade-offs. There are clearly various terms for the notion of the common good, terms that emphasize individual aspects: community spirit, social harmony, cultural identity,

etc. It is important to see that in each case these can only be approximations and temporary solutions, as regulatory ideas in particular cannot be defined in their totality.

As a result, the substance of the common good is constantly rebooted and appropriated in different ways depending on ideological and political attitudes. Occasionally, perception of the common good must be repaired and refocused in order to achieve a minimum consensus in society. In this situation, the question of what is in the “public interest” and what in the “interest of the country” arises more and more frequently.

The *Public Value Atlas* is new and different in two respects: first, it draws upon a frame of reference borrowed from the scientifically based psychology of needs. In this, the collective level of the common good is confronted with and related to the *conditio humana*. The elusive common good is linked to individual experience and translated from the theoretical sphere into the realm of everyday life. This gives the common good a basis that is empirically verifiable as opposed to soap-box speeches, metaphysical exercises, and abstract mind games. More fulfillment of societal needs = more common good—this is the simple formula. Anyone wanting to invoke other frames of reference can of course do so.

Our approach is based on a holistic view of humanity, open to different forms of development and variations of basic needs. By linking the individual with the collective via the concept of the common good, we can address the relationship between a (supposedly) self-creating and powerful subject and an increasingly unmanageable and alienating society, a relationship that has become very complicated in the modern world.

A second, important idea forms the backbone of the *Public Value Atlas*. In the spirit of Peter Drucker, the influential pioneer of modern management, our organizations and their actions are ascribed a role that is particularly relevant to the common good. Here we are focusing not primarily on the common good as enshrined in legal texts, in religious writings, or in abstract principles of state, but rather the common good that is produced by small and large organizations every day in the course of their ordinary lives. It is our institutions—in other words, businesses, public administration, and NGOs in particular—that characterize, shape, and even change our sense of the common good.

From this perspective, the concept of value creation that is common in business administration also gains an extended and partly new meaning. Organizations

not only make a contribution to the common good: we might put it even more strongly and pointedly and say that they are actively *creating* society. Through organizational experiences as a customer, employee, or citizen, we have social experiences that affect the structures of our needs and thereby form a context for personal development. The common good thus becomes a basic condition of human self-development and its servant. The common good is therefore not an end in itself. The individual can use the common good as a social resource, which they can at best rely upon, and from which they can draw strength and confidence.

One example of the special role played by businesses and their entrepreneurial activity is without question in digitalization. After all, the current surge in scientific and technological progress in the form of digitalization promises a much greater convergence of people and technology, thus changing the framework of the individual's personal development and social experience. As always in periods of technological euphoria, people say that this time it will be totally different and new heights of quality will really be achieved. In fact, there is much to indicate that the personal and global experience of all of us can be mediated or even completely re-imagined by means of technological devices more than ever before.

If we see the common good as a condition of the individual's possibility of a successful life, digitalization promises a massive transformation of the "conditions" of the common good. If our ways of interacting temporally, socially, and spatially with other people, with institutions, and also with the material world, and not least with ourselves change under the influence of technology, this leads to a massive transformation in living conditions. Previous experiences of self-efficacy, group membership, and freedom could at least be supplemented by the digital transformation, and in some cases even replaced or destroyed. In this sense, the digital transformation is a driver of new forms of the common good and thus a new breeding ground for the experience of subjectivity and successful interaction with one's social environment.

2. MEASURING WHAT CAN REASONABLY BE MEASURED

Creating an *Atlas* means measuring something and, as a result, characterizing an internal context. But is it not arrogant to speak about "measurement" in this case? Probably not, if we accept that the survey approach is based on transparent quality standards

and is verifiable. Drawing on many individual opinions and bringing them together as an average value becomes the attempt to find a common denominator to describe socially shared values. What is important here is traceability and plausibility, not a claim to accuracy that is associated with a scientific ideal but unachievable.

In the first place, it is a survey about individual organizations created using the tools of social scientific methodology, or more precisely it is about the images of such organizations we have in our heads and actively associate with them at the moment the questionnaire is completed. These images are never simple representations of a reality that we merely have to identify. No—they are the result of diverse external influences, but also internal states. For example, when we evaluate others (in this instance actual organizations), we are of course always saying something about ourselves. This is not surprising when people themselves are the measuring instrument. What else could serve as a thermometer for the condition of a society? This addresses a quite fundamental issue in any research into the common good. At least since the pioneering observations of philosopher Immanuel Kant, we have been aware of the impossibility of perceiving our environment in a way that is independent of the observer.

In everyday life, however, we try to suppress this very insight (later named the uncertainty principle), and we try to avoid the accompanying epistemological uncertainty.

The *Public Value Atlas* affects our self-image in two ways: first, as a participant in the questionnaire, it is about my own understanding of the organizations that surround me or influence me. Thus I am asked for value judgments and I have to come clean about what individual organizations are worth to me. The *Atlas* is designed in such a way that everyone can set their own weighting and thus create their individual definition of the common good. It is not about the passive expression of opinions, but about active participation in the debate.

Of course, it is very easy to express an opinion. But seeing such a questionnaire as a simple ticking of boxes against slogans would fall short of the mark and not take people seriously. This would be snobbish and ultimately anti-democratic. It is not about fluctuating opinions, but about consolidated experience, getting to the heart (or in this case the tick-box) of attitudes and values.

Whether we like it or not, we are talking about a mental reality that is neither true nor false, but just real. But beware: the *Public Value Atlas* is not a simple

representation of this. Rather, placing a tick against statements creates this reality in the first place. To some extent this reality is induced and implemented by the survey process itself. Or, more precisely, commonly referring to the common good as a fictional “as-if” produces a so-called collective systemic parameter, which in turn creates a focus.

We can—indeed must—argue at length about how we can reasonably increase the accuracy of these common references. There is at least no social scientifically viable option that obviates the aggregation of individual opinions as the best possible approach to collective phenomena. In any event, the *Atlas* is an inter-subjectively generated and thus social representation of the state of consciousness of a carefully selected subset of the population.

All in all, it is about a collective self-understanding, that is, an expression of the collective soul, the common emotional ecology. How can we be satisfied with ourselves if the environment is not right? But how strongly do I feel obliged to assume responsibility for taking my fate into my own hands? To this extent, “good” organizations not only contribute to our individual life satisfaction, they also stimulate motivation and energy for life. Humans are indeed social beings, who can define themselves as individuals only when

face to face³ with others. Without a “you” or a “we,” an “I” is inconceivable. Seen in this way, the *Public Value Atlas* is a tool or a visual aid to articulate mutual dependencies using social science-based methodology.

3. FROM ITEM OF VOCABULARY VIA LANGUAGE TO DIALOGUE

The common good is one of those concepts that have been invoked in the cultural history of humanity again and again as a call to arms or a wake-up call, in order to appeal to the “whole.” It is a perfect way of mobilizing political energies and/or disguising individual interests. Equally, one can also try to suspend use of the concept completely. It is important to remember the image of society conveyed by the stakeholder approach in the study of business management. In this, all relationships between businesses and their environment are reduced to individual relationships, in which the actors each have control over their own demands. The seemingly intractable greater good is reduced to concrete relationships and thus disappears from view.

And yet, good concepts can withstand even this over the course of time and renew themselves from within. The common good seems to be just such a

self-righting vessel, which from time to time is not only in danger of appropriation, but also suffers from a lack of specificity. This is especially true when it degenerates into an empty formula or is downgraded to a mere item of vocabulary.

The writer Martin Walser articulates the difference between “vocabulary” and “language” with razor sharpness: for him language “always becomes vocabulary when it is intended positively ... Language can be experienced. Vocabulary is understandable ... Language does not have to be correct. Vocabulary is correct.”⁴ Similarly, the *Public Value Atlas* does not have to be “correct,” but it should make our social reality more accessible to experience. The ever-present problem of measuring in each survey is thus relativized to a certain extent, if we place more emphasis on the *Public Value Atlas*’s incentive to articulate and reflect on our own social experience. For, to echo Immanuel Kant, what are intuitions without concepts, and concepts without intuitions?

Alienation begins where the conversation ends, where it is reduced to the exchange of items of vocabulary, or is thought and felt in the form of mutual prejudices and condemnations. Being in conversation with each other also means creating common experiences.

And this is the core of the whole: the common good can only be experienced, not defined.

To this extent, the *Public Value Atlas* is also a resonating space, a unique quasi-object,⁵ which provides reference points for the debate. The *Public Value Atlas* creates a public realm for the common good.

It is clear: initially, we see just bare numerical values, which reveal their meaning only through interpretation and thereby bring to light or bring to life a “truth.” It would be wrong to search immediately for reasons and causes. We will simply not find them if we do not first of all (and this is by no means meant therapeutically) pay attention to our inner voice and find out for ourselves what is important to us about this topic.

Moreover, trying to uncover the common good empirically is a deeply democratic matter. Who else but the people should be able to pronounce on this? They are the sovereign body itself that has the legitimacy and the voice to speak about social conditions. Historically, no social system can survive without subjective acceptance. Anyone who underestimates the subjective question runs the risk of underestimating a very important dimension of social stability, as well as the capacity to innovate.

II. SUMMARY

The *Public Value Atlas* is a mirror that society holds up to its organizations. Whether they recognize themselves in the image or not is one issue. Another issue concerns society itself, which projects its attitudes onto the *Atlas*. The *Public Value Atlas* is also an expression of a collective emotional ecology, in which an internal system or even cultural self-knowledge is unfolded. It condenses public opinion and raises it to the level of a published opinion. This is not a metaphysical exercise, but rather a practical, collective self-reflection as the basis for a debate and discussion focused on the reality of life.

This is where the idea of seeing the common good as a condition of the possibility of a successful life comes into play—or, more succinctly, “no freedom without the common good.” The common good becomes the basic condition of human self-development.

We can now answer the question, “*cui bono?*”: in the best case, the *Public Value Atlas* benefits all of us, each individual in his or her own position, and those organizations who want to communicate their role and impact in society and build new bridges.

In the future, it will be important to improve accuracy of measurement and find alternative forms of data

collection. However, alongside this ongoing challenge, it is most important to explore the opportunities and limits of the debate stimulated by the *Public Value Atlas*. This includes, for example, the fusion of the material and intellectual foundations that lead to corresponding value judgments in the population.

One thing seems certain: it is the disruptive dynamics of current developments in the economy and society that will continue to drive the search for the common good and the compatibility of business and political activity with the common good. In this context, the *Public Value Atlas* can make an empirically based contribution to self-assurance. This is particularly important in a culture of debate where opinion, evaluation, and belief are characterized by polarization and driven by dynamic changes.

This approach should be particularly interesting for those who want to shape their environment, and in so doing recognize how they themselves (whether as a business or as an individual) can depend on and influence the common good in their development.

Notes

1. See <http://www.gemeinwohl.ch> and <http://www.gemeinwohlatlas.de>.
2. This essay draws in part on Timo Meynhardt and Peter Gomez's contribution, "Was dient der Allgemeinheit? Und wer?" in *Wirtschaftswoche* (October 30, 2015) and on T. Meynhardt, "Ohne Gemeinwohl keine Freiheit: zur Psychologie des Gemeinwohls" in *Freiheit und Gemeinwohl*, ed. by Hans-Jürgen Papier and Timo Meynhardt (Berlin: Tempus Corporate, 2016), pp. 173–92.
3. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991).
4. Martin Walser, *Die Verwaltung des Nichts. Aufsätze* (Berlin: Reinbek, 2004), pp. 72, 89.
5. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).