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Reframing Business as Collective Economic Agency: A Systemic Shift Toward Peoples' Rights

*Adina-Iuliana Deacu**

Abstract

In a context marked by declining trust in multilateral institutions, deepening inequality, and accelerating ecological crises, dominant economic paradigms continue to undermine the collective foundations of human and peoples' rights. This article argues that neoliberal conceptions of business grounded in profit maximization and shareholder primacy have contributed significantly to the erosion of self-determination, economic sovereignty, and social cohesion. In response, the paper proposes a normative redefinition of business as an entity that solves social issues and creates social value in a financially sustainable way, reframing business as a form of collective economic agency rather than a purely private actor. Drawing on systems thinking, environmental psychology, trauma-informed leadership research, and Indigenous wellbeing economies, the article develops a multidimensional framework that reconnects economic activity with human dignity, ecological limits, and collective rights. Through an examination of cooperative movements such as Mondragón, the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement, and the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, alongside an in-depth case study of Tianmei World Academy, the paper illustrates how this redefinition can be operationalized in practice. It further explores implications for peoples' rights, peacebuilding, and multilateral governance, arguing that reimagining business as a public, regenerative function offers a viable pathway toward a rights-based economy aligned with justice, solidarity, and peace.

Keywords: *Peoples' rights, Economic self-determination, Human rights-based approach, Collective agency, Regenerative economy*

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Introduction: Beyond the Crisis of Multilateralism

The collapse of trust in multilateral institutions has become one of the defining features of the twenty-first century. Amid global inequalities, climate emergencies, and proliferating conflicts, many communities experience a deep disillusionment with institutions that once promised collective security and shared prosperity (Acharya, 2018; Falk, 2021). The erosion of legitimacy within organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization mirrors a deeper moral crisis: a loss of faith in the very idea of the commons as a foundation for human coexistence (Gray, 2007).

This paper situates the current crisis of multilateralism within the broader disintegration of the neoliberal economic order. Over four decades, neoliberalism grounded in Milton Friedman's (1970) ideology that business's sole social obligation is to generate profit for its shareholders, has transformed business from a potential partner in human development into a driver of systemic inequality, environmental degradation, and social fragmentation (Fraser, 2022; Harvey, 2020). By reducing human flourishing to market efficiency and social cooperation to competition, it has hollowed out collective capacities and rights for self-determination.

Against this background, this article argues that reframing business as collective economic agency, as *an entity that solves social issues and creates social value in a financially sustainable way*, represents not only an economic reorientation but also a political and ethical one. Business, traditionally understood as a private actor, can instead become a site of collective resistance and regeneration, a vehicle through which peoples reclaim their rights and sovereignty over their livelihoods, resources, and futures.

Section 1 examines the relationship between economic paradigms and peoples' rights, focusing on how neoliberalism undermines self-determination as a foundational collective right. Section 2 introduces the proposed redefinition of business as collective economic agency and situates it within systems thinking, environmental psychology, and existing debates in business ethics and social enterprise. Section 3 explores existing movements for economic self-determination, illustrating how alternative business models already embody principles of collective agency in practice. Section 4 develops a multidimensional operational framework, outlining six interdependent dimensions through which the redefinition proposed can be translated into concrete organizational practices. Section 5 presents the case study of Tianmei World Academy as an applied example, illustrating both the possibilities and the practical tensions of operationalizing a

rights-based business model. Section 6 discusses the broader implications of this framework for peoples' rights, economic sovereignty, and the transformation of multilateral governance. The paper concludes by reflecting on the role of business in re-embedding economic activity within human rights, ecological limits, and collective agency.

1. Peoples' Rights and the Political Economy of Neoliberalism

While this section focuses analytically on the right to self-determination as a foundational collective right, this choice is intentional. Self-determination functions as an enabling condition through which other peoples' rights—such as economic sovereignty, cultural integrity, and control over natural resources—can be exercised. The erosion of self-determination under neoliberalism therefore has cascading implications across the broader spectrum of peoples' rights. The section thus uses self-determination as an entry point to examine how contemporary economic structures undermine collective rights more broadly.

1.1. From Self-determination to Market Dependency

The right to self-determination, articulated in the UN Charter and the International Covenants on Human Rights, was conceived as a foundational guarantee enabling peoples to determine their political status and pursue their economic, social, and cultural development freely (UN General Assembly, 1966). However, since the late twentieth century, neoliberal globalization has progressively eroded the material conditions necessary for exercising this right. Through structural adjustment programs, privatization, and the liberalization of trade and finance, economic systems have been reorganized around Friedman's (1970) conception of business as an entity whose primary responsibility is to generate profit for shareholders. This shift has transformed economic sovereignty into dependency on global capital flows and market dynamics (Kentikelenis et al., 2016; Stiglitz, 2002).

As market logics came to dominate development discourse, the meaning of "development" itself was redefined. Efficiency increasingly displaced equity, and economic growth became decoupled from questions of justice. In this process, the collective dimension of peoples' rights was progressively marginalized, replaced by a framework centered on individual consumer choice and market participation (Mutua, 2008; Santos, 2016).

Crucially, neoliberalism undermines self-determination not only through specific policy instruments but through the production of structural

dependency. By reconfiguring states and communities as actors within competitive global markets rather than as autonomous agents, it narrows the range of viable economic pathways available to them. Decisions regarding development become conditioned by external capital flows, investor expectations, and trade regimes, rather than collectively defined priorities. In this way, self-determination is not formally revoked but materially hollowed out, as the capacity to exercise it becomes increasingly constrained by systemic economic pressures.

1.2. Business as an Instrument of Structural Power

The contemporary business corporation, particularly in its transnational form, both reflects and reinforces this shift from self-determination to market dependency. As Crouch (2013) and Banerjee (2022) argue, corporate actors have evolved into political entities that actively shape governance systems through lobbying, tax strategies, and the organization of global supply chains. Despite this expansive influence, their accountability remains primarily oriented toward shareholders rather than the communities and ecosystems affected by their operations.

This produces a fundamental paradox: while business plays a central role in structuring material realities—from food systems to digital infrastructures—it continues to be framed ideologically as a private actor, ostensibly detached from the public good. Within this framework, peoples' rights to control resources, define development trajectories, and safeguard their environments are frequently subordinated to contractual obligations embedded in international trade and investment regimes (Borras et al., 2015).

The structural power of business thus operates not only through direct influence but through the reconfiguration of decision-making environments. When economic systems are organized around the imperatives of attracting and retaining capital, communities are compelled to align public policy, labor conditions, and environmental standards with market expectations. Such dynamic narrows the scope of collective choice, constraining the ability of peoples to exercise their rights in practice. As a result, self-determination becomes contingent on competitiveness, further entrenching asymmetries in power and agency.

Reversing this logic requires a fundamental reorientation: reclaiming business as part of the commons, not as a private instrument of accumulation but as a form of collective infrastructure that serves human rights, social wellbeing, and ecological regeneration.

2. Redefining Business as Collective Economic Agency

2.1. A Normative Framework for Redefinition and Theoretical Grounding

Drawing on the author's ongoing entrepreneurial practice at Tianmei World Academy and research at Research Institute for Sustainability at GFZ (RIFS), this paper proposes redefining business as *an entity that solves social issues and creates social value in a financially sustainable way*. This definition departs from both profit-maximizing and purely philanthropic models, offering instead a systemic and regenerative conception of business as a public function. This redefinition is influenced by systems thinking, which views organizations as living systems embedded within larger socio-ecological contexts (Capra & Luisi, 2014). Rather than isolated entities, businesses are nodes in complex adaptive networks. Changing one element, such as redefining purpose, can cascade through the entire system, altering relationships, incentives, and outcomes.

Environmental psychology complements this view by emphasizing how different physical, social, natural, socio-political and cultural environments, shape human behavior, values, and wellbeing (Gifford, 2014). For example, just as physical environments can promote or hinder healing, organizational and economic environments can either reproduce extractivism or foster regeneration. A business that prioritizes cooperation, inclusion, and purpose can thus catalyze healthier social ecosystems.

Another psychological dimension informing this redefinition is *cognitive dissonance theory*, which explains how inconsistencies between beliefs and behaviors create psychological discomfort that individuals seek to resolve (Festinger, 2001). What this means is that perceptions shape behavior. If business is economically, culturally and institutionally perceived as an entity whose sole social obligation is to make profits for its shareholders, then actors within that system will behave accordingly, prioritizing profit maximization even when it conflicts with broader social or ecological values and human rights. But as Bandura (1999) notes, moral disengagement often occurs when harmful practices are normalized through prevailing narratives that justify them as 'necessary' for growth or competitiveness, further leading to a vicious cycle. Therefore, if we wish to transform business behavior, it is not sufficient to regulate actions alone; the underlying perception of what business is and what it exists to do must also be redefined. Reframing business as a mechanism for solving social issues and creating social value in a financially sustainable way realigns cognition and conduct, reducing

dissonance between moral intention and economic action (Ariely, 2012). In this context, “collective economic agency” refers to the capacity of communities to actively shape economic systems in alignment with their social, cultural, and ecological priorities, rather than merely participating in markets as passive actors. It positions business as a vehicle through which such agency can be exercised, institutionalized, and sustained.

2.2. Resonances with Plural Economies and Indigenous Worldviews

This approach resonates with long-standing traditions that view economy as a social and moral practice, not merely a market mechanism. Indigenous worldviews, African Ubuntu philosophy, and the Andean notion of *Buen Vivir* all place relationality, reciprocity, and ecological balance at the core of economic life (Escobar, 2018; Gudynas, 2011). In these frameworks, wealth is measured not by accumulation but by the wellbeing of the collective. The proposed redefinition of business therefore represents both an epistemic decolonization and an ethical realignment, a bridge between modern systems theory and ancestral wisdom.

A particularly compelling articulation of this relational and regenerative economic logic can be found in Māori wellbeing economies (Spiller et al., 2025). Within this worldview, economic activity is not oriented toward profit maximization or perpetual growth, but toward sustaining *whānau* (*extended family*), community cohesion, and the long-term health of land and waters. Economy is understood as a living system embedded in relationships between people, ancestors, future generations, and the natural world, where principles of guardianship, reciprocity, and collective responsibility guide decision-making. Wealth is measured not through accumulation or output, but through intergenerational wellbeing across social, ecological, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. Enterprises exist to care for life systems, and extraction is legitimate only insofar as it contributes to regeneration and shared flourishing. This approach offers a concrete, practice-based validation of the proposed redefinition of business, demonstrating how economic entities can function as instruments of collective care, ecological responsibility, and long-term resilience rather than vehicles of private accumulation. By grounding economic activity in collective wellbeing and relational autonomy, Māori wellbeing economies exemplify the realization of peoples’ rights to self-determination and control over resources as recognized in international human rights law. While these perspectives provide ethical and epistemological grounding, it is also necessary to situate this redefinition within existing debates in business ethics and social enterprise.

2.3. Positioning within Existing Business Ethics and Social Enterprise Debates

The proposed redefinition of business builds upon, but also departs from, existing traditions in business ethics and social entrepreneurship. Social enterprise scholarship has long emphasized hybrid models that combine social value creation with financial sustainability (Dees, 1998; Defourny & Nyssens, 2010; Mair & Martí, 2006). Similarly, stakeholder theory challenges shareholder primacy by advocating for the consideration of multiple constituencies in corporate decision-making (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 2010), while movements such as benefit corporations and conscious capitalism institutionalize purpose-driven business models (Hiller, 2013; Mackey et al., 2013).

However, the framework advanced in this paper differs in three key respects. First, it shifts the ontological status of business from a private organizational form with expanded responsibilities to a collective economic function embedded in the realization of peoples' rights. Second, it introduces planned obsolescence as a normative principle, whereby the success of an enterprise is measured by its ability to resolve the issue it addresses rather than sustain its own existence. Third, it integrates psychological and cultural dimensions, including environmental psychology and trauma-informed leadership, as foundational to economic transformation rather than as peripheral considerations (Deacu, 2026b).

In this sense, the proposed redefinition is not only a refinement of existing approaches but a systemic reframing: it positions business as an instrument of collective agency and rights realization rather than as a market actor balancing competing interests. This repositioning provides the conceptual foundation for the operational framework developed in the following section.

3. From Theoretical Grounding to Practice: Existing Movements for Economic Self-determination

Community-owned enterprises across different regions of the world demonstrate how business can function as collective economic agency rather than an instrument of private gain. These initiatives, though emerging from distinct historical, cultural, and political contexts, share a common foundation: they transform economic activity into a participatory process through which communities reclaim control over their livelihoods, resources, and futures.

One example is found in the *Mondragón Corporation* in Spain, often considered the world's largest network of worker cooperatives. Originating

in the Basque Country in the 1950s under the guidance of Father José María Arizmendiarieta, Mondragón built a complex ecosystem of industrial, educational, and financial cooperatives governed by the principles of democratic ownership, profit sharing, and inter-cooperative solidarity (W. F. Whyte & Whyte, 1991). Mondragón's enduring success challenges the assumption that competitiveness requires hierarchical management or external shareholders; instead, it illustrates how shared ownership and collective intelligence can generate both economic efficiency and social equity.

Although in a profoundly different context, similar principles are embodied by the cooperative network of the *Landless Workers' Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, MST)* in Brazil. Emerging during the 1980s from large-scale land occupations and struggles for agrarian reform, the MST has since established numerous agricultural cooperatives and production units managed collectively by settled families (Fernandes, 2009; Wright & Wolford, 2007). Rooted in agroecological practices, popular education, and participatory governance, these cooperatives enable communities to achieve food sovereignty, rebuild degraded ecosystems, and foster local solidarity economies. Profits and surpluses are reinvested in housing, health, and education, while decisions are made collectively through assemblies, ensuring gender inclusion and horizontal power relations. The MST cooperative network demonstrates how business can serve as an infrastructure for both economic autonomy and social justice, transforming markets into tools for emancipation rather than dependency. As Fernandes (2009) notes, the cooperative challenges dominant notions of development by linking production directly to the political right of peoples to land, livelihood, and dignity. In this sense, the MST exemplifies business as a vehicle for systemic transformation, one that unites economic practice, environmental regeneration, and collective agency.

In South-East Asia, similar dynamics have unfolded within the *Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement* in Sri Lanka, which since the 1950s has nurtured thousands of village-based enterprises rooted in the Gandhian ideals of self-reliance (*swadeshi*) and collective awakening (*sarvodaya*). Each village becomes a micro-community economy organized around mutual aid, participatory decision-making, and reinvestment of local surpluses into social infrastructure such as schools, health clinics, and community centers (Clark, 2005). *Sarvodaya's* approach exemplifies how economic cooperation can be a spiritual and cultural act, an expression of the right to live with dignity and harmony rather than mere subsistence.

Taken together, these cases illustrate that the principles of collective ownership, relational accountability, and ecological stewardship are not

bound to any particular geography or ideology. Whether in Spain's industrial sector, Brazil's agrarian reform movement, or Sri Lanka's village economies, they reveal how communities around the world are redefining business as a tool of empowerment rather than exploitation. Each model, in its own way, reclaims the economic sphere as a space for democratic participation and systemic healing, an essential foundation for realizing peoples' rights in practice.

These examples anticipate the very logic of business as collective economic agency: production organized not for external shareholders, but for the health and continuity of the community itself. By aligning business activity with local aspirations and ecological realities, these enterprises exemplify how self-determination can influence economic models.

4. Operationalizing Business as Collective Economic Agency: a Multidimensional Framework

The cooperative movements examined previously show that transformative economic practices already exist across diverse cultural and geographic contexts. However, for business to function systematically as an actor in the realization of human rights, these practices must be supported by a deeper structural and normative reorientation of the economic system itself. This requires redefining the concept of business beyond its conventional profit-centered framing. The proposed definition of business as an entity that solves social issues and creates social value in a financially sustainable way provides such a foundation, offering a concrete framework to guide practice (Deacu, 2025, 2026a).

Building on the theoretical grounding established earlier, this section develops a multidimensional operational framework that translates this redefinition into practice. The six dimensions presented are interdependent and mutually reinforcing elements, together constituting an integrated model of business as collective economic agency.

4.1. Business as a Social Problem-solver

At its core, the proposed redefinition transforms business from a vehicle of accumulation into a mechanism for collective problem-solving. The central question shifts from "How do we increase profit?" to "What social or ecological issue are we addressing, and how can we do so effectively and in a financially sustainable way?" In this framing, businesses become adaptive organizations oriented toward resolving context-specific challenges, such as food insecurity, inequality, or ecosystem degradation.

However, this shift also reveals a structural paradox. When enterprises prioritize sustaining solutions rather than resolving the underlying problems, they risk reproducing the very conditions they seek to address. In such cases, economic viability becomes tied to the persistence of the issue itself. Organizations working on hunger, pollution, or mental health, for instance, may develop implicit incentives to maintain rather than eliminate these conditions if their revenue depends on their continued existence. As Meadows (2011) observes, systems tend to evolve in alignment with their underlying goals; if financial growth remains the implicit objective, organizational behavior will stabilize around preserving the problem that sustains that growth.

A rights-based and regenerative conception of business therefore requires designing for mission fulfillment rather than institutional perpetuation. This entails embedding safeguards that align organizational continuity with the resolution of the issue addressed. Mechanisms such as time-bound mandates, mission-locked legal structures (e.g., purpose trusts or steward-ownership models), and independent accountability bodies can reorient evaluation criteria toward progress in problem resolution rather than financial expansion. Similarly, sunset clauses or conditional reinvestment frameworks can ensure that continued operation is justified only where unmet needs persist. Together, these approaches shift incentives from growth to resolution, anchoring business activity in problem solving and rights fulfillment rather than self-preservation.

This orientation resonates with broader human rights and economic pluralism frameworks. De Falco (2020) argues that the realization of social and economic rights requires governance systems explicitly designed to redistribute resources and advance collective wellbeing, while Rizzo (2023) emphasizes that sustainable peace and human security depend on intersectoral approaches that integrate economic, environmental, and social dimensions. Within this perspective, business emerges not merely as an economic actor but as a structural component of the human rights ecosystem, capable of contributing to inclusive development and systemic resilience. The redefinition advanced here thus aligns with calls for plural, solidarity-based economic models as foundational to sustainable peace and the realization of human dignity. This reorientation of purpose also requires rethinking the role of economic activity itself.

4.2. Economy as a Means, not an End

Long before the advent of formal markets, people relied on systems of reciprocity and mutual obligation to meet shared needs (Graeber, 2014;

Polanyi et al., 2010). As such systems expanded, money appeared as a unit of account and medium of exchange to simplify these interactions, translating human relationships of value into standardized forms. An increasing number of exchanges gradually produced what today we call the *economy*. Over time, however, the symbol overtook the substance: the means of coordination became the object of pursuit, and the economy, originally a web of interdependent exchanges resulted from collective wellbeing, gradually transformed into an autonomous system measured by financial accumulation rather than social purpose (Ingham, 2004). Recovering the original relational meaning of money is therefore essential to re-embedding the economy within human and ecological needs and rights, reaffirming that finance must serve life, not the reverse.

Through this lens, profit can be re-conceptualized as a *means* to sustain mission-driven activity, not as its ultimate goal. In practical terms, this means reinvesting surpluses in social infrastructure, capacity-building, and environmental restoration rather than maximizing shareholder dividends. Financial sustainability thus becomes synonymous with resilience, understood as the ability of a business to endure, adapt, and continue serving its community across changing conditions (Meadows, 2011; Raworth, 2017). This interpretation echoes De Falco's (2020) argument that fiscal and financial systems should act as redistributive mechanisms to advance human rights and collective welfare, and aligns with Falcomer and Manzavecchia's (2024) findings that financial instruments such as microcredit can enhance empowerment when profitability remains subordinated to social purpose. If the economy is understood as a means rather than an end, governance structures must also reflect this shift.

4.3. Participatory Governance and Co-creation

A business that creates social value must engage the very communities it intends to serve. This requires participatory decision-making, local ownership, and distributed governance. It also requires recognizing that solutions cannot be imposed from above. They must emerge through co-creation processes that integrate lived experience, local knowledge and cultural values.

As demonstrated by Mondragón, MST, and Sarvodaya, democratic participation ensures that business outcomes reflect the collective interest, transforming the enterprise into *commons* that uphold both social rights and ecological balance. This emphasis on co-creation aligns with Freire's (2018) observation that rights-based initiatives succeed when grounded in local perspectives, and with Gamba's (2025) findings that multi-level

governance structures enhance social resilience through shared ownership. Similar principles have been demonstrated in participatory urban contexts, where Mazzocchin (2019) shows that inclusive co-design fosters both social cohesion and ecological balance. Beyond participation, this transformation also requires rethinking the temporal logic of business itself.

4.4. Planned Obsolescence

Translating the redefinition of business into practice also requires a shift from perpetual growth toward purpose-driven temporality. Whereas conventional industries have historically engineered products with limited lifespans to stimulate repeated consumption and maximize profit (Bulow, 1986), regenerative enterprises can invert this logic by applying planned obsolescence to their own organizational existence. This entails designing businesses to become redundant once the social or ecological issue that justified their creation has been effectively addressed.

Rather than pursuing self-preservation or market dominance, such enterprises develop strategies for self-transformation or intentional exit. This includes redistributing resources, knowledge, and governance capacities to communities or redirecting efforts toward emerging systemic needs. For example, an organization established to restore a polluted watershed or achieve local food sovereignty may, upon fulfilling its mission, transition its assets to community stewardship, dissolve, or reorient toward unresolved challenges. In this model, accountability is redefined: success is measured not by longevity, but by the extent to which the organization renders its continued existence unnecessary.

This principle of intentional impermanence resonates with Indigenous worldviews that understand social and ecological life as cyclical rather than linear. Across many Indigenous knowledge systems, institutions and practices are expected to emerge, transform, and give way once their purpose within the broader web of life has been fulfilled (Cajete, 2000; Kimmerer, 2020). Continuity is not an inherent virtue; it is justified only insofar as it sustains relationships among people, land, and future generations. As Whyte (2018) notes, persistence beyond necessity can itself become a form of imbalance.

Within this perspective, the ethical question shifts from how long an organization can endure to whether it knows when to step aside. Planned obsolescence thus becomes an act of care rather than loss: a deliberate return of power, resources, and agency to the collective once an intervention has achieved its purpose. Designing enterprises with an awareness of their own ending aligns business practice with principles of balance, reciprocity, and intergenerational responsibility.

Framed in this way, planned obsolescence redefines the role of business within a human rights paradigm. Enterprises become temporary instruments for advancing dignity, equity, and ecological restoration, rather than self-perpetuating entities. Their legitimacy derives not from survival, but from contribution: the extent to which they resolve the conditions they were created to address and enable communities to sustain those outcomes independently. Such a reorientation of purpose and temporality must be accompanied by new ways of evaluating success.

4.5. Measuring What Matters

The practical application of this redefinition also requires a fundamental rethinking of how performance and success are measured. Conventional indicators such as revenue, growth rate, or market share are designed to capture financial efficiency and competitive positioning, but they systematically obscure social and ecological value. By reducing complex outcomes to monetary metrics, they render invisible dimensions such as community empowerment, environmental regeneration, or improvements in psychological wellbeing. As a result, enterprises may appear “successful” while contributing to long-term social and ecological harm.

Alternative measurement approaches must therefore adopt multidimensional and relational indicators. These include environmental regeneration (e.g., biodiversity restored, carbon sequestered), social equity (e.g., fair wages, inclusive governance), psychological and community wellbeing (e.g., empowerment, reduced precarity), and civic participation (e.g., increased trust and engagement). Unlike traditional metrics, these indicators capture both outcomes and processes, reflecting how value is created, distributed, and sustained over time. Such frameworks align with emerging approaches in social impact measurement (Rawhouser et al., 2019) and reinforce the integration of human, environmental, and collective rights into accountability systems (De Falco, 2020; Rizzo, 2023). However, these structural transformations ultimately depend on the individuals who enact them.

4.6. Healing Leadership: from Trauma-driven Control to Compassionate Governance

As a final dimension of the operational framework, the transformation of business requires attention not only to structures and governance, but to the psychological foundations of leadership through which these systems are enacted (Deacu, 2026b)2026b. While less explored in business literature, these foundations are critical to understanding how economic

systems are reproduced or transformed. Economic systems do not operate independently; a growing body of trauma research shows that unresolved childhood adversity profoundly shapes adult behavior, particularly in positions of power, influencing patterns of authority, control, and decision-making (Maté, 2022; Schore, 2019; Van der Kolk, 2015). Leaders who have internalized insecurity or emotional neglect may reproduce these conditions through hierarchical, fear-based, or extractive organizational cultures.

As Maté (2022) argues, contemporary societies often “normalize trauma,” rewarding disconnection, hyper-competitiveness, and emotional suppression rather than healing. Within this paradigm, economic and political systems can mirror unresolved psychological wounds, where accumulation, control, and dominance function as attempts to secure safety and self-worth. What appears as structural features of global capitalism may therefore also be understood as collective expressions of trauma.

This dynamic is reinforced by the symbolic role of money. Beyond its economic function, money frequently operates as a site of psychological projection, absorbing unmet needs for security, worth, and belonging (Belk & Wallendorf, 1990; Kasser, 2014). When shaped by trauma, it can become moralized, naturalizing scarcity and legitimizing inequality through the belief that accumulation reflects merit while deprivation reflects personal failure. In this way, economic systems encode psychological and cultural assumptions into seemingly neutral market logics, obscuring their role in reproducing injustice and undermining human dignity.

Research on trauma further illustrates how these dynamics scale from individuals to institutions. Trump (2021) shows how early emotional deprivation can manifest as authoritarianism and diminished empathy, while Haines (2019) conceptualizes trauma as a systemic force that conditions both individuals and communities to operate under chronic threat. When unaddressed, these patterns become embedded in organizational practices and economic systems, perpetuating cycles of control, exclusion, and exploitation.

In contrast, trauma-informed and compassionate leadership recognizes that governance and healing are inseparable. Sustainable institutions emerge from emotional regulation, empathy, and secure relational bonds (Schore, 2019; Senge, 2014; Smith & Boyatzis, 2025). Within this framework, compassion is not an ethical add-on but a core governance competency, enabling the creation of environments grounded in safety, dignity, and trust. Such environments support collaboration and shared agency, allowing organizations to function as sites of regeneration rather than replication of harm.

From a human rights perspective, these insights carry normative implications. The right to dignity, psychological integrity, and freedom

from degrading treatment extends beyond individuals to the systems and workplaces that shape their everyday lives. Organizational environments that perpetuate chronic stress, humiliation, or learned helplessness can thus be understood as structural violations of human rights. Conversely, enterprises that cultivate belonging, safety, and participation enact the positive obligations of human rights by creating conditions in which individuals and communities can thrive.

Healing, in this sense, becomes a structural requirement for justice rather than a peripheral concern. Addressing the emotional legacies of fear and scarcity that underpin extractive leadership is essential for building economies grounded in empathy and regeneration. Compassionate governance therefore represents both a psychological and juridical evolution, transforming the residues of trauma into practices of responsibility and care. In doing so, it ensures that economic activity not only advances human rights outcomes but is conducted in ways that protect them. As such, healing leadership is not an auxiliary concern but a foundational condition enabling all other dimensions of business as collective economic agency to function in practice.

5. Case Study: Tianmei World Academy

Tianmei World Academy (TWA) offers a living demonstration that the redefinition of business proposed in this article is an already-tested reality and not just a theoretical proposition. Founded as a decentralized, cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary ‘network of classrooms’ learning platform, TWA’s business model was designed according to the new definition of business discussed in this article - *an entity that solves social issues and creates social value in a financially sustainable way*. TWA is built on environmental psychology insights, on the belief that understanding what elements create a nurturing learning environment allows the recreation of such environments anywhere. By integrating environmental psychology insights, TWA transforms any space available (e.g. cafés, offices, community spaces) into nurturing learning environments where education becomes accessible, inclusive, and healing rather than competitive, thus taking high quality educational opportunities to where the learner is, not the other way around (Deacu, 2020).

At its core, TWA treats learning as a universal human rights issue. Where conventional education commodifies knowledge, TWA democratizes it, turning access to quality education and mental-health-supportive environments into a universal human right rather than a privilege. Its

operations demonstrate how the *Availability, Accessibility, Acceptability, and Quality (AAAQ)* principles, originally developed for the right to health (Sudha, 2018), can equally underpin a rights-based business model. Psychological wellbeing is not marketed as a commercial product but becomes an added value emerging from the design of each learning experience. Through this structure, TWA directly contributes to SDG 3 (Health and Wellbeing), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) (*Tianmei World Academy*, 2018).

TWA's governance and pedagogy reflect the collective economic agency discussed earlier in this article. TWA's membership system functions as a life-long learning ecosystem, where revenues are reinvested in the organization's growth to be able to bring high quality educational opportunities to more people without having to rely on investors or charity, based on a customer-funded business model (Mullins, 2014). Instead of vertical profit growth, TWA pursues *horizontal prosperity*, measuring wealth by how many people can be helped rather than how much money is earned. This operational logic reframes profit as an instrument for creating social value and environmental regeneration.

Equally, TWA is designed as a platform ecosystem (Reillier & Reillier, 2017), a hybrid organization combining the principles of an academic research organization with a social enterprise, so that it can translate all its research into real life solutions. This model allows TWA to design products and services for real-life needs and solve real-life problems in a financially sustainable way. This positioning also allows TWA to understand when one product/service has become obsolete and when to design new ones, so as to stay relevant, true to its mission, while financially sustainable.

Ultimately, TWA exemplifies what it means to operationalize human and peoples' rights through business model design. It shows that an organization grounded in compassion, diversity, and environmental awareness can remain financially viable while expanding collective capabilities. In doing so, it embodies the regenerative paradigm this paper advances: a business that heals social, psychological, and environmental ecosystems, rather than exploiting them.

However, TWA's model is not without tensions. Maintaining coherence across a decentralized network requires continuous negotiation between flexibility and structural consistency. Such challenge highlights that operationalizing a rights-based business model is an iterative process shaped by contextual constraints, rather than a fixed or universally replicable solution.

6. Discussion: Implications for Peoples' Rights and Multilateral Governance

The implications of redefining business as collective economic agency extend beyond organizational practice to the broader architecture of economic governance. Rather than discrete domains, economic sovereignty, multilateral transformation, and peacebuilding can be understood as interdependent dimensions of a rights-based economic paradigm. The following discussion therefore develops these themes as interconnected processes, illustrating how shifts in business logic can reconfigure relationships between communities, institutions, and global systems.

6.1. Reclaiming Economic Sovereignty through Collective Economic Agency

Redefining business through the lens of peoples' rights re-centers sovereignty at the local and community levels. Instead of relying solely on state-centric frameworks, it recognizes *peoples* as autonomous economic agents capable of defining their own development trajectories.

This also aligns with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN General Assembly, 2007), which emphasizes free, prior, and informed consent regarding resource management. Extending this principle to economic life more broadly would require international law to acknowledge collective forms of entrepreneurship and ownership as expressions of self-determination.

The traditional knowledge frameworks highlighted by Sudha (2018) demonstrate that peoples' right to self-determination can be exercised through the collective governance of resources and knowledge. By embedding human rights standards like AAAQ directly into production and exchange, such models enact the very principle of economic sovereignty that international law still struggles to codify.

These dynamics suggest that economic sovereignty is not an isolated outcome but a foundational condition that enables broader transformations in governance and peacebuilding.

6.2. Reconfiguring Multilateral Institutions for Plural and Regenerative Economies

Multilateral organizations must evolve from regulating markets to facilitating plural economies. This entails integrating community enterprise indicators into SDG monitoring, recognizing social and ecological accounting methods beyond GDP, supporting translocal networks of wellbeing

economies, and reforming investment treaties to protect community rights. Such transformations would align global governance with bottom-up realities, bridging the gap between formal rights and lived experiences (Pogge & Sengupta, 2016).

Building on this re-centering of economic sovereignty, multilateral institutions must evolve to support, rather than constrain, diverse expressions of collective economic agency.

6.3. Operationalizing a Rights-based Economy of Peace

There is a direct intersection between business, human rights, and peace. Economic exclusion and ecological destruction are among the root causes of conflict (Homer-Dixon, 2010). Conversely, community-rooted economies that prioritize dignity and reciprocity can serve as infrastructures of peace.

A rights-based economy of peace would thus rest on three interlinked dimensions:

1. *Relational value creation and economic justice*: Business activity is embedded in networks of human, ecological, and institutional relationships, with fair distribution of resources and opportunities. Value emerges from exchanges that nurture these relationships, not from extraction (Folke et al., 2016; Raworth, 2017).
2. *Collective agency and cultural continuity*: Economic actors—workers, consumers, communities—are co-creators of value with respect for plural worldviews and practices. Their agency extends beyond participation to shared decision-making and ownership (Gibson-Graham, 2006).
3. *Systemic sustainability and ecological regeneration*: Financial viability is necessary but as a means, not as a goal, so it can operate within ecological boundaries and social foundations (Jackson, 2021; Meadows, 2011) to restore the very conditions for life.

Reframing business as collective economic agency can thus operationalize these dimensions, turning economic activity into a peace-building process.

Conclusion: Toward a New Commons of Economy and Human Rights

The global polycrisis, spanning climate change, inequality, and democratic erosion, reveals the exhaustion of the neoliberal imagination. The notion that market forces alone can deliver collective wellbeing has proven untenable. Yet, within the cracks of this system, new paradigms are emerging: regenerative enterprises, cooperative networks, and learning ecosystems that redefine business as a collective endeavor.

This paper has argued that a redefinition of business constitutes more than a technical reform. It represents a systemic shift in the ontology of economy. Business, reframed as *an entity that solves social issues and creates social value in a financially sustainable way*, becomes a bridge between peoples' rights and the global commons.

By embedding economic activity in relationships of care, reciprocity, and ecological balance, business can claim a moral and political purpose. It can become a platform for peoples to reassert sovereignty over their futures, restoring trust not through markets or institutions alone but through shared agency. In doing so, it can help realign multilateralism with its original promise: a world governed by solidarity, justice, and peace. In this sense, redefining business is not merely an economic intervention but a transformation of how societies organize agency, responsibility, and care in the face of shared planetary challenges.

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