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# Community development and community food in Lincolnshire, United Kingdom: The limitations of neoclassical economics

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**ABSTRACT**

Community development in the UK has moved from private philanthropy in the early 20th Century through welfarism to a 'marketisation' in the 21st Century with both state contracts, and market-based performance measures. But neoclassical economics, on which such marketization is based, is an inadequate measure of community development practice as it does not accommodate a range of inequalities, spatial differences, changes over time, market failures and externalities, all of which are at the core of community food projects. Whilst community food projects address market failures, they can use innovative market mechanisms to "cushion" some of these neoclassical economics failings. A number of practical examples is offered, from Lincolnshire UK, of such innovations in relation to community food production, and environmental, food waste, and food poverty externalities.

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## Introduction

This paper is written from the standpoint of a community development practitioner working in community food in the United Kingdom. It traces, firstly, the changing conditions under which community development has operated in the UK and concludes that it has become increasingly marketized into the 21st Century. This marketization conforms to many of the precepts of neoclassical economics and of neoliberalising economic systems. These precepts are assessed and are found to have limitations for dealing with the concerns of community development. Many community food objectives have to find ways of working around these limitations, as they increasingly work within neoliberalising economies. Examples of how these limitations can be "cushioned" are offered through a case study in Lincolnshire UK of both community food production, and a range of examples of how food market failures more generally can be tackled within different kinds of market.

## Marketizing community development

The temporal shift of community development toward marketization has been charted for many western economies over different time periods. Aimers and Walker (2016) examine this for New Zealand from the 1980s, using a discourse assessment. Fursova (2018) offers

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a commensurate context for Canada, García (2021) for the United States and Geoghegan and Powell (2009) for Ireland. In the UK, the relationship between community development, the state and the market has oscillated over the past 100 years. The private philanthropy of the landed classes and the new industrialists, that offered a core resource for community development, never really returned after the introduction of a comprehensive welfare state after the Second World War. One of the principles of welfarism was that there would be no need for a community sector if the needs of society and the state were coincident (Prochaska, 2014).

The pulling back of the welfare state from the 1980s under successive administrations of Premiere Thatcher would, it was assumed, see a natural resurgence in community activity to fill the welfare gap (Fung & Wright, 2003). But the displacement of the old-style philanthropy meant that this was not going to happen as a matter of course. With globalization, and the increasing unequalness of global wealth, today the "super rich" have turned their philanthropic attentions more to the global south (Gates) than the local community and to outer space (Bezos, Musk, Branson) rather than to local space. As a result, a number of successive administrations would tempt the community sector back into action under what are generically known as policies of citizenship (the "Third Way" under Premier Blair (1997–2007) and the "Big Society" under Premier Cameron (2010–2016) were the best known). These would provide an infrastructure and funding for community action.

But these state supports would, quite naturally, have conditions attached. The independence of the community sector would become tethered to the purposes of the state in exchange for funding. "Market" contracts developed between the state and the community sector, fueled by the austerity politics after the 2007 banking crash (Fougere et al., 2017). In this context, working at variance with state purposes – particularly through advocacy – would be choked off for fear of a loss of state contracts (Singleton, 2015).

As a result, say critics, community development now plays out very much in the context of market principles. Lemke (2001), for example, asserts that such principles place an emphasis on "self-care" in the community, echoing Foucault's (1978) earlier "responsibilisation." Community "problems" become recharacterised as individual problems with market solutions (Brown, 2006). Community action becomes "community entrepreneurship," conforming to the established norms of market competition (Mirowski, 2013) and this reduces dependency, improves social conduct, and allows the identification of the "good citizen" (Jayasuriya, 2002).

Fougere et al. (2017) also claim that "inclusive economies," where much community action takes place, are now also framed in this market discourse: inclusion is achieved through *economic* inclusion (for example, a job), and it also becomes entrepreneurial rather than social. And to cement this, the state reifies the community sector emphasizing its success in market language to engender feelings of empowerment and social agency. This further endorses the market approach to community work (Edward & Willmott, 2013).

Some have even suggested that community development has become part of this marketization project itself. Marketization invades community decisions replacing them with market principles (Yeo, 2017), where non-commodities become commodified and community goods are hidden as they masquerade as market goods (Rochester, 2015). In these circumstances community innovation gives way to economic expediency (Osborne et al., 2008), and competition and economic efficiency make the community sector more "cost effective and productive" (Goodwin & Phillips, 2015, p. 102). Certainly, in operational terms (Burkett, 2011;

Fursova, 2018) marketization in the community sector has required more accountability through business-based metrics, a shift from community development to service delivery, and funding has become contractual and largely for direct costs only. Success in tackling market failures is increasingly measured in market terms (Clark et al., 2021).

Many different terms are used for such market principles in these critiques. Marketization and neoliberalisation, for example, have been widely used – but often in a loose and ill-defined way (Dunn, 2017). The term neoclassical economics is used in this paper to represent marketization: an economic approach that favors free trade, low taxes, low regulation, and low government spending and intervention (Reinert, 1994). Whilst there are differences in the meaning and use of these terms (see, Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009, for a discussion), the limitations of neoclassical economics in serving the purposes of community development, have relevance to them all.

## Shortcomings of neoclassical economics

In his seminal work on the symptoms and causes of poverty, Erik Reinert (1994) provides an accessible explanation of some of the shortcomings of neoclassical economics in explaining the human condition. He asserts that neoclassical economics is built around a theoretical edifice of market equilibrium, and disequilibrating factors (such as disadvantage, injustice and unequal resource distribution) are assumed away: "Neoclassical theory has progressed along the path of least mathematical resistance, which (due to the core assumptions) also happened to be the path which proved that distributional problems did not exist." (Reinert, 1994, p. 74). So, he says, it has limitations in dealing with inequalities.

But he also notes that such theory is aspatial – failing to accommodate the relative inherent disadvantages of some places (for example, remote rural) over others (metropolitan) in terms of access to markets and raw materials. This spatial indifference is compounded by globalizing tendencies to create communities of interest (often worldwide and virtual), at the expense of communities of place (axiomatically local and real). These differences define an inherent spatial unevenness in wealth and poverty, in the absence of some form of countervailing intervention (by state, community or individual).

It is claimed, too, that neoclassical economics fails to represent the "real world" adequately, because of its simplifying assumptions, and a keenness to provide mathematical models to explain the human temperament. Bell (2011), for example, questions the assumption that economic decisions are based on "rational self-interest and utility maximization" (Bell, 2011, p. 638) and goes on to show empirically, a range of other values (such as collective interest and philanthropy) that influence economic decisions. Again, simplifying assumptions, despite their irrefrangible status, move theory away from what actually happens. Reinert (1994), again, suggests that (mathematical) economists like to develop imaginary worlds of theory, rather than views of economic behavior, grounded in testable empirical evidence.

Indeed, the evidential base in social sciences generally has been found to have limitations in describing the human condition adequately. In his landmark piece on social drama, Turner (1980) has noted that structuralist-functionalist approaches (that broadly assume large-scale consensus and stability) to anthropology, for example, – also of much relevance to community development – have had the principal purpose of developing generalized laws of structure and process from trained observation and successive approximation. But, he notes, the problem with this is that observable data quickly becomes selective so that successive observations are chosen to reinforce the generalized laws rather than challenge them. Enquiry becomes self-reinforcing.

Cronbach and Furby (1970) also have noted that in social psychology, maintaining the same questions in survey work over time allows consistent time series data to be collected, but that this, by definition, occludes the charting of change. Wagner et al. (2007) note this problem in the social sciences more generally. In essence, any evidential base in the social sciences that seeks data consistency in order to compare "like with like" over time, is likely to be poor at picking up change.

Douglas North, a Nobel Laureate and an economic historian of the New Institutional Economics school, also has concerns about the ability of neoclassical economics adequately to explain economic change over time. He had an interest in three types of institution (in economic decision-making). He called these the "rules of the game" (North, 2005) that provided a brake on economic change, all of which impact the community sector. Constraints are criminal and civil laws; restraints are negotiated behaviors (such as policies and guidelines), and customs are associated with values, beliefs and ideologies. Whilst the low regulations aspirations of neoclassical economics might reduce constraints and restraints, customs are harder to budge because they are based on cumulative experiences and norms of behavior across a wide number of people over long periods of time (D. C. North, 1981).

These institutions create transactions costs that need to be overcome, again, not accommodated in the general equilibrium of neoclassical economics (Alcan, 1979). And these transactions costs increase as the community sector becomes increasingly marketized, often exceeding the financial benefits of community projects (Davis, 1997). North (1992, p. 5) also considers these transactions costs to be rooted in information asymmetries (across those involved in the transaction) in contrast to the "perfect information" assumptions in neoclassical general equilibrium theory.

This lack of a temporal element in neoclassical economics also leads to an under-consideration of the consequences of economic growth, itself a dynamic construct. Thus, we have known since at least the 1950s that economic growth increases inequalities in wealth (Galbraith, 1958), since at least the 1960s that it damages the environment (Mishan, 1967) and from the 1970s, from Meadows et al.'s (1972) work, that it leads to unsustainable resource depletion. And increasing globalization more recently seems to have exacerbated these problems (Layard, 2005; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). In this context, Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz and coworkers (Stiglitz et al 2020) have noted that general equilibrium theory is not very helpful for measuring physical and mental health, social capital, environmental impacts, community participation and the distribution of wealth.

These shortcomings in failing to accommodate a range of inequalities, spatial differences and changes over time tend to be lumped into the general category of "externalities" where general equilibrium is not achieved because the production and consumption of goods impacts on unrelated third parties. These impacts can be either positive or negative but either way, the market is considered to have "failed" because (price) equilibrium doesn't reflect the wider costs and benefits of the transaction. Market failure is then seen to be an "inefficient" distribution of resources. Much is written about the significance of social and environmental (Varadarajan, 2020) and infrastructural (Zhu et al., 2021) externalities.

But in the current marketizing context of community development, Fougere et al. (2017) suggest that these externalities are still seen as correctable by markets, albeit social ones. Attempts are commonly made, too, to internalize these externalities into markets (Unerman et al., 2018). In this way, a new lexicon develops around "social" economies, where "inclusive" and "sharing" economies purport to deal with distributional externalities, for example, and "circular" economies with environmental and waste externalities, but all are still seated in market mechanisms.

Success here can be limited. Von Jacobi et al. (2017) suggest that marketization does not sufficiently embrace the active participation of marginalized individuals or address the *causes* of their marginalization: the inability to tackle inequalities prevails. Instead, marketization tends to buttress prevailing institutions rather than being transformative in the way that the community sector aspires. In doing so, markets in community development sustain, rather than reduce marginalization, promoting, Yeo (2017) claims, several injustices (such as food poverty and food health) simultaneously.

Whilst neoclassical economics has much to tell us about the "efficient" allocation of resources, then, critics have noted a number of its shortcomings, most of which provide difficulties when treating the community sector within a marketized framework.

## The community sector and community food: Working with market failure

Most community food projects in the UK and indeed globally, have been set up precisely to deal with the food externalities and correct the market failures that the quest for market equilibrium leaves behind. Global food insecurity is one such, where large scale intensive agriculture has been seen to exhibit negative climate, soil, and water externalities (Seekell et al., 2017). As well as food insecurity, such agricultural systems also have significant negative environmental externalities (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2021). Food waste is another externality, and whist this is a global problem, practical solutions are almost invariably local (Carey, 2011). Food health is a fourth externality, with staggering first world levels of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and so on, occasioned by poor diets and ultra-processed foods (Lang, 2020), due, in part at least, to imperfect knowledge.

But most pressing at the community level, perhaps, is the food poverty externality. This has been rising year on year in the UK for nearly a decade with almost 2 million people turning to the UK's 2,200 or more food banks in 2020 compared to 913,000 in 2013 (House of Lords, 2021). This has been exacerbated greatly by the Covid Pandemic where locally, increases in food bank use of over 1,300% have been reported between May 2019 and May 2020 (Bailgate Independent, 2020).

And in addressing these externalities, community food projects invariably work precisely at the intersections of these neoclassical economics shortcomings (Deller et al., 2017). They are concerned to address inequalities of all kinds, particularly wealth and health, (Rose, 2017) invariably through improving information (Blay-Palmer et al., 2013), and they operate at the local level *because* of spatial difference (Stroink & Nelson, 2013). In doing all of this, they build community cohesion (Le Blanc et al., 2014) and citizen collaboration (Beckie et al., 2012). They also seek to redress all manner of environmental impacts, (Stroink & Nelson, 2013) particularly at the local level through waste reduction and shorter food miles.

Because of all of these functions, Vorley and Williams (2015), Berti and Mulligan (2016), and Crabtree et al. (2012) all suggest that it is entirely to "miss the point" to assess such community food projects against "market" criteria. Heap et al. (2017) also suggest that the transactions costs are much higher in community projects generally, because of the complex nature of decision-making.

In the context of this marketization, Geoghegan and Powell (2009) suggest that community development takes one of three paths. It is either "of" (where community groups are subservient to the needs of market development), "with" (where corporatist partnerships develop between the state, the market and community groups) or "against" (local, national and global resistance) marketization/neoliberalisation. Fursova (2018) suggests that these may not be mutually exclusive, observing community organizations that work both "with" and "against" the state at the same time. Mars (2020), too, suggests some community food projects might be "of" marketization (middle and upper-class consumers purchasing local produce at premium prices) whilst at the same time being "against" (redistributing surpluses to lower income communities vulnerable to food insecurity).

The practice examples described below suggest a fourth path: "cushioning." Distinct from a political or ideological stance, this is a pragmatic, operational position, which seeks to use the tools of marketization, where possible, to soften its impact. Burkett (2011) notes a similar path – working within the system to create change through community or social entrepreneurship. Aimers and Walker (2016) note a broadly similar approach, too, stressing the importance of social innovation within it.

The remainder of this paper reports on how community food projects in one UK County – Lincolnshire – seek to address these marketization characteristics through cushioning. Such examples are concerned with systems thinking rather than place specificness, and thus are broadly transferable into other contexts and places. It is divided into three sections. Firstly, a brief profile of the County is presented to contextualize the local community food sector. Secondly, actions are reported that seek to address the market disadvantages of small-scale community food *production*. Thirdly a series of market manipulations is recounted in the context of *environment, food waste and food poverty* externalities, that "use the market to soften the market."

## Cushioning the marketization of community food development in Lincolnshire, UK

### *The Lincolnshire food context*

Lincolnshire is the second largest county in England by area. It is rural, with no significant metropolitan areas. It has several districts of high deprivation (in the top 10% for England; Lincolnshire Community and Voluntary Services, 2020), where food poverty, and food bank use, are significant. Industrial agriculture is one of the County's key sectors, within the Eastern region, known as the "breadbasket" of England because of its production of wheat. The County produces 12.5% of the UKs food (30% of vegetables and 18% of poultry) and processes 70% of its fish. The food chain accounts for 24% of the County's jobs and 21% of its economic output. Both are considerably higher than the national average (Lincolnshire Local Enterprise Partnership, 2021).

Locally it was a right-of-center Conservative controlled county administration, and all 11 County Members of Parliament (national) were Conservative, in 2022. Some 66% of those who voted in Lincolnshire, voted to leave the European Union in 2016, with the highest national constituency vote to leave (76%) being in the County. This was in Boston and Skegness, where the largest concentration of European in-migrant agricultural workers nationally, was situated (Electoral Commission, 2019) and where, now, the most significant agriculture worker shortage is being experienced as a result of the loss of this European workforce. Because agriculture is a "traditional" industry in the County, "alternative" community food cultures have been harder to develop than in areas with more left-of-center "green collar" populations such as in the Brighton and Hove and Bristol metropolitan areas (Curry et al., 2016), a difference also noted in the USA context, by Low et al. (2020).

## *Tackling market disadvantages in local, small-scale community food production*

Whilst the principles of neoclassical economics don't serve the purposes of community food well, they have, perhaps ironically, been altogether suspended in the operation of industrial/commercial agriculture in most western economies (and certainly in Lincolnshire). Such agriculture has created considerable market failures with, and often exacerbated by, huge levels of state financial support.

For the UK, registered agricultural holdings receive subsidy simply for owning land (basic payments). Subsidies also are allocated for fuel, for business rate relief and through inheritance tax exemptions. In 2020 the value of this support was £3.2 ($4.35) billion, set against a total farm income in the same year of £4.12 ($5.6) billion (Defra, 2021, table 4.1). Whilst these subsidies accounted for 78% of total farm income in 2020, they were over 100% in much of the 2000s (farmers would have been better off not doing anything but receiving state support), peaking at 138% in 2005 (Curry & Owen, 2009).

Addressing market failures with this massive support disparity is a considerable challenge for the community growing sector. In Lincolnshire several approaches to cushioning community production have been pursued. Principally, of course, working collaboratively is critical, to achieve a degree of self-reliance (Burkett, 2011), to increase trust and to integrate the food chain (Bloom & Hinrichs, 2011). This invariably requires strong leadership (García, 2021) and good information flows (Fursova, 2018). Incredible Edible Lincolnshire is a collective of over 30 small producers (including hobbyists and Community Supported Agriculture holdings (Cone & Myhre, 2000)) that shares (physically and electronically) good practice (information), inputs (working capital), and indeed values.

A second approach has been to engage with landholders that have non-market proposes, to seek the release of community-based land. High levels of subsidy, particularly death duty exemptions, are capitalized into land values placing land largely out of reach of any would-be community growers. In Lincolnshire, the local County Council holds about 10,000 acres and the Church (the Lincoln Diocese) a similar amount. The former had the original purpose of encouraging new entrants into agriculture. The latter, despite land being part of its asset portfolio, has an interest in both social and environmental uses for their land, and appointed a Church sustainability officer in 2018, partly to pursue these ends.

Thirdly, working within other policy domains can provide sources of income whilst addressing market failures simultaneously. In Lincolnshire, relationships are developing with the local health authority in relation to social prescribing (using community food growing as exercise and mental health rehabilitation) and care farming (Leck et al., 2014). Links with the prison service, too, are developing the potential for community food growing as social and employment rehabilitation. Of course, fourthly, community food production makes much use of voluntary effort, often, simultaneously, improving community cohesion (Rosol, 2012).

Fifthly, unconventional spaces are often used for food production. The Lincolnshire Food Partnership is developing a "garden production" collective in a low-income part of Lincoln City. "Guerrilla gardening" (growing without explicit permission) commonly takes place in many parts of urban UK (Hardman & Larkham, 2016), and in Brighton, sheep grazing takes place on social housing estates, built after the Second World War with generous public open space. This has been found to engender responsibility and reduce anti-social behavior. (Brighton and Hove City Council, 2021).

More widely, finally, whilst all of these sit within markets, innovative direct market supports in community food production often come from the consumer (Low et al., 2020). This includes paying for (fresh, unprocessed) produce well in advance of consumption, to share producer risk and provide income certainty (O'Hara & Stagl, 2001), shortening food chains to bypass distributors – direct purchase (Bloom & Hinrichs, 2011) and paying premium prices as an act of loyalty and a belief in community. Consumers at Stroud Community Farm, UK, for example, knowingly pay "inflated" prices for food boxes to cross-subsidize improvements in nutrition amongst low-income communities (Franklin et al., 2011). This kind of direct consumer support is part of an array of entrepreneurial models that can cushion marketization approaches, which also include cooperatives, farmers' markets, farm-to institution models, and alternative retail approaches (e.g. food trucks, pop-up restaurants; Mars, 2020).

### *Embracing the market in community food development*

More direct market manipulation has been used in Lincolnshire to address market failures relating to the environment, food waste and food poverty. This reflects Carolan and Hale's (2016) "diverse economies" approach. *In-organization cross-subsidization* is an obvious starting point. The community-consumer supports noted in the previous section are a prime example of this, for example, premium price box schemes.

*Using markets to internalize externalities* also has a redistributive purpose. Repurposing "waste" food is well organized through a central Lincolnshire hub. Coming largely from large food retailers, near sell-by-date food, or food with damaged packaging, is donated free (and therefore avoids refuse charges) and is passed on free (food banks) or resold in community cafes at about 10% of restaurant prices. These cafes also run cooking classes particularly for those in food poverty, which, in effect, are tackling the unrealistic assumption of "perfect information" within neoclassical general equilibrium theory.

Waste food re-use has popular appeal such that other organizations donate surplus food into the system. The local university grows large quantities of fruit and vegetables as part of its research into agricultural robotics: once robot-picked, they are donated. Community growing projects also chip in. Being associated with food redistribution as a producer/retailer is good for reputation and marketing and has a feelgood factor, too.

*Converting capital costs into revenue streams* also has developed. The emphasis of many state regional infrastructure grants is on supporting capital projects, but the main struggle for community food projects lies in securing recurring revenue costs. A partnership with the local community energy company has allowed capturing state capital grants for solar panels. Placed on municipal buildings, these generate an income stream for more than 20 years, which (after direct costs) are donated to community food projects on a continuing basis – known as the "Feeding Tariff" (Curry, 2022)).

*Experimenting with different mediums of exchange* also has been valuable for reducing inequalities. In one local community café (Mint Lane Café, 2021), *price-based monetary exchange* takes place where a café and a thrifty shop sell "surplus" food at a fraction of its market price. *Volunteering* is a non-monetary exchange as volunteers each have a "free food" entitlement. In the thrifty shop a *pay as much as you feel* system has operated and when there are gluts of food retail perishable items (such as bread and pastries), these are *given away free*. There are also *donations boxes* for customers who wish to pay above prevailing prices where they exist (for redistributive purposes) and *pay it forward vouchers* for those who wish to buy food for other people (invariably unknown to them). These are all in addition to food *gifting* from all of the sources noted above.

Finally, *sponsorship* offers a seventh medium of exchange. The café has been refurbished by a local kitchen company (a prize in a "Caring Kitchen of the Year" competition) and is one of 20 UK "Starbucks Community Cafes": Starbucks provides a range of coffees, teas and biscuits free on a continuing basis. In the end, community development projects of all types are likely to have to embrace markets in these kinds of "cushioning" ways in what Fraser (2020) considers is now "neoliberal community development":

> Community development emerges not so much as a social profession rooted in the needs and aspirations of communities, but as a technology of government which is deployed by local states to facilitate neoliberalisation, austerity and the marketisation of public services. (Fraser, 2020, p. 437)

But there are innovative ways of cushioning the market to address the failures of the market.

## Conclusions

The community development journey in the UK has transitioned from philanthropy through welfarism to marketization through the 20$^{th}$ Century. This has created challenges for the sector because neoclassical economics principles, upon which marketization is founded, fails to embrace many of the core purposes of community development (see, Figure 1).

It is possible, however, to use a range of market mechanisms and other social innovations (summarized in the right-hand column of Figure 1) to "cushion" these shortcomings of neoclassical economics to achieve community goals within the prevailing marketization climate. These innovations are generic systems thinking, and therefore transferable. In this way, community food (and more general) projects can operate within the limitations of a neoclassical market framework.

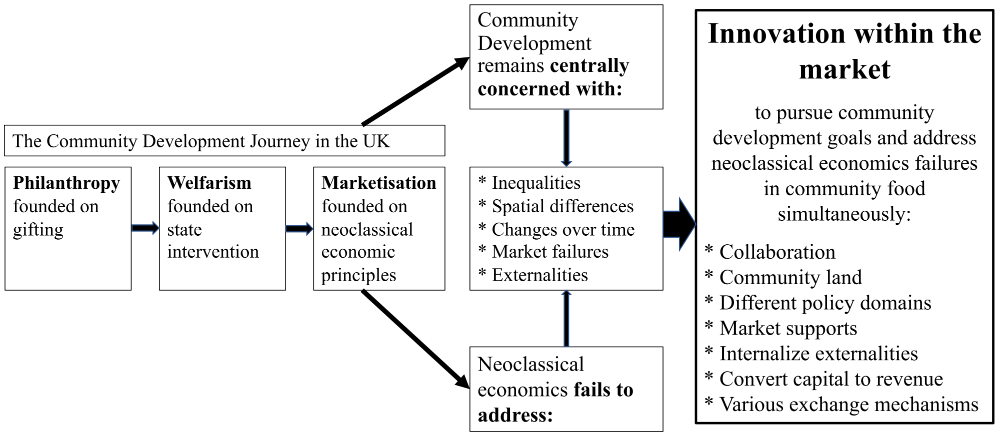


**Figure 1.** Innovating within the market to address community development goals and neoclassical economics failures simultaneously.

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