

**Book review of: Calafati, L.; Froud, J.; Haslam, C.; Johal, S.; Williams, K. (2023): When nothing works: From cost of living to foundational liveability**

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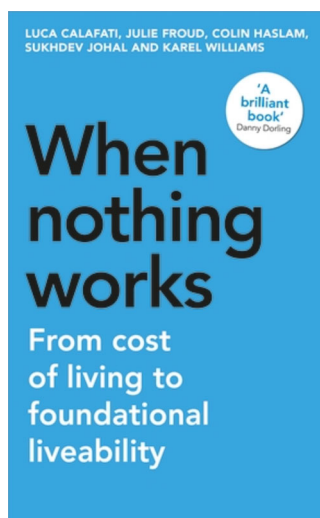
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# Calafati, L.; Froud, J.; Haslam, C.; Johal, S.; Williams, K. (2023): When nothing works: From cost of living to foundational liveability

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“When Nothing Works” targets a UK audience for whom the title will feel wearingly familiar. Experiences that might confirm nothing works include the struggle to make ends meet even when working; waiting hours for treatment in hospital Accident and Emergency departments; the exorbitant and rising costs of essentials; and, for some households, no water supply for days as basic infrastructure fails

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due to underinvestment by privatised water companies. But this book moves beyond well-worn tropes to critically analyse the failure of the UK state to provide for the material and emotional wellbeing of many households and how this might be remedied. While the book focuses on the UK context, many of the challenges it identifies, including rising costs of essential services, spatial inequalities and pressures on social infrastructure, resonate strongly with ongoing debates in European regions.

The authors have consistently critiqued mainstream economic policy since the publication of their Manifesto for the Foundational Economy in 2013 (Bentham/Bowman/de la Cuesta et al. 2013). The notion of the Foundational Economy has emerged as one of a number of ‘alternative’ economic development approaches such as Community Wealth Building and Doughnut Economics that have gained traction in both the UK and overseas, particularly at subnational scales (Crisp/Waite/Green et al. 2024). Growing interest in these ideas is reflected in the attention generated by frameworks like Doughnut Economics among policymakers, including those in the global C40 network of mayors leading major cities.<sup>1</sup> The devolved nation of Wales has been at the forefront of efforts in the UK to embed ideas around the Foundational Economy in economic policy (Sissons/Green 2025), although this has yet to gain significant traction outside of the UK.

Alternative approaches also feature in academic debates concerning the possibilities, tensions and limits of adopting more transformative approaches to economic develop-

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/Beyond-GDP-How-your-city-can-use-alternative-measures-of-social-environmental-and-economic-progress> (08.04.2026).

ment against a wider political economy that remains wedded to growth. This includes studies that have looked at these challenges in relation to the adoption of Doughnut Economics in cities as diverse as Amsterdam (the Netherlands), Barcelona (Spain), Tomelilla (Sweden) and Bad Nauheim (Germany) (Thompson/Cator/Beel et al. 2024; Cattaneo/Lemos/Humpert et al. 2025; Schmid 2025). These alternative approaches share a prognosis of the perceived failure of conventional economic development policies to tackle enduring social and spatial inequalities, rising political disenchantment and division, and accelerating climate change. Yet “When Nothing Works” sets itself apart with its advancement of a novel conception of *foundational liveability* and a resolutely pragmatic approach to engineering the policy changes required to secure this goal. From a spatial planning perspective, the concept of foundational liveability offers a valuable lens to better understand how inequalities are produced and experienced across different types of regions, from metropolitan areas to smaller city regions and rural hinterlands.

The core argument of the book is the need to break with mainstream economic thinking and to pursue, instead, a goal of foundational liveability through a “gradualist political practice of adaptive reuse” (p. 256). This is elaborated in three parts. Part 1 (“Why we need to change the lens”) takes aim at the ‘policy quagmire’ of mainstream supply-side economic policies with its misplaced emphasis on unattainable forms of growth and productivity, particularly within so-called frontier sectors such as knowledge intensive industries and advanced manufacturing. The authors critique such policies on the basis that productivity gains do not necessarily translate into wage increases if the benefits accrue to capital rather than to labour, while frontier sectors tend to provide few employment opportunities. Such approaches also neglect the structural causes of social and economic inequalities. These include the shift to a low-wage service sector model, the disempowerment of trade unions, privatisation and the outsourcing of essential public services, and the deregulation of financial markets. The authors argue instead for a decisive shift from the fantasy of pursuing unattainable economic goals to “asking how we can directly improve household liveability given the economy we have” (p. 64).

Part 2 (“Rethinking the economy”) makes this intellectual break through two related moves. First, it advocates a fundamental change in the way policymakers understand living standards by centring the household as the unit of analysis. This reframes the central economic challenge, focusing on how to improve the lived experience of households in all their complexity and variety in particular places, rather than on abstract measures of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or Gross Value Added (GVA). Instead of the

latter, the authors propose a three part framework of *household liveability* as the proper focus of policy, comprising *disposable and residual household* income (i.e. what’s left after tax and benefits and the cost of essentials like housing, utilities and food); essential *foundational services* like health and care, utility supply and food distribution; and *social infrastructure* including hard infrastructure like libraries and parks, cafes and clubs, and soft infrastructure such as children’s playgroups and choirs. Collectively these components make up what is necessary for “human flourishing through thriving social relations and positive emotional states” (p. 207). The book’s emphasis on everyday infrastructures and household conditions also raises important questions for urban and regional planning, particularly regarding the governance and provision of essential services at local and regional scales.

Part 3 (“What to do”) identifies what can be done to improve household liveability. The authors take pains to distance themselves from unfeasible transformational solutions given the state’s constrained fiscal circumstances and inflexible, hard-to-reform bureaucracy. They argue accordingly for a form of ‘radical tinkering’, borrowing the notion of *adaptive reuse* from the French architects Lacaton and Vassal whose approach to postwar social housing developments was “never demolish, never remove or replace, always add, transfer and reuse” (p. 22). The core point is that, at least in the short term, it is more effective to pursue workarounds that recognise the limited capacity of the state to effect radical change.

The book proposes three forms of policies to address contemporary challenges: *Starter policies* which align with broadly held ideas of compassion and fairness such as free school meals; *stealth policies* which address technical issues not widely understood by the public e.g. reducing punitive taper rates in the benefits system as recipients move into employment; and *switch policies* which hand initiatives to other actors who can do what the state cannot e.g. repealing anti-trade union legislation to encourage workplace organisation and empowering social economy organisations to deliver public services.

For those following the work of the authors, it is clear that “When Nothing Works” represents the evolution of a project willing to continually question and revise its own thinking. Notably, the book explicitly dispenses with the previously central proposition of *social licensing* (explicit social obligations on for- or not-for-profit providers of foundational services) due to recognition of the immense challenges government would face in negotiating and enforcing licences. They replace this with alternative proposals for forensic financial analysis of provider accounts combined with imposing more stringent physical and environmental requirements on firms delivering foundational services. This pivot

captures the relentlessly pragmatic focus of the authors on policies that are politically feasible and likely to deliver immediate benefits.

For some, this could highlight a central tension in the book. On the one hand, the book advocates a fundamental rupture in mainstream economic thinking, demolishing shibboleths about growth and productivity that have dominated mainstream economic policy for so long. The core proposition that ‘nothing works’ due to a decades-long, but ultimately failed, project of ‘market citizenship’ is rooted in a radical critique of an extractive model of capitalism that has weakened labour and contributed to the increasingly unaffordable costs or inadequate provision of essential goods and services.

On the other hand, relative to the scale of this critique, the proposed solutions are often incremental and might leave some readers wondering if they match the deep structural sources of contemporary inequalities. Free school meals, reduced tapers in the benefit system and improved investment in services and social infrastructure are, among other policy proposals, all worthy and valuable goals. They are arguably consistent with a revived social democratic project, albeit with a novel emphasis on pluralist forms of economic governance and ownership, most notably through ideas of distributed social innovation. However, many of the core features of the current market citizenship project would be left in place, not least the forms of speculative finance in the “global casino” (Pettifor 2026) that drive up the costs of essential goods and services. The deliberate eschewing of transformative goals that are more central to other alternative economic development approaches such as Doughnut Economics, or the highly contested notion of degrowth, may render “When Nothing Works” susceptible to critiques of being too ameliorative in ambition.

On balance, though, the strength of the book arguably lies in its advocacy of the need to ground understandings of, and policies towards, inequalities in the particular economic circumstances and social needs of households and the wider communities in which they live. The emphasis on detailed empirical analysis of the differentiated circumstances of households in terms of, for example, composition, location (factoring in the regional cost of living) and consumption, so as to derive measures of disposable/residual income, ensures a sharp focus on policymaking as a response to lived realities. This kind of grounded analysis gives rise to the notion of foundational liveability as an essential framework for making policy that directly impacts on the things that matter to households rather than the unrealistic and disconnected pursuit of improvement in abstract economic metrics.

Some of this is not entirely novel. The notion of foundational liveability is, as the authors acknowledge, an

amalgam of existing proposals for universal forms of basic income, essential services and social infrastructure. Yet what is distinct, and most valuable, about “When Nothing Works” is the set of core principles it advocates. It combines critique of existing economic policy orthodoxies, detailed analysis of the challenges facing households and a need for workaround policy solutions which recognise the weaknesses of the UK state.

The book perhaps lacks the conciseness, simplicity and core narrative thread of some other alternative approaches to economic development. It has neither the visual immediacy of Doughnut Economics nor the tightly prescribed policy pillars of Community Wealth Building. Yet it undoubtedly has much to offer for academics, policymakers and practitioners looking to understand what underpins the popular perception that ‘nothing works’ and what an economically viable, politically feasible and immediately realisable policy response might look like.

#### Full reference of reviewed title

Calafati, L.; Froud, J.; Haslam, C.; Johal, S.; Williams, K.: (2023): *When nothing works: From cost of living to foundational liveability*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

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