

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gift economy and well-being: A mode of economy playing out in recovery from Rwandan tragedies

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Abstract

Previous studies challenge the assumption that economic growth improves subjective well-being, and argue that economic growth is incompatible with not only nature conservation but also subjective well-being. To achieve SDGs, a mode of economy that sustains both subjective well-being and the natural environment needs to be investigated. This ethnographic study explored community-based economy systems in post-genocide Rwanda, and elaborated the process and mechanisms by which the contemporary gift economy facilitated subjective well-being in culture and natural landscape. Findings showed that subjective well-being can be achieved by applying alternative modes of economy (gift economy, sharing economy) and having access to direct sources of well-being (natural environment, social cohesion, cultural identity, and spirituality), when basic needs are satisfied by well-established infrastructure and social services. This study contributes to understanding why and how people can be happy without money, and illuminate a mode of economy that can benefit the sustainable development of local communities.

KEYWORDS

community, gift economy, Rwanda, sharing economy, sustainability, well-being

1 | INTRODUCTION

Over the last century, global capitalism has encouraged individual countries to promote economic development and growth, leading the vast majority of the world population (91.4%) to be out of absolute poverty (UN, 2020). However, recently, empirical studies challenge the assumption that economic growth improves happiness for people in both high- and low-income countries. Miñarro et al. (2021) demonstrated “happy without money”—subjective well-being (SWB) can be achieved at high level with minimal monetisation, analysing quantitative data from the low-income Solomon Islands and Bangladesh. The authors identified that direct sources of happiness, such as provision of basic needs, access to healthy natural environment, and social cohesion, contributed to SWB. By contrast, studies from high-income populations warranted that economic growth can erode various

sources of happiness other than monetary income, such as the natural environment (LPHE, 2019), cultural identity and spirituality (LPHE, 2018), social cohesion (Powdthavee, Burkhauser, & De Neve, 2017), and time (Giurge & Whillans, 2019). The phenomenon that economic growth does not necessarily improve SWB is known as the Easterlin Paradox (Easterlin, 1974). Some studies of sustainable development argue that economic growth measured by GDP is incompatible with SWB and nature conservation; in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), investigation to find a mode of economy that sustains both SWB and the natural environment is called for (Dawes, 2020; Hickel, 2019; LPHE, 2019).

Prior research, policy, and practice have proposed various alternative approaches to the existing capitalist economy. For example, sharing economy (e.g., Airbnb, Uber, bike-sharing, and crowdfunding) is one emerging alternative widely observed especially in high-income

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settings since the Great Recession. The sharing economy is defined as a peer-to-peer based sharing of access to goods and services, which is most commonly facilitated by a community-based online platform (Mi & Coffman, 2019; Richardson, 2015; Schor, 2016). Research suggests that the sharing economy can have positive environmental and health impacts, through a reduction of the total resource use and carbon footprints as well as a promotion of collective healthy behaviour, if the overuse of the goods and services is well regulated (Mi & Coffman, 2019; Schor, 2016). In a wider context of sustainable economy, sharing economy is conceptualised as one form of the circular economy, a closed-loop economic system employing reuse, refurbishment, remanufacturing, repair, sharing, etc., and minimising the use of resource and the creation of waste, pollution, and carbon emission (EEA, 2016; Korhonen, Honkasalo, & Seppälä, 2018; Murray, Skene, & Haynes, 2017; Schroeder, Anggraeni, & Uwe, 2018). One literature review shows that the circular economy can contribute directly to achieving many SDG targets including nature conservation and economic growth, although potential trade-offs including decent work and human health can also exist (Schroeder et al., 2018). In terms of preserving natural environment and human SWB, green economy is also one alternative economic policy widely implemented in both high- and low-income countries. Green economy aims to reduce environmental risks and ecological scarcities while improving well-being and social equity (UNEP, 2011). Empirical studies have shown that green environment is associated with physical and mental health, such as increased physical activity and social cohesion (Hartig, Mitchell, de Vries, & Frumkin, 2014) and reduced suicide (Helbich, de Beurs, Kwan, O'Connor, & Groenewegen, 2018) and mortality (Rojas-Rueda, Nieuwenhuijsen, Gascon, Perez-Leon, & Mudu, 2019).

Among various alternative approaches, this paper pays particular attention to the gift economy as the community-based alternative economic system for sustainability, which is the most fundamental and essential mode of economy that people practice across different income settings but often neglected in research and policy debates.

TABLE 1 Modes of economy (social exchange)

Gift economy

The gift economy is an exchange of inalienable and personal things between mutually-dependent transactors. This is a non-market, morally-based exchange that generates social bonds as well as obligation for reciprocity.

Commodity economy

The commodity economy is an exchange of alienable and impersonal things between mutually-independent transactors. This is a market exchange, free from obligation but disrupting social cohesion.

Hybridisation

The commodity economy in contemporary capitalist society has been revealed to be dysfunctional without gift characteristics, such as relationship making and personalisation, inalienability (e.g., branding), and obligation (e.g., royalty programmes). Meanwhile, the contemporary gift economy has also been found to have commodity characteristics, such as alienability (e.g., money gifts), voluntary or loosely-obligated reciprocity. Researchers agree that the gift-commodity is hybrid rather than dichotomous; some see that the heart of human economy is in gift-giving.

Recent studies revisit the gift economy in contemporary world as potentially beneficial to the sustainable development (Cordeiro, Wong, & Ponchio, 2018; Elder-Vass, 2020; Thygesen, 2019). The gift economy is traditionally defined as an exchange of inalienable and personal things between mutually-dependent transactors, which is contrasted by the commodity economy, an exchange of alienable and impersonal things between mutually-independent transactors (Table 1; Gregory, 1982, Taylor, 1992). The former is a non-market exchange that obliges reciprocity and generates social bonds; the latter is a market exchange, free from obligation but disrupting social cohesion. However, over recent decades, research has revealed that the gift-commodity is not dichotomous but, rather, hybrid; the commodity economy is dysfunctional without gift characteristics, while the contemporary gift economy shows commodity characteristics such as loosely-obligated reciprocity (Lapavistas, 2004; Miller, 2001; Rus, 2008). Elder-Vass (2020) defines the gift in contemporary society as “a voluntary transfer of goods or services...that does not require a compulsory transfer in return” and giving as its process, and suggests that the heart of the human economy is in gift-giving. Namely, the contemporary gift economy is the gift-commodity hybrid system based on gift-giving with voluntary or loosely-obligated reciprocity. The contemporary gift economy is reported to be beneficial to increase access to the market economy in Brazil (Cordeiro et al., 2018), and achieve environmental sustainability and generate social value in the Danish island of Samsø (Thygesen, 2019).

The associations between SWB, natural environment, and economic growth are complex. Based on the empirical evidence, SWB is likely to be promoted by well-conserved natural environment through green landscape, clean air, less noise, increased physical activity and social cohesion, and reduced stress (Hartig et al., 2014; Miñarro et al., 2021; Rojas-Rueda et al., 2019;). However, the conservation of natural environment has been argued as incompatible with economic growth (Costanza et al., 2014; Dawes, 2020; Eisenmenger et al., 2020; Hickel, 2019; LPHE, 2019), as the purpose of unlimited economic growth inevitably continues to facilitate the global industrialisation process, which contradicts with the sustainable resource use (Eisenmenger et al., 2020). The incompatibility between the natural conservation and economic growth appears to be a problem since both are presumed to be necessary for human SWB. Hence, the argument arises to find a balanced way to meet the human needs for SWB through economic growth while conserving natural environment or respecting ecological capacity to carry human industrial activities. However, as discussed earlier, the assumption that economic growth is necessary for human SWB is doubted (Easterlin, 1974; Giurge & Whillans, 2019; LPHE, 2018, 2019; Miñarro et al., 2021; Powdthavee et al., 2017). While this does not mean the absolute rejection of industrialisation and market economy given that purely non-monetised and non-industrialised societies may no longer exist, evidence from minimally-monetised societies show that human needs for SWB can be met without economic growth or increased monetary income (Miñarro et al., 2021). Understanding the mode of economy that can promote SWB with minimal monetary income and well-conserved natural environment will help the resolution of the incompatibility between natural conservation and economic growth.

In this study, we explore community-based economic and care systems in Rwanda, which have taken the green growth policy for socio-economic recovery from the genocide and wars, and consider how and why the contemporary gift economy has promoted SWB in the recovery process, in the cultural and natural landscape. Given that much of previous research on the contemporary gift economy and SWB has drawn from high-income, industrialised societies, perspectives from a low-income setting are valuable. This qualitative study will then contribute to understanding the detailed process and mechanisms of “happy without money” (Miñarro et al., 2021), and shedding light on a mode of economy that can be beneficial to develop a future sustainable community.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Research site

Rwanda has shown an impressive recovery after a series of tragedies during the 1990s including the 1994 genocide, and is now one of the leading countries for green growth in Sub-Saharan Africa with a natural conservation policy, which includes protection of forests, wetlands, and lakes, plastic use prohibition, biomass reduction, and alternative energy application (Biruta, 2016). The country also has well-established systems for national health insurance (100% coverage), primary-school education (100%), gender equality (30% quotas), water and sanitation (87.5%) (NISR, 2017). Mobile phone penetration is extensive (urban 71.5%, rural 40.6%) (NISR, 2011). Along with the top-down social policy and services establishment, bottom-up, community-based practices have also played a pivotal role in the recovery process, for example, community care, pastoral care, mutual help, and microsaving, which have facilitated social cohesion, reconciliation, hope, and well-being (Otake, 2017, 2018; Benda, 2013; Costanza et al., 2014; Dawes, 2020). Consequently, the 2000–2016/17 national statistics recorded a 20% drop in people living under the poverty line (58.9 to 38.2%), and improved life expectancy (from 48.6 to 68.3 years), while maintaining CO₂ emissions at approximately 0.07 metric tons per capita (WB, 2020). Although the country is

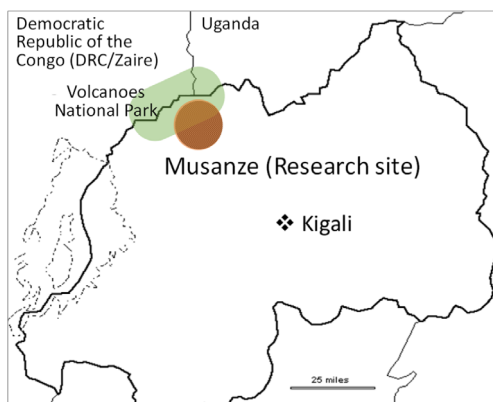


FIGURE 1 The research site [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

classified as low-income, sufficient food is derived from natural resources, nourishing more than 80% of the population (RoR, 2017).

The research site, the Musanze district in the North of Rwanda (Figure 1), was devastated during the 1990s but recovered as a rural ecological area. It is located at the base of Virunga Mountains in the Volcanoes National Park, where mountain gorillas live and local communities show high awareness of natural conservation. The land of Musanze is particularly fertile thanks to the volcanoes and produces various crops, vegetables, and fruits throughout the year (Figure 2). Local communities underwent socio-economic reconstruction, relying largely on their own initiatives and achieved a notably low poverty rate (20.1%) by 2010/11, second only to Kigali in the national ranking (NISR, 2010/11). The 2018 nationwide survey showed that the area had the lowest prevalence of mentally-ill genocide survivors (e.g., 22.7% of the genocide survivors had depression compared with 40.1% in Kigali) (Kayitshonga, Sezibera, & Smith-Swintosky, 2018), which is indicative of the well-being of the entire Musanze population.

2.2 | Procedures

To explore communities' experiences of the recovery process, the first author and local assistants conducted ethnographic research (2015–2016, 2019), drawing from participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus-group discussions (FGDs). Interview participants were approached in villages through networks that the first author and local assistants had already established. In the fragile post-conflict context, trust built on existing networks was vital for data collection. Initial sampling aimed to maximise the variety of participant characteristics (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity, occupation, socio-economic status, and home village). Theoretical sampling was then undertaken to test emerging hypotheses and examine coding schemes. Sampling was terminated when a “theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2006)” was reached.



FIGURE 2 Landscape of the village; the fertile land produces various crops, vegetables, and fruits (e.g., beans, potatoes, corns, bananas, and avocados) through the year [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

The ethnographic observation took more than 1 year. Observation focused on everyday life, community care, and economic activities across different communities (i.e., social groups) in the village of Musanze and generated fieldnotes for analysis. Additionally, in-depth interviews and FGDs with 49 participants (29 women and 20 men, aged 22–84 years; Table 2) were conducted as part of the ethnography; most of the participants were interviewed repeatedly for examining emerging codes and hypothesis. During the in-depth interviews, participants were asked about their experience of post-conflict recovery, community care, and economic activities, which have promoted well-being. All the interviews, FGDs, and community meetings were audio-recorded after having the informed consent, and then transcribed and translated for analysis. All transcriptions and translations were double-checked. Fieldnotes were taken during the observation, interviews, and FGDs, and analysed. The thematic analysis was conducted throughout the research lifecycle, while developing coding schemes manually and refining them through constant comparison and memo-writing. To ensure that the analysis appropriately represented participants' subjectivity, a "member check (Charmaz, 2006)" was conducted with participants and assistants. The whole cycle of

sampling, data generation, and analysis was informed by grounded theory techniques (Charmaz, 2006).

Since the ethnographic research focused on rural villages in Musanze, the gift and commodity economy systems and practices described in the result section are limited to the rural village setting and may not represent the urban setting such as the capital Kigali. The results need to be understood with this limitation.

Ethical approval was granted by the Rwanda National Ethics Committee, the Ministry of Education in Rwanda, [concealed for double-blind review] and [concealed for double-blind review].

3 | FINDINGS

Participants' views of wealth and well-being emphasised their connection to social relationships and the natural environment for stable values within local communities (Table 3). They commonly perceived helping each other as the key to well-being—living and dying well, and going to Heaven. Being "rich" was defined as having many visitors and friends, land, and domestic animals (e.g., chickens, goats, pigs, cows); being "poor" meant not having these assets in addition to not having money.

They reported having recovered well-being through participating in social groups, including faith-based groups, mutual-saving groups, and kin and neighbour networks. Most participants were involved in multiple groups (Table 2). Participants reported common care practices (Table 4) and economic activities within these groups. In the following sections, we will describe how the community care and gift-commodity hybrid economies played out across different groups in the post-1990s recovery, drawing from participant narratives.

TABLE 2 Characteristics of research participants

	n (%)
Gender	
Women	29 (59%)
Men	20 (41%)
Age	
20–29 years	11 (22%)
30–39 years	21 (43%)
40 years and over	17 (35%)
Occupation ^a	
Self-sustainable farmers	17 (35%)
Paid workers ^b	19 (39%)
Small business owners	7 (14%)
Landlord/lady	3 (6%)
Students	3 (6%)
Social groups (multiple answers) ^c	
Faith-based groups	25 (51%)
Mutual-saving groups	20 (41%)
Kin and neighbours network ^d	6 (12%)
Government-led associations	4 (8%)
Genocide survivors association	1 (2%)
Total	49 (100%)

^aParticipants who had multiple occupations reported their main employment, most had farms and home gardens.

^bGovernment officers, non-governmental organisation officers, schoolteachers, cooks, bike couriers, tailors, masons, and security guards.

^cSocial groups mentioned by participants as having helped their life-reconstruction.

^dKin and neighbour networks were the foundation for all social groups although they were only mentioned by six participants during the interviews.

TABLE 3 Local views of wealth and well-being

Wealth
Being "rich" was defined as having social and natural-environmental resources, such as many visitors and friends, land and domestic animals; being "poor" meant not to have these resources in addition to not having money. In the participants' view of wealth, they became poorer as development continued and land was turned into buildings, which was reported to provoke a fear and anxiety.
"If you have banana trees [around the house], you are very rich. If you have land, a farm for beans and maize, you are rich. But now, the land has been reduced. It's the reason we have a lot of poor people." (man, 30s)
"We are rich...[because] everyone knows each other in our neighbourhood community and when a neighbour is sick, you go to visit the person immediately." (woman, 50s)
Well-being
Living well and dying well was described in association with <i>gusangira</i> (sharing) and <i>gufashanya</i> (helping each other).
"If we help her [an elderly neighbour]...she goes on moving her days and she will go home [die] well.... If god gives you something, you share it with her." (woman, 40s)
"[after my death] if my child needs something important, he could give it to her [in return for my gift]...this is the important way in which, I wish, people remember me, as someone who did good deeds for others." (woman, 50s)

TABLE 4 Community care practices**Gusura** (visiting)

Visiting kin, neighbours, and friends in everyday calls or ceremonial occasions, typically with gifts (e.g., drink, food, money, help, care, and prayer). This is an essential practice to build and maintain social relations. Having many visitors is perceived as a sign of wealth.

“You nourish your friendship by visiting (*isuka ibara ubucuti ni akarenge*).” (Rwandan proverb)

Kuganira (chatting)

Chatting with each other about religious and everyday-life issues. It is reported to be therapeutic as it facilitates social reconnection, comfort, meaning-making, and problem-solving.

“When you talk to others [in a meeting]...you understand that you are not alone and you are not suffering alone.” (woman, 40s).

Gusenga (praying)

Praying communally, discussing the bible, and organising charity activities (including gift-giving) in faith-based groups; praying individually, personal conversation with god.

“With god, my heart becomes well... I go to pray and can think about it (people who were killed in the 1990s) every time. Because god is there.” (man, 30s)

Gufashanya (helping each other)

Mutual help among kin members, neighbours and friends in everyday and ceremonial life; community action to help isolated members due to illness, aging, withdrawal, or extreme poverty (e.g., *umuganda* farm work). Helping each other was a key practice in the gift cycle, as well as the intersection of the gift-commodity cycles. The practice of loosely-obligated reciprocity worked transgenerationally.

“[my neighbours] came and asked me to lend them a hoe... [and] they gave me something in return...they are good neighbours. When I harvest, I bring them food. This is how we live together.” (woman, 70s)

Gusangira (sharing)

Sharing everyday life, life-event ceremonies, life-stories, and memories over food and drink with kin members, neighbours, and friends. Traditionally, *urwagwa* (homemade banana beer) is shared as a symbol of solidarity, reconciliation, and happy resolutions. An *ubusabane* (party) to share the *urwagwa* beer also symbolises *gufashanya*. Sharing was another key practice in the gift cycle, as well as the intersection of the gift-commodity cycles.

“[in *ubusabane*] we talk while making jokes and laughing. This makes someone forget his problem because he is among others...you see that there is no problem because...at the end, we share something to eat and drink.” (man, 20s)

Kwiyunga (reconciliation)

Reconciliation with perpetrators, and more generally, with other human being. Participants reported their efforts and experiences of reconciliation through sharing and helping each other across different social groups.

“If I live with my neighbour and he has any problem, like having a sick family member, it is good to help him even if that person is like my enemy. When other people go there [to help him], I cannot stay at home. Those are the things that help my heart to feel well.” (man, 60s)

produce food. They also discussed issues such as the many orphans and widows and the extreme poverty in which people now lived. Local religious leaders initiated faith-based groups of approximately 50–70 members. Group members began to visit people who had withdrawn from society and offered comfort and companionship. Those who received visits in turn became visitors, as they got involved in the group.

“I was always withdrawn and having problems...[since] my family members were all killed and I was also shot. After that people [from the church] came and prayed for me. They comforted me and I became tolerant little by little... [Now] I visit others who are still withdrawn... I comfort them and tell them how to pray.”

Woman, 30s

Faith-based groups have a typical programme. Members gather regularly (weekly, fortnightly, or monthly); activities include praying, reading and discussing the Bible, and planning charitable aid. Many participants called this set of activities “*gusenga* (praying together),” an essential practice to help with distress and maintain mental well-being. Members chat about everyday life and discuss how to cope with different life problems. This “*kuganira* (chatting)” was reported to be therapeutic and promote mental health and well-being.

“When we chat, we don't only exchange our ideas but also talk through the word of the Bible in which we find the way of reconstructing ourselves. It is like fetching water. If we didn't have the word of God, many people would lose their mind.”

Woman, 40s

Praying and chatting have worked therapeutically since they have helped to reconstruct not only social cohesion but also participants' views of humanity, of the world, and cosmology. In particular, one major cause of anguish resulting from the traumatic 1990s was the loss of shared life and meaning: “why me alive (while everyone else died)?”. Survivors who were haunted by such questions experienced severe mental illness. Praying and chatting together nurtured a grand narrative that began to make sense of their lives. Survivors could relate their experience to the human histories narrated in the Bible: human beings make war but God eventually ends all wars and their aftermath. In this worldview, they tried to understand perpetrators as human, the same as themselves; sinners and imperfect beings before God; they prayed for them “to be changed not to kill again.” Meanwhile, their own survival was perceived as “a gift of God (*impano y'Imana*)” and their loss “God's calling (*kwitaba Imana*)”. The concept of *Imana* originated from a traditional local deity, which was taken over by Christians (or minority Muslims). Survivors learned to locate human lives and deaths in relation to a transcendent entity, which helped to make sense of their ordeal.

3.1 | Post-1990s reconstruction, gift-commodity hybridisation

After regaining peace and security, people who had survived the tragedies of the 1990s began to visit one another. For Rwandans, “*gusura* (visiting)” is an essential practice for building and maintaining social cohesion. The reconnected people resumed cultivating the land to

When the meeting ends, members discuss and plan a charity activity called “*gufashanya* (helping each other)”; this has been a powerful means of recovery. Common practices included visiting members who have health and life issues (e.g., those who are in hospital, pregnant, or have lost family members), giving money, food and drink, and offering communal prayer for mentally-ill members. They have also paid national health insurance contributions on behalf of those with no income by raising a small fund within the group. For members who need special care (e.g., the extremely poor, old, or those living with disability), they provide *umuganda* (community work), taking care of land, farms, and gardens. The records of charity activities in one faith-based group in Musanze in 2015 are shown in Table 5: the group gave a total of 63,000 frw (approximately £63, 2015 exchange rate), drink, food, care, and prayers for 38 out of 70 family members (54%), who had health or life issues during the year.

Most members of faith-based groups were monetarily poor. However, they lived in a gift economy, symbolised by *gufashanya*. Gifts included food (e.g., crops and fruit from their land, maize meal, and porridge made at home), care practices (e.g., visiting, helping, and communal prayer), and commodities (e.g., gifts of money, beer, and cloth). They mostly shared gifts obtained from natural resources, which allowed them to give and reciprocate voluntarily, rather than obligatorily. Giving, with the notion of loosely-obligated return, still satisfied basic needs as it was done collectively, on a daily basis across wider geographical communities. When someone was isolated and withdrawn from the activities of the gift economy due to illness, aging, or extreme poverty, the group provided gifts, through which the isolated person reconnected to the gift economy cycle.

TABLE 5 Gift-giving and helping in a faith-based group^a

	Recipients; n (%)	Gifts
Visiting (<i>gusura</i>)		
Hospitalised members	15 (21%)	25,000 frw, visits, food, drink, care ^b
Pregnant women	10 (14%)	5,000 frw, visits, food, drink, care
Bereaved families	3 (4%)	Visits, care, prayers
Communal prayer for members in hardship or mental illness	3 (4%)	Visits, prayers
Community farm work (<i>umuganda</i>) for elderly women	3 (4%)	15,000 frw, visits, care, prayers
Paying national health insurance on behalf of extremely poor members ^c	4 (6%)	18,000 frw
Total	38 (54%)	63,000 frw, visits, foods, drink, care, prayers

^aThe total membership is 70 families. The information is based on the 2015 meeting minutes book and interviews.

^bAny practice to help and satisfy the recipient's needs.

^cThe health insurance fee (3,000 frw per year) is a serious financial burden for extremely poor people.

While people with no stable cash income (e.g., self-sustainable farmers) relied on faith-based groups, those with a small cash income (e.g., small business owners, paid workers) engaged in mutual-saving groups, sometimes in addition to a faith-based group. *Ikibina* (a mutual-saving group), is a trust-based, informal banking system for mutual-saving and problem-solving, voluntarily organised within different social groups. Described in the literature as “rotating savings and credit association (ROSCA) (Ardener, 1964),” such groups operate widely in low-income settings.

One serious problem in post-1990s Musanze was that people who earned money for day labour spent it on not only everyday consumables, but also on alcohol and tobacco to mitigate distress, resulting in continued extreme poverty and ill-health. Recognising this problem, some labourers voluntarily initiated *ikibina*.

“We drank and spent a lot of money... [One day] I said to them (my friends); ‘What do you think about this life of only drinking?’...I proposed them to make an *ikibina*...We said, ‘if we take 10 bottles [of beer], we also have to save 1,000 frw’. One said, ‘that’s a good idea! We have to do that!’...Another said, ‘we are going to convince others who are like us to join this group and see what will happen in future.’”

Man, 30s

Membership of mutual-saving groups gradually increased over time (reported membership ranged from 3 to 300) and various functions were added to banking while maintaining autonomous governance. For example, one *ikibina* association provides an emergency service; if there is a traffic accident in the district, the association responds to the emergency call with a free ambulance and rescue service. Another equipped various working groups (e.g., welfare, justice) to deal with members' problems and worked as a self-governing body.

The history of *ikibina* was reported as a memory of tribal family gatherings passed on by ancestors; members exchanged their harvest produce (crops) for food and drink, which were shared at an end-of-the-year party. Today, *ikibina* groups hold regular (daily, weekly, monthly, or quarterly) meetings. At these meetings, each member contributes a fixed amount of money, and one member takes the whole sum. This member uses the money for his/her own livelihood project. As a result, everyone can access the same sum of money once during the mutual-saving life-cycle; members monitor and support each other in their livelihood projects. The saved money was most-commonly used for three types of livelihood projects: maintaining the natural environment (e.g., buying land, planting trees, growing crops, feeding domestic animals, and managing small agricultural businesses); maintaining social relationships (e.g., buying commodity gifts, giving money gifts, organising parties, and ceremonies); and improving life (e.g., building a house and expanding small businesses) (Table 6).

After the financial transactions are completed, members have an *ubusabane* party and drink *urwagwa*, traditional homemade banana beer. *Ubusabane* was described as a symbol of “*gusangira* (sharing),”

TABLE 6 The banking system of a mutual-saving group (*ikibina*)^a

ID	Month 1		Month 2		Month 3	
	Contributed	Received	Contributed	Received	Contributed	Received
Member 1	0 frw	308,000 frw ^b	28,000 frw	0 frw	28,000 frw	0 frw
Member 2	28,000 frw	0 frw	0 frw	308,000 frw	28,000 frw	0 frw
Member 3	28,000 frw	0 frw	28,000 frw	0 frw	0 frw	308,000 frw
...	
Member 12	28,000 frw	0 frw	28,000 frw	0 frw	28,000 frw	0 frw

^aThe total membership of this group is 12 individuals. The information is based on the 2019 meeting minutes book.

^bAs the group has monthly meetings, all members can access the same sum every year. The money is used for various purposes, for example, buying land and materials for farming, buying materials for agricultural small business, feeding domesticated animals, buying land and materials for self-build house, and organising a party or life-event ceremony; the group also has a social fund for emergencies, small-interest loans, *ubusabane* parties, or end of year celebrations.

which refers to the sharing of everyday life, life-event ceremonies, life-stories, and memories over food and drink with kin members, neighbours, and friends. Drinking *urwagwa* also symbolises solidarity, reconciliation, and happy resolutions. Some of the money saved in the groups' social fund is used to buy *urwagwa*. In the mutual-saving groups' *ubusabane* parties, members share their life problems and discuss possible resolution while drinking *urwagwa*.

“The group plays a role in mental recovery because... when you have a problem...you tell it to them (other members) and they can give you advice. That's to say, the group is not only for money...but also helps us to meet people and we chat about everyday life. It's very, very important.”

Man, 20s

The mutual-saving system requires building trust among members with different backgrounds. Thus, some members reported that the group mediates “*kwiyounga* (reconciliation)”.

“[Among members] someone may have betrayed my family - all of them got killed, which left me completely alone. You see that it's difficult to sit together again and chat with each other...But the mutual-saving brings us together, so that no-one can continue to think of another as an enemy.”

Woman, 20s

Social bonds fostered through mutual-saving went beyond the meeting; members began *gusurana* (visiting each other), *gufashanya* (helping each other), and gave gifts (e.g., drink, food, and money) for significant life events such as ceremonies, health issues, or any other life problems.

“We visit one another. When someone gives birth, ... we give that member food and drink. When someone

has a family loss, ...we contribute money to the funeral and visit the bereaved family with food and drink.”

Man, 30s

In mutual-saving groups, members sought individual development and increased capital, apparently driven by a commodity economy and capitalism. However, the accumulated capital was spent on maintaining local wealth, that is, social relationship and the natural environment, rather than consumer products. Also, the heart of mutual-saving for them was *gufashanya* (helping each other) and *gusangira* (sharing). When these are practised, the accumulated capital is transformed into gifts and redistributed in a gift economy. Commodity and gift cycles intersect and create a “flow¹⁴” of the local economic cycle, which contributes to healing communities.

3.2 | Gift-sharing and well-being

As described above, sharing and helping each other were central practices driving the gift-commodity hybrid cycle in Musanze. This begs the question, how can such practices lead to well-being despite the monetary poverty? A deep connection with nature was a key to understanding the mechanism.

The abundance of nature was often mentioned in association with participants' livelihoods, and their mental and spiritual health. Some expressed emotional attachments. For example; “People who destroy nature don't know what nature is giving them” (woman, 30s). Nature was also described as a way in which God protected them during the 1990s: “When we were running, a lot of bullets came, but God protected us and bullets hit banana stems.” (man, 30s). People in Musanze have fostered a common sense of life and a belief in nature as “a gift of God (*impano y'Imana*)”; it is this belief that encourages them to help each other and share gifts from nature and God.

“We are like one family. That's why we help her (an elderly neighbour who needs assistance)...We

cultivate for her, give her water, sometimes give her firewood, and whatever we find. If God gives you something, you share it with her.”

(Woman, 40s)

Furthermore, this gift-sharing often manifests as joy, most typically observed as smiles and laughter when people shared farm work and harvest produce. Joy was also symbolised in rituals, such as singing, clapping, and dancing in ceremonies. In short, people shared what they perceived as gifts from the natural and supernatural world with joy and gratitude, thus maintaining social cohesion, spirituality, and well-being. For them, sharing and helping represented a gain rather than a loss.

3.3 | Transgenerational reciprocity

Gusangira (sharing) and *gufashanya* (helping each other) were observed most explicitly in the fundamental social organisation of daily life, that is, kin and neighbours. They helped each other with housework, farm work, and childcare, and shared water, food, and livelihood materials. They also organised life-event ceremonies together and exchanged gifts. Eventually, *gufashanya* practices in different social groups were transformed into memories and life-histories and handed on to the next generation through storytelling. Participants practiced *gusangira* in the sharing of food and drink at *ubusabane* parties during ceremonies (Figure 3). Often a gift was described as a symbol of *gufashanya*. One young man talked to his neighbour, an elderly woman who had helped with his wedding ceremony, during an *ubusabane* party;

Young man (30s): “It was not a gorgeous ceremony but you accompanied me. That's why I can't forget you...Those histories can help us to

be good friends... My offspring who will be born in future will remember it (your gift). Even after you die, I will tell them, ‘there was a grandmother who lived there...It was her who gave me this gift...’”.

Elderly woman (50s): “Yes, indeed...”

The Rwandan view is that life and death are cyclical. Life does not end with a death but is handed on to the next generation as a memory and a story of the person's *gufashanya* practices. An ancestor's life-history of giving and helping can be remembered over at least three generations and result in the offspring receiving gifts. This transgenerational reciprocity often encompasses the wartime.

“My grandfather died long ago (he was killed during the 1990s). But...no-one can forget him... He did something good when he was alive...then if I face a problem and say, ‘I am the grandson of Mugabo’, people help me in the name of Mugabo, who did good things for them.”

Man, 30s

The person's name may be eroded over time, but the chain of giving, sharing, and helping goes on even after three generations, as a morality embedded in Rwandan culture. The war memories can then be embraced and healed within those helping-each-other stories across multiple generations. Transgenerational reciprocity is voluntary and thus imperfect, as proven by the history of the genocide and wars, and many still suffer (Otake, 2019). Yet people who survived in grassroots communities continue their efforts to live well and die well, and hand their lives on to a future generation, believing it will finally lead them to long-term peace and reconciliation. This is their itinerary for humanity, a way of life that they are attempting to recover after all the tragedies.

4 | DISCUSSION

This study explored community care and economic systems in post-genocide Rwanda and described how and why the contemporary gift economy—gift-commodity hybrid system based on gift-giving with voluntary or loosely-obligated reciprocity—has promoted subjective well-being (SWB) in the cultural and natural landscape. Community views of wealth and well-being emphasised the significance of social relationships and the natural environment. While no-income participants relied on the gift cycle and gave gifts, small-income participants engaged in the commodity cycle and accumulated capital. However, the accumulated capital was spent within caring social relationships and the natural environment, through which the capital was transformed into gifts and redistributed in the gift cycle. The two cycles were interconnected by gift-mode practices, *gusangira* and *gufashanya*, which prevented illness and promoted social cohesion and SWB. The underlying mechanism by which these practices led to SWB was “gift-sharing”, sharing “God-given gifts” derived from nature. Cultural identity and spirituality, represented by various communal activities, deep connection to nature and God, meaningfulness,



FIGURE 3 A convivial party (*umusabane*) during a life-event ceremony in the village; people who have different gender, social status, and generation gather and share memories of giving and helping each other while drinking *urugwagwa* beer (calabash on the table) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

and joy, were driving this mechanism. Eventually, the gift-sharing became voluntarily reciprocated across generations. Participants attempted to preserve this transgenerational reciprocity as their itinerary for a lasting peace and humanity.

The contemporary gift economy found in our research echoed previous literature, which noted the significance of this mode of economy in both high- and low-income societies (Cordeiro et al., 2018; Elder-Vass, 2020; Thygesen, 2019). The main features of gift-commodity hybridisation in the researched low-income communities (e.g., money-donation in a gift cycle, gift-giving in a commodity cycle) were in line with those in high-income settings (Lapavistas, 2004; Miller, 2001; Rus, 2008). Our findings additionally showed that other modes of economy, including sharing economy and green economy, played a role in forming the community-based economy systems. The sharing economy in the researched low-income communities was a peer-to-peer based sharing of access to natural and human resources, which is not necessarily facilitated by online platform, diverging from high-income settings (Mi & Coffman, 2019; Richardson, 2015; Schor, 2016). It was a sharing of natural and human resources as God-given gifts, and a sharing of mutually-saved capitals and commodities within communities, by which capitals and commodities were transformed into gifts and distributed in a gift economy. Furthermore, the community-based gift and sharing economies were able to work in the national policy of green economy that conserves natural environment and resources, at the same time, provides well-established infrastructure and social services to meet the basic needs.

One major contribution of this study was to describe the detailed process and mechanisms by which the contemporary gift economy facilitates SWB. The phenomenon of “happy without money” (Miñarro et al., 2021), in which minimally-monetised communities show a high level of SWB, is already demonstrated quantitatively by the study in Solomon Islands and Bangladesh (Miñarro et al., 2021), as well as other settings such as the studies of Satoyama in rural Japan (Kamiyama, Hashimoto, Kohsaka, & Saito, 2016; Takeuchi, Ichikawa, & Elmqvist, 2016). Our study examined such a process qualitatively and rendered an in-depth understanding of why and how it works. There are various sources for SWB, which are not necessarily associated with monetary income and economic growth (Giurge & Whillans, 2019; Kamiyama et al., 2016; LPHE, 2019, 2018; Miñarro et al., 2021; Powdthavee et al., 2017). In our study, social cohesion, natural environment, cultural identity, and spirituality were major direct sources to generate SWB.

Social cohesion and natural environment were found in the process by which the capital input from the global market was transformed into gifts in local communities, and facilitated SWB. Participants spent their accumulated financial capital on caring for the natural environment (e.g., land, farm, and gardens) and social relationship (e.g., *ubusabane* parties and money gifts), rather than consumer products, which resulted in happiness and joy. In other words, their values and lifestyle were not based on short-term material consumption but long-term, even transgenerational, relationships with humans, animals, and nature. Cultural identity and spirituality were observed especially in the process in which participants shared natural resources, what they perceived as

gifts from nature and God, and experienced SWB including happiness, joy, and meaningfulness of life. In this process, participants understood their meaning of life to be deeply grounded in the natural and supernatural worlds; this deep connection to nature allowed them to share nature's gifts and help each other; then, the sharing itself generated collective joy and gratitude, which enhanced the sharing cycle. Cultural identity driving SWB was also found across various cultural, collective activities such as *umuganda* (community work), *umusabane* (social party), and *ikibina* (mutual saving). In short, the nature-grounded lifestyle with social cohesion, natural environment, cultural identity, and spirituality enabled them to be happy without money. Importantly, and as we discussed earlier, these sources were able to generate SWB under the condition that the participants' basic needs are met by well-established infrastructure and social services.

Previous studies have pointed various sources for SWB, which are not necessarily produced by monetary income and economic growth. These sources include healthy natural environment (Kitayama et al. 2016; LPHE, 2019; Miñarro et al., 2021), social cohesion (Kitayama et al., 2016; Miñarro et al., 2021; Powdthavee et al., 2017), cultural identity and spirituality (LPHE, 2018), time (Giurge & Whillans, 2019), and satisfied basic needs (Miñarro et al., 2021), most of which were reiterated in our research. In the light of our findings, the relation between these sources for SWB and monetary income is not straightforward but complex. Some of them may be directly purchased by money in the market economy, others may be shared or gifted in non-market economy; but most commonly, they are likely to need both market and non-market modes of economy to be produced and maintained. Considering the important role of alternative modes of economy in SWB, further research is needed to understand these alternatives and the extent to which monetisation is necessary to secure the basic needs and SWB.

We presented one case study for a community-based sustainable economy and lifestyle, from which we could learn lessons for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is a rural-urban hybrid, yet nature-grounded, economy, and lifestyle; that is, living within the green environment while accessing modern social services and convenient facilities, where the gift and sharing modes of economy play a vital role for SWB. Previous literature has questioned economic growth as being incompatible with nature conservation and human SWB and has proposed degrowth, especially in high-income settings (Dawes, 2020; Hickel, 2019; LPHE, 2019). In the light of our findings, SWB can be achieved by applying alternative modes of economy, such as gift economy and sharing economy, as well as by having access to other direct sources of well-being, such as social cohesion, natural environment, cultural identity, and spirituality, when basic human needs are already satisfied. These findings can help the resolution of the incompatibility. One additional route for degrowth may be to increase the opportunity for high-income populations to have a close contact with natural environment and experience nature and nature's reproductive cycle, which can foster a sense of security, joy, and satisfaction and alleviate the drive for consumption. It allows human beings to be aware of their life as part of the eco-system and, thus, meaningful. Another route is to increase low-income community's

control over environmental resource management and put their views at the centre of policy and programme planning (Nerfa, Rhemtulla, & Zerriffi, 2020). The family farm campaign by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2020) may be one such example. The small-scale, primary-sector populations are the caretaker of the earth as well as the foundation of the global market, thus we endorse protecting their nature-grounded lifestyle and non-market economy, learning from their knowledge and views.

5 | CONCLUSION

This ethnographic study explored community-based economy systems in post-genocide Rwanda, and elaborated the process and mechanisms by which the contemporary gift economy facilitates SWB in Rwandan culture and natural landscape. Findings offered a potential vignette of a future sustainable lifestyle and community-based economic system in environmentally-rich setting. The findings suggested that SWB can be maintained with small income and small consumption when nature is abundant and social services are well-established, in line with previous studies from other low-income or high-income rural settings (Kitayama et al. 2016; Miñarro et al., 2021; Takeuchi et al., 2016). The gift mode of economy, along with social cohesion, natural environment, cultural identity, and spirituality, was vital for SWB. The study contributed to understanding the detailed process and mechanisms of why and how people can be happy without money, and shedding light on a mode of economy that can benefit the development of sustainable community.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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