Structural Conditions for Economic Participation:
A Framework for Public Discussion

GEN Council Foundational Framework — Public Academic Edition

Prepared for submission to academic and media outlets for independent review · Contributors: GEN Council; AI-assisted drafting and synthesis

This paper presents a logical framework for understanding why structural barriers to economic participation exist, what those barriers do to people, and what their removal would require. Beginning from the philosophical proposition that every person has inherent value, the framework develops a transitive chain of logical entailments — through dignity, autonomy, and a minimum economic floor — arriving at fair voluntary exchange as the economic condition that human dignity requires. The framework draws on political philosophy, institutional economics, and technical systems design to demonstrate that barriers to economic participation are structural rather than natural, and therefore remediable. It is offered as a position for open public review: every definition is stated, every logical step is shown, and every objection the framework anticipates is addressed directly. No institution is identified as the solution to the conditions described.

Keywords: economic dignity, human dignity, autonomy, structural barriers, voluntary exchange, capability approach, economic floor, fair exchange, institutional design

Preface: Purpose, Scope, and Contributors

This paper presents a logical framework for understanding why structural barriers to economic participation exist, what those barriers do to people, and what their removal would require. It is offered for open public discussion — not as a policy prescription, and not as the product of any institution claiming to have solved the problem it describes. The framework is institution-agnostic. It does not identify any organization, technology, or movement as the solution to the conditions it describes.

Political philosophy and human rights theory — including Kantian ethics, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Rawlsian justice theory, and Sen and Nussbaum's Capability Approach — provides the philosophical grounding for the framework's claims about dignity, autonomy, and minimum thresholds.

Satoshi Nakamoto's 2008 paper, *Bitcoin: A Peer-to-Peer Electronic Cash System* — a technical systems design paper — provides independent corroboration, from engineering rather than philosophy, of several structural claims this framework makes. The connections between his technical findings and this framework's normative claims are the GEN Council's interpretation, not his stated intent.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) contributed to the drafting, synthesis, and structural articulation of this document. The framework's claims are the GEN Council's own. The document is organized so that a careful reader who disagrees with any step can identify exactly where and why. Every definition is stated. Every logical connection is shown.

A Note on Method: Structural Unity Across Domains

In 1748, Leonhard Euler published what mathematicians have since described as the most elegant equation ever written: $e^{i\pi} + 1 = 0$. The equation unites five mathematical constants — e, i, π, 1, and 0 — each discovered independently, in different centuries, by people pursuing entirely unrelated questions. This framework proceeds from the same conviction: it draws together philosophy with economics and asks whether the connection between them is constructed or discovered. The framework's central claim is that the connection is structural and prior.

Section A: Known Objections and Honest Responses

A framework that does not address its own objections is not a serious framework. The following objections are stated in their strongest form and responded to directly, before the framework is presented.

A.1 — PHILOSOPHICAL OBJECTION

Objection: Claims about "inherent dignity" are not empirically verifiable. They are philosophical assertions, not facts.

Response: The framework acknowledges this directly. The foundational claims are normative, not empirical. The framework's logical structure is: if you accept that persons have inherent dignity, then the following conclusions follow by valid inference. Readers who reject the premise should say so explicitly — the framework is designed to make that disagreement clear. (Waldron, 2012; Nussbaum, 2006)

A.2 — ECONOMIC OBJECTION

Objection: Markets allocate resources efficiently. Inequality reflects merit, not structural barriers.

Response: The framework does not claim markets are broken in the sense of failing to process information efficiently. It claims that the conditions under which markets operate — specifically, who has access to participate — are shaped by structural factors that have nothing to do with merit. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) demonstrate that inclusive economic institutions systematically outperform extractive ones over the long run.

A.3 — INSTITUTIONAL SELF-CRITIQUE

Objection: Any institution advancing this framework will eventually become a barrier itself, by the framework's own logic.

Response: This is correct, and acknowledged as a genuine constraint. An institution committed to this framework should be designed to build toward its own irrelevance — its success condition is that the barriers it addresses no longer require an institution to address them. This self-critique is a load-bearing feature of the framework's institutional design logic.

A.4 — HISTORICAL OBJECTION

Objection: The claim that "every human system has created barriers to full economic participation" is too sweeping.

Response: The claim is not that every system has only created barriers, or that no progress has occurred. The historical claim is that no system, to date, has achieved full economic participation for all persons. (Young, 2011)

A.5 — TECHNICAL OBJECTION

Objection: Financial systems require trusted third parties as intermediaries. Removing them is impractical or dangerous.

Response: The framework does not argue for or against any specific technology or arrangement. Nakamoto (2008) demonstrated that a peer-to-peer payment system can process exchanges without requiring a trusted third party. Its existence as a proof of concept establishes that the intermediary requirement is a feature of how specific systems have been designed — not of economic reality.

Section B: Philosophical Framework

B.1 — Philosophical Definitions

Person: A human being, considered as the fundamental unit of moral concern. (Kant, 1785/1993; UDHR, 1948)

Inherent Value: The value a person has by virtue of being a person — prior to any achievement, productivity, or economic function. Not conferred by others; not contingent on behavior. (Kant, 1785/1993; UDHR, 1948)

Love: The act of genuinely attending to another person's inherent value. Love is not a feeling — it is a recognition. Love is the mechanism by which inherent value becomes correlative obligation. (Levinas, 1969; Buber, 1923/1970)

Dignity: The condition of being treated in accordance with inherent value. (Waldron, 2012; Nussbaum, 2006; UDHR, 1948)

Autonomy: The capacity of a person to direct their own life. Autonomy requires both capability (internal capacity to choose) and access (external conditions that make choice possible). (Sen, 1999)

The Floor: The minimum set of material and social conditions required for autonomous function. A person below The Floor cannot exercise meaningful autonomy regardless of internal capacity. (Nussbaum, 2006)

Economic Floor: The Floor expressed in economic terms: the minimum conditions required to participate in exchange on one's own terms.

Economic Dignity: The condition of a person whose circumstances meet the Economic Floor and who can thereby participate in exchange on terms that acknowledge their inherent value.

Exchange: The general mechanism through which a person's needs and wants are met in relation to others — through markets, public institutions, communal arrangements, or informal giving.

Known Needs and Wants: The needs and wants a person can accurately identify when capacity to choose is not impaired by manipulation, misinformation, or deprivation. (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2006)

Unimpeded Access: The condition in which no structural barrier stands between a person and the resources required to meet their known needs and wants. (Urban Institute, 2021)

Fairness: The condition in which exchange occurs without coercion, deception, or structural disadvantage that systematically advantages one party. (Munger, 2011; Nakamoto, 2008)

B.2 — Philosophical Transitive Chain

Step	Connection	Logical Content
1	**Person → Inherent Value**	If something is a person, it has inherent value. (Definitional)
2	**Inherent Value → Dignity**	If something has inherent value, it is owed treatment that acknowledges that value.
3	**Dignity → Autonomy**	If a person is owed dignity, they are owed the conditions for autonomous function.
4	**Autonomy → The Floor**	If a person is owed autonomous function, they are owed at minimum The Floor. Without it, autonomy is theoretical, not real.
5a	**The Floor → Exchange Conditions**	Needs and wants are satisfied through exchange with others. Therefore, the conditions under which exchange occurs become morally relevant.
5b	**The Floor → Obligation Extends to Exchange**	The moral obligation extends to what satisfaction requires. The conditions governing exchange are part of what is owed.
6	**The Floor → Fairness**	Because coercion and structural disadvantage in exchange erode autonomy, the conditions of exchange cannot be morally optional. Fairness is required, not merely preferred.
7	**Fairness → Unimpeded Access**	Fairness and Unimpeded Access are the same structural requirement described from two vantage points: one from the exchange process, one from the individual path through it.
Terminal Condition — Fair Voluntary Exchange: Voluntary Exchange names the condition autonomy requires. Fairness names the condition dignity requires. Fair Voluntary Exchange is the compound condition that satisfies both. It is the economic condition that human dignity requires.		

Section C: Economic Framework

C.1 — Economic Definitions

Exchange: The transfer of value between two or more parties. The fundamental economic act. (Smith, 1776; Mill, 1848)

Voluntary Exchange: Exchange without coercion and with informed consent of all parties. (Wertheimer, 1996; Munger, 2011; Nakamoto, 2008)

Double Coincidence of Wants: The condition required for direct barter: each party must want what the other has, at the same time. The fundamental scale limitation of pure barter. (Jevons, 1875)

Scale Limitation: The constraint that direct exchange imposes on economic complexity. Money exists to solve this problem.

Money: A medium of exchange that solves the double coincidence of wants. Its fundamental function is coordination. The monetary systems humans build are design choices — and those choices determine who can participate. (Jevons, 1875; Menger, 1892)

Barrier to Participation: Any structural condition that prevents a person from engaging in voluntary exchange on fair terms. Nakamoto (2008): “The cost of mediation increases transaction costs, limiting the minimum practical transaction size and cutting off the possibility for small casual transactions” (§1).

CommUnity Value: The aggregate value generated when exchange is broad and fair, as opposed to narrow and extractive. An economy that excludes potential participants is smaller and less productive than one that includes them. (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012)

Facilitation: The legitimate function of an institution in an economy: enabling exchange, not gatekeeping it. (Nakamoto, 2008)

C.2 — Economic Foundational Claims

Claim	Explanation
Exchange is the primary economic act	All economic value is realized through exchange. Production without exchange has no economic effect.
Money solves scale	Money emerged as a solution to the scale limitation of direct barter. Money is a coordination technology.
Monetary systems create access conditions	Any system using money must create conditions under which participants can access that medium. Those conditions are always a design choice, even when they appear natural.
Every human system has created barriers to full participation	No human system to date has achieved full economic participation for all persons. This is a historical observation, not a claim about necessity.
Barriers are structural, not natural	The barriers preventing full economic participation are features of the systems humans have built. They can be changed.

Section D: The Connection Between Frameworks

D.1: The philosophical chain establishes that persons are owed autonomy. Autonomy requires access to voluntary exchange — because known needs and wants are satisfied through exchange with others. Therefore: persons are owed access to voluntary exchange. Any system that structurally prevents this is violating a condition of autonomy. (Sen, 1999)

D.2: Autonomy requires The Floor. The Floor is the minimum level of economic participation required for autonomous function. Therefore: persons are owed economic participation at or above The Floor. A system that structurally places persons below The Floor fails them at the level of their dignity as persons. (Nussbaum, 2006)

D.3: Dignity requires fairness. Fairness means exchange without systematic structural disadvantage. Therefore: the conditions of exchange must be fair. Harm resulting from structural conditions — without any individual actor intending the harm — is nonetheless a form of injustice. (Young, 2011)

D.4 — Technical Confirmation: Nakamoto (2008) provides independent confirmation of each connection from systems design rather than philosophy. Commerce on the internet "has come to rely almost exclusively on financial institutions serving as trusted third parties," creating structural barriers that restrict who can access exchange. The distributed consensus mechanism demonstrates that exchange fairness is achievable through transparent, verifiable structural rules — confirming that fair conditions are a design question, not an impossibility. Nakamoto does not make claims about dignity or inherent value.

Section E: Framework Beliefs

Belief	Statement	Transitive Grounding
Inherent Dignity	Every person has inherent dignity that is not contingent on productivity, status, or social role.	Foundational. All other beliefs derive from this.
The Floor	Every person is owed, as a condition of their dignity, access to the economic minimum required for autonomous function.	Person → Inherent Value → Dignity → Autonomy → The Floor (B.2, Steps 1–4)
Voluntary Exchange	Exchange should be voluntary. Coerced exchange is not exchange in the morally relevant sense.	Autonomy (B.1); Voluntary Exchange (C.1); B.2 Step 3
Fairness	The conditions of exchange should be fair. Systematic structural disadvantage that predictably excludes or exploits one class of participants is a violation of dignity.	Dignity → Fairness (B.2, Step 6)
CommUnity Value	Economic systems produce more value for all participants when participation is broad and fair than when it is narrow and extractive.	C.2; Acemoglu & Robinson (2012); Nakamoto (2008, §6)
Facilitation	The legitimate function of an institution in an economy is facilitation — enabling exchange, not gatekeeping it.	C.2; Nakamoto (2008, §6)

Section F: Foundation for Mission and Vision

This section traces each component of the mission and vision the framework points toward back to its grounding proposition, making the logical path from foundational principles to that horizon fully transparent. A closing note distinguishes the framework's horizon from the GEN Council's own mission.

Mission (the framework's horizon): To see economic dignity restored to every person through the removal of structural barriers to participation in voluntary exchange. The framework identifies what such a restoration would require; it does not prescribe what should be built to achieve it, or by whom. What institutions, tools, or arrangements best meet these requirements is a separate question this framework is designed to inform, not to answer.

Vision: A world in which every human being has unimpeded access to the economic floor required for autonomous function — where fair voluntary exchange is the default condition, not a privilege granted by gatekeepers.

Framework Proposition	Mission / Vision Component	Connection
Every person has inherent dignity (B.1)	“Restore economic dignity to every person”	The mission names dignity because the framework grounds it in inherent value — not in productivity or desert.
Barriers are structural, not natural (C.2)	“Removing structural barriers to participation”	The mission specifies structural barriers because the framework establishes they are structural — and therefore remediable.
Autonomy requires unimpeded access (B.2)	“Unimpeded access to the economic floor”	The vision specifies unimpeded access because impeded access is the primary failure mode.
Fair voluntary exchange is the economic condition of dignity (B.2, C.1)	“Where fair voluntary exchange is the default condition”	The vision names fair voluntary exchange as the target state because it is the economic condition that dignity requires.
Facilitation is the legitimate institutional function (E)	“Removing structural barriers to participation”	Facilitation — not gatekeeping — is the legitimate function of whatever institutions the community may build; the framework names the requirement, not the builder.
Barriers are structural and therefore remediable (C.2)	“Restoration through the removal of structural barriers”	Restoration is meaningful only if structural conditions are changed, not just immediate outcomes — a change the framework calls for without specifying its form or its author.

A note on whose mission this is. The mission above is the horizon the *argument* points toward — the state of affairs a just economic arrangement would produce. It is not the mission of any organization, and it names no organization as its agent. The removal of the barriers, and the building of whatever replaces them, belongs to the community the framework concerns — everyone it affects — not to the authors of this document.

The GEN Council, which stewards this framework, holds a distinct and deliberately narrow mission: to keep the framework freely available, to convene open and non-partisan discussion of it, to invite challenge to it, and to name no solution of its own. Consistent with A.3, an institution faithful to this framework is one built toward its own irrelevance; the GEN Council’s success condition is that the barriers described here no longer require a steward to convene the conversation about them. The framework points at a horizon; the Council holds open the room in which people decide how to reach it.

Section G: Complete Terminology and Transitive Connections Map

G.1 — Full Transitive Pathway

Person carries Inherent Value, which demands Dignity, which requires Autonomy, which requires The Floor, which requires Unimpeded Access to Exchange, which requires that exchange be Voluntary and Fair, which together constitute Fair Voluntary Exchange — the terminal condition the framework names as the appropriate default for any economic system.

The mechanism connecting Inherent Value to Dignity to action is Love — defined not as sentiment but as the structural non-indifference that follows from genuinely recognizing another person as real.

The economic problem that money solves — the Double Coincidence of Wants / Scale Limitation — explains why direct barter cannot meet The Floor at social scale, and why Money as a coordination technology becomes morally relevant. The design of monetary systems is not a neutral technical question — it is a question with direct implications for Dignity and Autonomy.

Barriers to Participation are what happens when infrastructure is designed — intentionally or by default — to exclude. CommUnity Value names the economic cost of exclusion — not just to those excluded, but to the whole. Facilitation names the only institutional function consistent with the framework.

G.2 — Term-by-Term Connection Reference

Term	Connects To	Direction of Connection
Person	Inherent Value	Person is the bearer of Inherent Value (definitional)
Inherent Value	Dignity	Inherent Value demands recognition as Dignity
Inherent Value	Love	Love is the mechanism of recognizing Inherent Value as real
Love	Dignity	Love transforms recognition of Inherent Value into the active condition of Dignity
Dignity	Autonomy	Dignity requires the conditions for autonomous function
Autonomy	The Floor	The Floor is the minimum threshold at which autonomy becomes actual rather than theoretical
The Floor	Economic Floor	The Economic Floor is The Floor expressed in economic terms
The Floor	Exchange	Meeting The Floor requires exchange with others
The Floor	Unimpeded Access	Reaching The Floor requires the absence of structural obstruction
Exchange	Voluntary Exchange	Voluntary Exchange is the form of exchange autonomy requires
Exchange	Fairness	Fairness is the condition exchange must meet to be consistent with dignity
Voluntary Exchange	Fair Voluntary Exchange	Fair Voluntary Exchange is the compound of what autonomy requires and what dignity requires
Fairness	Unimpeded Access	Full Fairness and Unimpeded Access are co-extensive — the same structural requirement from two vantage points
Scale Limitation	Money	Money exists as a solution to Scale Limitation
Money	Barrier to Participation	Money systems create access conditions that can constitute Barriers to Participation
Barrier to Participation	The Floor	Barriers prevent reaching The Floor; eliminating Barriers is how The Floor becomes accessible
CommUnity Value	Exchange	Broad fair exchange generates more CommUnity Value than narrow extractive exchange
Facilitation	Barrier to Participation	An institution that gatekeeps rather than facilitates creates a Barrier to Participation

Interpretive Instructions for Readers and Reviewers

Do not add claims not grounded in the framework. The framework is designed as a complete logical structure. Adding claims not grounded in the transitive chain introduces unsupported assertions.

Do not remove the counterargument section. Section A is part of the framework's intellectual structure, not a disclaimer.

Do not treat the framework as settled. If a reviewer identifies a logical error, a missing step, or a definition that does not hold, that is a success condition — not a failure. The framework is offered for challenge.

Distinguish framework claims from cited sources. Nakamoto (2008), Sen (1999), Nussbaum (2006), Young (2011), and others corroborate specific claims. Those sources do not endorse this framework.

This framework is institution-agnostic. It does not identify any organization, technology, or movement as the solution to the conditions it describes.

References

Acemoglu, D., & Robinson, J. A. (2012). *Why nations fail.* Crown Publishers.

Buber, M. (1970). *I and thou.* Charles Scribner's Sons.

Darity, W., Jr., et al. (2022). *Stratification economics.* Economic Policy Institute.

Jevons, W. S. (1875). *Money and the mechanism of exchange.* D. Appleton.

Kant, I. (1993). *Grounding for the metaphysics of morals.* Hackett Publishing. (Original 1785)

Levinas, E. (1969). *Totality and infinity.* Duquesne University Press.

Menger, C. (1892). On the origins of money. *Economic Journal, 2*(6), 239–255.

Mill, J. S. (1848). *Principles of political economy.* John W. Parker.

Munger, M. C. (2011). Euvoluntary or not, exchange is just. *Social Philosophy and Policy, 28*(2), 206–228.

Nakamoto, S. (2008). *Bitcoin: A peer-to-peer electronic cash system.* https://bitcoin.org/bitcoin.pdf

Nussbaum, M. C. (2006). *Frontiers of justice.* Harvard University Press.

Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice.* Harvard University Press.

Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom.* Anchor Books.

Smith, A. (1776). *Wealth of nations.* W. Strahan and T. Cadell.

United Nations. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights.* https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights

Urban Institute. (2021). *Poverty results from structural barriers, not personal choices.* https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/poverty-results-structural-barriers-not-personal-choices-safety-net-programs-should-reflect-fact

Waldron, J. (2012). *Dignity, rank, and rights.* Oxford University Press.

Wertheimer, A. (1996). *Exploitation.* Princeton University Press.

Young, I. M. (2011). *Responsibility for justice.* Oxford University Press.