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Beyond the Hunger Games: Reimagining District-Based Economies for Equitable Prosperity

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Abstract

This study examines the concept of a regionally specialised industrial system, as depicted in the dystopian novel *The Hunger Games*. It involves conducting a rigorous cost-benefit analysis and comparing it to both historical and modern economic frameworks. The analysis, which draws on case studies from the Nordic countries, Singapore, and Estonia, as well as literature on industrial specialisation, welfare states, and sustainable development, identifies the *Hunger Games* Economic model's underlying flaws while also extracting certain functional elements that, if reimagined, could serve as the foundation for a viable and equitable modern economic framework. The final section suggests a hybrid centralisation-specialisation backed up by technological parity, equitable redistribution, and sustainability-driven specialisation.

Keywords: Centralisation; decentralisation; regional specialisation; comparative advantage; economic mobility; wealth inequality; sustainability; smart specialisation; Nordic model; SkillsFuture; digital transformation; Soviet Union economy; innovation systems; related variety.

1. Introduction

Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* introduces us to a dystopian world called Panem where the United States is the sole country left standing after natural disasters ravaged the Earth and altered its very landscape. In the aftermath, the region underwent sweeping changes to survive, ultimately adopting an authoritarian regime led by the Capitol and divided into thirteen districts.

The system was marked by stark inequalities. Capitol residents lived in an overflow of wealth and luxury,

while the districts, in contrast, were left with limited, often inadequate basic necessities. Each district was assigned responsibility for producing a specific regional commodity, ranging from luxury goods and technology to seafood, agriculture, coal, and nuclear energy, with these allocations determined by the Capitol.

No inter-district trade was permitted, leaving each region as an isolated cog in the larger machine that ultimately served the Capitol. The districts had no influence over leadership or their living conditions. As one might expect, this imbalance sparked widespread

dissent, culminating in a revolution. In the event known as the “Dark Days,” the Capitol crushed the rebellion, even going so far as to destroy District 13. By the time the events of *The Hunger Games* unfold seventy-four years later, these oppressive conditions not only remain but have worsened.

These inequalities and systemic injustices, driven by the Capitol’s oppression, form a central plot element in Collins’ narrative and serve as the spark for the next uprising. However, this study approaches the system from an analytical standpoint, focusing primarily on the economic model at its core; a centralised hub directing resources produced by mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive, regionally specialised sub-regions.

The primary aim is to conduct a thorough cost–benefit analysis of this model to determine whether it is both practical and desirable in today’s world. Based on these findings, the study will then propose a revised model that incorporates successful elements from global economies that have faced and addressed similar challenges. In doing so, it seeks to answer the question: could a centralised, regionally specialised economic system, if implemented today, foster national economic growth while delivering internationally recognised improvements in productivity, citizen welfare, and sustainability?

2. Literature Review

Research in economics and public policy has explored how centralisation, specialisation, and support systems affect national productivity, equity, and sustainability.

Mogstad, Salvanes, and Torsvik (2025) examined the Nordic model to determine how nations can achieve a mix of low income inequality and economic growth. They looked at coordinated wage setting, progressive taxation, and universal public services as predistribution mechanisms that combat inequality before redistribution. The objective was to assess how predistribution-first systems avert income polarisation

without compromising competitiveness. Their results indicate that when accompanied by universal education, health, and social insurance, wage compression is compatible with high productivity and social trust, providing a template for equitable growth.

Fung (2020) and Tan (2017) studied Singapore's country-wide SkillsFuture scheme, initiated in 2014 to enhance economic mobility and flexibility in the face of a quickly evolving labour market. The scheme aimed to provide all citizens with access to upskilling, match training more closely to industry demands, and promote individual ownership of career development. Researchers note high take-up rates, with hundreds of thousands of Singaporeans and thousands of businesses having benefited, indicating that inclusive, lifelong learning systems can enhance labour force resilience.

Terriou (2023) and Kattel and Mergel (2019) examined Estonia's post-independence digitalisation prioritisation as a national development strategy. Initiatives like the Tiger Leap programme, X-Road data environment, and universal digital ID (identification) were designed to bridge technological gaps and provide equal access to public services. The aim was to modernise government, enhance transparency, and foster inclusion in the digital economy. Outcomes show that the incorporation of digital infrastructure into all domains can flatten disparities and improve administrative effectiveness, even in small states with few resources.

Nove (1980) provided an extensive assessment of the Soviet Union's centrally planned economy, comparing the expected benefits of plannability and priority of resources with its operational deficiencies. The study sought to understand the inherent limitations involved with central planning on a large scale. The study revealed that while centralization enabled the distribution of resources to priority sectors, extreme inflexibility, data processing bottlenecks, and disregard for local conditions hindered responsiveness and innovation.

Ricardo's (1817) foundational theory of comparative advantage explained the efficiency gains related to regional specialization. Building on this model, Kemeny and Storper (2014) discussed how basing specialization on local competencies can increase productivity and support innovation. Their goal was to determine the conditions under which specialization supports growth without promoting the exacerbation of inequality. The findings are, that benefits are dependent on the presence of interlinked industries, innovative systems, and adaptive mechanisms.

Novikova and Strogonova (2020), and Manolov et al. (2020) addressed how to "smart specialise" selecting sectors according to social and environmental value in the long term. They sought to build frameworks that minimize excessive specialisation in individual industries and enhance resilience. There is evidence that the integration of specialisation and diversification in related activities, sustainability objectives, and innovation potential defends regions against market shock and environmental hazard.

3. Cost benefit analysis of the economic model in the hunger games

3.1 Costs

The source material does not shy away from highlighting the flaws of the Capitol, so it shouldn't be a surprise that the negatives of this system far outweigh the positives. Nevertheless, the system warrants an in depth analysis before proceeding with the rest of the paper.

The original hunger games trilogy is narrated by Katniss Everdeen, a 16 year old girl from the Seam- the poorest section of District 12, inhabited mainly by the coal miners. Through her eyes, we see the stark contrast between life in the Capitol and in the districts. Katniss

struggles to feed her family after losing her father in a mining accident, often going hungry for days, living off scraps salvaged from empty kitchen cupboards or weeds and plants foraged from the meadow. Their belongings are few and far. Bread is viewed as a rare sight, a luxury even.

A similar plight is witnessed across the districts, even in district 11; the nation's agricultural hub. Despite producing the food for the nation, for fear of prosecution, the residents of district 11 are forbidden to eat any of the produce. However, in the Capitol, food is common, readily available, and at the same time, wasted. At a party that Katniss attends, Capitol residents drink a concoction that induces vomiting, allowing them to keep trying, and tasting the rich and expansive spread the party offers. This scene encapsulates the economic injustice: the districts have no right to the commodities they labour to produce. Instead, everything is funnelled back to the Capitol, leaving the working class exploited, underpaid, and deprived of basic necessities.

All decisions; social, economic, and political are made by the Capitol, with no chance of change. In the Capitol's view, the districts are mere resource providers, existing to serve its needs. Enjoying their comfort and abundance, Capitol residents rarely, if ever, recognise the injustice inherent in such a system. This extremist centralised approach goes largely unquestioned and uncontested, leaving the districts economically dependent and politically submissive.

The system also restricts inter-district trade, causing the districts to be economically isolated from one another. The districts cannot complement each other's needs or capitalize on diverse resources, which is an inefficient allocation of resources overall. The lack of trade creates a fractured society with minimal cooperation or shared interests among the districts. People have to rely on scarce local resources, leading higher vulnerability to shortages, which contributes to poverty and suffering,

particularly in poorer districts. This economic isolation further exacerbates the poor living conditions of those in the districts.

The technological disparities between the Capitol and districts are jarring. Katniss marvels at a Capitol shower offering an array of soaps, scents and water jet customizations, while back home she lacks even hot water for a wash. The technology and infrastructure from medicine to transport, is far more advanced and readily accessible, whereas the districts make do with outdated facilities or go without entirely.

Moreover, each district is locked into a specific specialisation assigned by the Capitol. The regions have no say in what they produce and no ability to change their focus, forced instead to comply with whatever role is dictated to them.

3.2 Benefits

A form of comparative advantage drives district specialisation in Panem. According to his 1817 book, “On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation”, David Ricardo, the originator of the term ‘comparative advantage’, explains it as the principle whereby each country allocates labor and capital most effectively and economically by specialising in the production of goods where they have a relative efficiency advantage, thereby increasing total output and diffusing benefit across nations. This is clearly illustrated by District 12’s focus on coal production, owing to its abundance of coal reserves, and District 4’s focus on seafood, due to its proximity to the coast.

However, unlike in a free market system where comparative advantage naturally drives specialisation and trade, in Panem, the Capitol enforces and mandates this specialisation, limiting the districts’ autonomy and preventing trade between them. Thus, the comparative

advantage is institutionally imposed rather than emerging from free economic choice.

The second advantage owes to the production quotas. The Capitol regulates production to meet demand, maintaining quota systems in districts. Quotas can help stabilize supply chains and avoid overproduction or shortages, though transparency and fairness are critical.

This critical analysis has yielded the result that, unsurprisingly the economic system observed in Panem is a net loss. However, there are a few advantageous aspects that, if adapted within an equitable, transparent framework, could form part of a revised economic model. The following sections of the paper will build on both the good and bad aspects of Panem’s structure, to develop the most beneficial economic model that could be practically and beneficially adopted in today’s world.

4. Lessons from real-world economies

If Panem's district economy serves as an extreme cautionary tale about how not to structure a country's economic system, several real-world examples show how similar underlying elements of central coordination and regional specialization can be successfully implemented when accompanied by equity-focused policies, technological integration, and mobility frameworks.

4.1 Addressing Wealth Inequalities - The Nordic Model

“Policymakers, public commentators, and researchers often cite the Nordic countries as examples of a social and economic model that successfully combines low income inequality with prosperity and growth” (Mogstad, Salvanes, & Torsvik, 2025, p. 2). This is done for good reason. The low wealth inequalities observed in the Nordic can be primarily associated with its predistribution-first approach, where problems are

essentially fixed at the source; inequalities are addressed and rectified in the labour market prior to any transfers or taxes. At the heart of this system is the coordinated wage setting mechanism, which effectively compresses wage distribution, or the gap between high and low earners across sectors and skill classes, limiting any extreme pay disparities, but also preventing the compromise of productivity incentives.

Rigorous rounds of sectoral bargaining determine minimum wages, which are then adjusted in local negotiations, but always within nationally agreed standards, thus guaranteeing both horizontal and vertical equity in pay. However, what truly renders this system a success is its supporting pillars. Universal, high-quality public services in education, health, and childcare are easily accessible in the Nordic model and are funded by progressive taxation, where the higher income bracket pay proportionally more. Added to this are generous social insurance programs against unemployment, illness, or disability that secure economic stability during periods of personal adversity.

Furthermore, the region observes a higher labour force participation among genders and socioeconomic groups, owing to the re-equipping and reintegration of workers into jobs. Collectively, these traits forge a society in which pre-tax earnings are more equal, opportunities are universally available, and risks are shared collectively, thus producing not only reduced income inequality but also long-term economic growth and high social trust levels (Mogstad, Salvanes, & Torsvik, 2025)

4.2 Enabling Economic Mobility - Singapore's SkillsFuture

The University of Michigan's Poverty Solutions Department (n.d.) defines 'economic mobility' as "People's ability to improve their economic status over the course of their lifetimes." They further go on to state that, "Economic mobility requires access not only to income, assets, training, and employment, but also more intangible resources like power, and social inclusion." Singapore's SkillsFuture Movement, founded in 2014,

was a nationwide inclusive program aimed at doing exactly that.

The initiative aimed to provide continuing education and training (CET) in conjunction with governments, institutions, agencies, unions, firms, and training providers all over the country. To stay up with the ever-changing environment of technology and industry, people had access to a flexible education system, with individuals over the age of 25 receiving S\$500, which they could use to complete any of the 20,000 SkillsFuture Modules on the Portal as they pleased. These modules, created by employers and industry bodies, combined learning with practical experience, ensuring that the training meets current industry needs. They were also guided by Skills Frameworks and Industry Transformation Maps co-created with employers to reflect actual demand.

The MySkillsFuture portal also serves as a career navigation and skills profiling tool, allowing individuals to create their own development path rather than following a predetermined, centrally prescribed one. This approach encouraged people to take ownership of their careers, acknowledging that everyone's needs, aspirations, and starting points are unique, and it was supplemented by initiatives aimed at older workers, low-skilled employees, and those in disrupted industries through programs such as SkillsFuture for Digital Workplace. Study Awards and Fellowships were available to anyone pursuing further reintegration and education, from 11 years old to those 20 years past their bachelor's degrees.

By 2018, more than 465,000 Singaporeans and 12,000 enterprises benefited from SkillsFuture subsidies (EY, 2023), with participation rates approaching 48% of the eligible workforce, over 3,500 individuals taking part in Work-Study Programs, and more than 52,000 attending SkillsFuture Advice workshops for personalised guidance (Fung, 2020) (Tan, 2017).

4.3 Closing Technological Gaps - Estonia's Digital Transformation

Following independence, Estonia found itself in a vulnerable position: it needed to modernize but was hampered by Soviet-era technology, outdated systems, and significant technological disparities. Rather than pushing digitalization as a secondary policy, the government prioritized it as a national development plan. And after years of hard work, the country's efforts paid off. "For this country of 1.3 million inhabitants, which can claim to have developed the most advanced digital identity card system in the world, the digitization of most of its public services and a wealth of experience in cyber security, the title of" most advanced digital society in the world "is perhaps not misplaced." (Terriou 2023)

The first step was to integrate technology into education. The Tiger Leap initiative, launched in 1996 with the goal of promoting all-inclusive digital literacy, provided computers, internet connection, and standardized ICT (Information and Communications Technology) curricula to schools across the country, successfully bridging the gap between rural and urban students.

Next, Internet connection was made available at free public facilities such as libraries and community centers, ensuring that low-income and remote families were not left behind. Internet access became an enforceable right in 2002, leaving no room for exclusion in this regard. Then arose the need for a new digital infrastructure.

The X-Road platform of 2001 facilitated data sharing between the public and private sectors, allowing 99% of public services to be accessed online. All citizens and residents, including minorities, were given Digital ID cards that allowed them to vote and access banking, healthcare, and administrative services, lowering bureaucratic and physical hurdles. Inclusion and transparency were prioritised throughout the process.

Internet services and resources were accessible in both Estonian and Russian. Furthermore, citizens may track when and who accessed their data. Following the 2007 data breach, Estonia strengthened its cyber security procedures to successfully safeguard its citizens from future threats. (Kattel & Mergel, 2019).

5. Refined model proposal

Drawing from both the failures of Panem and the successes of these real-world examples, a refined economic model must balance the coordinating benefits of centralisation with the adaptability and responsiveness of decentralisation. It must preserve the productivity potential of regional specialisation while embedding equity, mobility, and technological parity as core principles.

5.1 Centralisation

Often times, arguments against a highly centralized economic approach stem from the failures of the Soviet Economy. "Indeed a catalogue of blunders and distortions can be assembled without difficulty from the pages of the Soviet press." (Nove, 1980). According to Nove, a centralized planning system typically addresses two key priorities: plannability and a degree of priority. As the key regulatory agency, the government is well positioned to understand what its residents require and how to address the three major problems: what to produce, how to produce, and for whom to produce. The degree of priority relates to the fact that a centralized planning system is intended to reallocate resources where shortages exist, prioritizing societal welfare over profits.

In principle, a centralized economic strategy would benefit a region as vast as the Soviet Union. Indeed, some features of this model proved successful. The USSR excelled in resource mobilization and planning for national high-priority areas such as fuel, energy, defense, industry, and space programs. The economy had a high employment rate and relatively stable

pricing. Furthermore, policies were administered consistently across the country, and tight steps were taken to reduce market shocks.

However, because the USSR was enormous, the sheer volume of data that economic planners had to process caused the system to experience massive delays, making it difficult to adapt and respond to real-time local situations. This resulted in rigidity, preventing technical adaptability as well as any opportunities for inter-regional collaboration and progress. Furthermore, production targets across the country emphasized quantity over quality, at the price of innovation. Mismatches between supply and demand were common as a result of the delays, and the rigidity was only maintained because of bureaucratic institutions' resistance to change.

In Panem's case, this same overcentralisation manifests itself in the Capitol's inability and unwillingness to respond to the immediate needs of its districts. Production and distribution decisions are made far from the realities of coal mines, fisheries, or farms, leaving local shortages unaddressed even when surpluses are available elsewhere. Prud'homme and Shah (2002) further highlight broader drawbacks of centralisation, including the imposition of uniform policies where local diversity is needed and diminished accountability due to the distance between decision-makers and citizens.

Therefore, a purely centralised model, like that seen in the USSR and in the Hunger Games would not have the desired results if implemented in today's world. However, in order to reap the benefits of centralisation, without being affected by the pitfalls, it is recommended that the central regulatory body retains its oversight on redistribution, macroeconomic stability, and national infrastructure, but decentralising operational decisions within each district's specialisation.

5.2 Specialisation

If centralisation governs the how of economic coordination, specialisation shapes the what. In theory,

regional specialisation is one of the most powerful tools for increasing productivity, encouraging innovation, and aligning a nation's economic structure with its resource base. The underlying logic is simple: when a region focuses on producing goods or services for which it has a comparative advantage, whether due to natural resources, skilled labour, geographic position, or established industrial capacity, it can achieve greater efficiency than if it attempted to produce everything. This allows for economies of scale, the concentration of expertise, and the development of infrastructure tailored to a specific sector. However, the benefits of specialisation are not guaranteed; they depend on the design of the system, the presence of safety nets, and especially, the adaptability of the specialised region to changes in market demand.

Empirical evidence supports the productivity benefits of well-managed specialisation. Kemeny and Storper (2014) show that when industrial specialisation aligns with local advantages, it can significantly enhance labour productivity, foster innovation spillovers, and attract investment in supporting infrastructure. Clusters of related industries benefit from dense networks of suppliers, specialised labour markets, and knowledge exchange. These effects reinforce themselves over time, creating a virtuous cycle of innovation and competitiveness. In Panem's case, coal mining in District 12 or fishing in District 4 reflects a basic alignment with local resources, but the absence of inter-district trade, investment in local innovation, or diversification traps these districts in a static, extraction-focused existence.

The literature also highlights the relationship between specialisation and citizen welfare. Swank (2000), in their comparative analysis of Scandinavian welfare states, finds that specialisation need not lead to the polarisation of incomes or the neglect of non-specialised sectors. Instead, when paired with robust redistributive policies and active labour market programmes, specialisation can provide high-quality employment while ensuring that gains are broadly shared. This stands

in sharp contrast to Panem's approach, where the benefits of specialisation are siphoned off to the Capitol and the producing regions remain impoverished.

Sustainability has emerged as a central consideration in modern specialisation strategies. Manolov et al. (2020) argue that "smart specialisation", or the deliberate selection of sectors based on their capacity to generate long-term environmental and social benefits is critical to ensuring that economic growth does not come at the cost of ecological degradation or social dislocation. Similarly, Novikova and Strogonova (2020) emphasise that sustainable regional development depends on embedding innovation systems within the specialisation strategy, ensuring that regions can adapt to technological change and evolving market conditions. For example, a coastal district specialising in fishing might, under a smart specialisation framework, transition towards sustainable aquaculture, invest in processing technologies to move up the value chain, and integrate with research institutions to monitor and preserve marine ecosystems.

A further safeguard against the risks of over-specialisation is the concept of "related variety." Rather than focusing exclusively on a single product or service, regions can build a portfolio of related industries that draw on overlapping skills, technologies, and supply chains. This diversification within a specialisation framework reduces vulnerability to market shocks. For example, a region specialising in renewable energy might cultivate linked industries in energy storage, smart grid technology, and electric vehicle manufacturing. In the event of a downturn in one subsector, the region can pivot resources and labour to related fields without dismantling its entire economic base.

The contrast with Panem couldn't be greater. There, specialisation is enforced in isolation, with no mechanism for innovation, no safety nets, and no potential for regions to progress up the value chain. The difficulty for any modern economy inspired by the concept of district-based specialisation is to balance the

structural benefits of focus with the adaptability, social protections, and environmental foresight required for resilience.

6. Implications and limitations

The analysis of Panem's economic structure, alongside lessons from the Nordic countries, Singapore, and Estonia, leads to several important implications for policymakers considering district-based or hybrid centralisation–specialisation models in the real world.

First, selective centralisation is essential. Central authorities should focus on those functions that benefit most from scale and coordination such as macroeconomic stability, redistribution, national infrastructure, environmental regulation, etc. while assigning operational decision-making to the regions. This ensures that national priorities are met without sacrificing the responsiveness and innovation that decentralisation allows.

Second, specialisation needs to be supported by the right policy framework. Without protections for workers, active labour market programmes, and access to mobility pathways, specialisation can create one-dimensional economies that fall apart when a key sector declines. The Nordic experience shows that wage compression mechanisms, progressive taxation, and universal services can prevent the polarisation of incomes and ensure that the benefits of specialisation are widely shared. Singapore's SkillsFuture demonstrates that mobility can be institutionalised, allowing workers to transition between industries as markets evolve. Estonia's example highlights the importance of closing technological gaps so that no region is left behind in the digital economy.

Third, sustainability and resilience should be built into the design of specialisation strategies from the outset. This requires identifying sectors not only for their current profitability but also for their potential to generate long-term environmental and social value. It also means investing in innovation systems that enable

regions to adapt their specialisations in response to technological change, environmental constraints, and shifting global demand.

However, the proposed model has its limits. Using a fictional world like Panem to shape real policies can highlight risks and opportunities, but it cannot show the full complexity of real political, cultural, and institutional realities. Moreover, the success of the case studies examined here depend heavily on contextual factors. The Nordic model thrives in a high-trust, consensus-oriented political culture, Singapore's SkillsFuture is backed by strong state capability and a compact geographic area, and Estonia's digital transformation was facilitated by a small, tech-literate population and a willingness to embrace systemic reform. Replicating these successes elsewhere would require careful adaptation to local conditions, governance capacities, and societal values.

Finally, the political feasibility of such a model cannot be overlooked. Implementing selective centralisation and smart specialisation would require political leadership committed to balancing national cohesion with regional autonomy, resisting the temptation to over-centralise, and ensuring that redistribution mechanisms are maintained even in the face of fiscal or political pressures.

7. Conclusion

The economic system in *The Hunger Games* is a clear example of how centralisation and specialisation, when applied without checks, can deepen inequality, limit mobility, and enforce long-term dependency. The Capitol–District arrangement removes regional autonomy, bans trade, withholds technological progress, and uses production quotas to benefit the centre at the cost of the periphery. Yet, within this flawed design are two core ideas that, under fair and transparent governance, could hold genuine potential; coordinated central oversight and purposeful regional specialisation.

The challenge is to take what works in theory and apply it in practice without importing the flaws of Panem's implementation. The Soviet Union's experience shows that central planning can mobilise resources effectively for national priorities, but that over-centralisation breeds rigidity and inefficiency. The Nordic countries demonstrate how wage coordination, progressive taxation, and universal services can pair economic competitiveness with equity. Singapore proves that mobility can be institutionalised, empowering individuals to navigate changing economic landscapes. Estonia shows that equal access to technology is not a result of growth but a requirement for truly inclusive development.

The refined model proposed here blends these lessons into a hybrid system. Central oversight retains responsibility for redistribution, macroeconomic stability, and large-scale infrastructure, while operational control rests with the regions. Specialisation is pursued strategically, aligning with local advantages but safeguarded by diversification, social protections, and continuous investment in innovation. Sustainability and resilience are embedded from the start, ensuring that economic gains do not come at the cost of environmental degradation or social exclusion.

In the end, the goal is to use the advantages of specialization and the unifying power of central coordination for a more equitable goal rather than to duplicate the inflexible and exploitative structure of Panem's districts. What Collins portrayed as an oppressive mechanism can be changed into a model for inclusive and sustainable development by establishing systems based on justice, flexibility, and shared prosperity. The main takeaway from Panem is obvious: how a structure is used, not its inherent nature, is what makes it harmful.

Abbreviations

ID: Identification

CET: Continuing Education and Training

ICT: Information and Communications Technology

USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

S\$: Singapore Dollar

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