

Radical Ecological Democracy

Searching for alternatives to unsustainable and inequitable model of 'development'

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PLURIVERSE

Bodies, Flowerbeds

The earth, carved up, engraved with bodies, this hollow vision of death: people resting together, bodies beneath a bed of flowers.

We soften death into poems and stories. The art of writing is just a way of wailing for the earth, carved up, sculpted by bodies.

In Cameroon, hair from the dead is carried, mixed with camwood and kept; the living remember bodies beneath beds of flowers.



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Coronavirus and the life lessons from "ordinary" people to save the Earth and ourselves

May 17, 2020 Agriculture, Community, Conservation, Ecology, Environment, New Economy, New Politics, Sustainability

Ashish Kothari

It is fascinating that the only people who know nothing about the COVID-19 pandemic are also those completely unaffected by it: uncontacted or isolated forest peoples in the Amazon and Papua New Guinea, a couple of adivasi

(indigenous) communities in the Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal, perhaps some groups in the Arctic circle. How I wish I were amongst them, as much to escape the virus as to be mercifully far from the incessant chatter about it!

As we continue to grapple with the virus (and even more, the consequences of state actions related to it), are there any positives hidden within the unfolding tragedy that could help us recalibrate our socio-economic and political systems? Are there any opportunities for interventions, which may help us prevent such a crisis from happening again, or be better prepared to tackle it if confronts us anew? "Positives" and "opportunities", you would wonder? And, that too in the suffering of the sick and those who are dying; the working classes who cannot switch to 'online' work, whose daily wage labor is imperiled, whose vegetables and fruits are not selling, whose industries are shut and who unlike their capitalist or government bosses do not have wealth to fall back on? How can we talk positively about a crisis in which the deaths worldwide have already passed 300,000, and 195 million people stand to lose their jobs according to the International Labor Office? (1)

The corona pandemic has grabbed global attention like no previous disease, generating historically unprecedented actions by nations, partly because it has hit the rich and brought the global economy to its knees. But, we must not forget that like always, the 'poor' are paying a higher price. This is true of other ongoing global crises, including of climate, biodiversity loss, and conflict. Everything else I say in this article has to be tempered by this very sobering reality.

What we seek
through our
endless studies
sits beyond
death, but the
path to it is
sinking
into a carved-up
earth, paved with
bodies.

The sharp shovel
of silence
briefly remedies
the ear deaf to
the voices of the
dead, linking
it to slender-
petaled tongues
in a flowerbed.

A poem or a story
is an etching of
memories,
dignity in the
fragile face of
loss. Soothing
the earth, carved
up, engraved with
bodies,
we hum together
beside a bed of
flowers.

*By Viola Allo
from Bird From Africa*





Migrant workers in India have been forced to walk hundreds of miles to go back to their native places from towns affected by Coronavirus.

In my opinion, within this crisis lies an incredible opportunity to right many historic wrongs. One is with regard to how we have treated our earthly home. And the other is regarding how our economies and politics have marginalized vast sections of humanity, the ones disproportionately suffering the consequences of multiple global crises. And the two are connected.

What is the Crisis telling us?

Images of how clean the air of cities like Beijing and New Delhi has been since the virus took over and halted vehicular traffic, industries and other sources of pollution, have been flashed worldwide (2). The cessation of much of the world's air traffic (3) could also have had an impact on carbon emissions. Likewise, many populations of fish and other aquatic life, and of terrestrial wildlife, must be breathing a bit easier as industrial scale fishing and hunting, and pollution, would have significantly declined.

In *The Swarm* by Frank Schätzing, deep-sea microorganisms form a collective intelligence, and wreak mass scale revenge on a rampaging humanity for its complete disregard of planetary ecological limits. I am not superstitious, but who

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knows if viruses are not doing precisely the same thing? Why should we think only human beings have agency, and the rest of nature is only a mute bystander?

But, even if the message of the viruses is not consciously generated, we should be heeding it. Industrial forms of natural resource use all over the world have disrupted natural systems irreversibly. Whether hunting for the global market rather than only for local subsistence use and markets or mono-cultural commercial agriculture), they have all had fatal consequences for millions of species and for ourselves (4) There have been other fall-outs, too – we are frequently unleashing micro-organisms that were not earlier affecting human beings, but are now latching on to us as new hosts. And, this is only one kind of impact; others include the rapid and widespread collapse of ecosystems that sustain the livelihoods of or provide security to billions of people ... and eventually of the planet's ability to sustain life as we know it.



Scientists warn that the destruction of the environment may make pandemics more likely.

As the triple forces of capitalism, statism (domination of the state in our lives), and patriarchy run amok, the earth as well as vast sections of humanity are suffering. The growing chasm between the have-lots and the have-nots has grown so much that even those benefiting from it are worried, if

Social Society Sustainability

Tribal Urban

nothing else because of the backlash they fear. The lack of accessible healthcare for millions in so-called 'developed' countries like USA, where the pharmaceutical and medical industry has been profiting shamelessly, has also been horribly exposed during the recent pandemic. The central role of the fossil fuel and military-industrial complex in the earth's destruction and the exacerbation of inequalities is clearer than ever before.

What is the Opportunity?

Currently, with the whole world worried about the future, we have possibly history's biggest chance of changing course. We can refashion the economy and polity, from the local level to the global, to be respectful and sensitive to ecological limits, and to work for all of humanity. But, this requires going far beyond the cosmetic managerial fixes of the kind that governments hastily applied after the 2008 economic collapse. Such fixes (such as bank bailouts), in fact, made things worse by privileging the elite; even now, bailouts of the airline industry are being considered, rather than using such resources for rebuilding the livelihoods of the poor (5). Similarly, we need to stay clear of technological fixes, which could destroy the earth's climate and biodiversity, faux solutions like giant screens ('geoengineering') that could supposedly reduce global warming.

We need transformations that are systemic, replacing the currently dominant structures of injustice and unsustainability with more equal political, economic, and social relations. We need a dramatic transformation towards genuine democracy, a *swaraj* ('self-rule' in Sanskrit) that encompasses not only all humans, but also the planet as a whole, based on an ethics of life.

What Course Changes are required?

What does this mean? It means reversing economic globalization, a process that was supposed to bring prosperity to all peoples but has actually brought enormous

distress, growing inequality and ecological devastation. This process has entailed the integration of production, consumption and trade into complex global structures and relations in such a way that no community or country is able to strive for self-reliance, or to protect livelihoods and environment from damage by multinational corporations and unfair international trade. The current system's fragile economic interdependencies have been rudely exposed by the virus crisis; for instance, when the components of a single consumer product are made in a dozen countries, mostly by informal labor with little economic or legal security, the collapse of even one of these links in the chain can cause a domino effect across the entire production chain. This is one main reason why this crisis may result in the loss of millions of jobs.



Transformations based on people's own initiatives have the potential for fostering socio-economic and political equality.

It is also a system, which has also fostered the dominance of one way of being and knowing ('western') over all others. Entire libraries of knowledge, embedded in thousands of languages and worldviews and ways of knowing around the world, have been wiped out or are in the process of being

erased due to epistemological colonization.

To be clear, in pointing to globalization as one major factor in the current crisis, I am not talking of global social relations that help exchange ideas, principles, cultures, and forms of knowledge on an equal plane, which has been a valuable component of human existence for millennia.

What, then, would economic globalization be replaced with? One emerging idea and practice is that of open localization, a process of striving for self-reliance in meeting basic needs (food, water, shelter, learning, health, governance, dignity, livelihoods) from within a certain human-scale local region. In such a system, each of us in our local communities has a significant level of control over decision-making, accompanied by localized feedback loops, which ensure that we don't easily overlook ecological and social damage. In a globalized economy, on the other hand, the damage caused by a person's over-consumption is borne by someone a thousand miles away. Most important, such a system would significantly reduce (not eliminate) the necessity of global movement of products and people, with a much lower chance of pathogens spreading quickly across the world. It would also reduce, and even reverse in many cases, the mass migration of people from rural areas into cities, which has resulted in densely packed populations where disease can spread so easily and quickly. The need to reduce global trade and travel, and densities of human habitation, must surely be amongst the biggest lessons from the corona virus disaster.

Communities Show the Way

Thousands of initiatives at food, energy, water, and other forms of community sovereignty across the world show that localized but interconnected solutions can work (many from India are showcased at www.vikalpsangam.org, and from other parts of the world at www.radicalecologicaldemocracy.org,

<https://www.localfutures.org>,
<https://solutions.thischangeseverything.org>). And many of them are showing how resilient they can be during a global pandemic.

In India, several thousand Dalit women farmers (severely marginalized in India's patriarchal, casteist society, and facing hunger and malnutrition three decades back), organized themselves as *sanghas* (associations) of the Deccan Development Society in a few dozen villages of Telangana state (<http://www.ddsindia.com/>). Using their own traditional seeds, organic methods, local knowledge, and cooperation, they have achieved food sovereignty, completely eradicating hunger and malnutrition. They are currently donating about 20,000 kg of food grains for COVID-19 related relief work, and feeding 1000 glasses of millet porridge every day to municipality and health workers and police personnel who have to be on duty despite India's ongoing lockdown.



Deccan Development Society, a pioneering initiative led by dalit women is donating food for Covid-19 relief work in south India.

In the Ecuadorian Amazon, the Sapara indigenous people

have fought hard to gain collective territorial rights over their rainforest home. They are now defending it against oil and mining interests, and trying to demonstrate a localized economic well-being model that blends their traditional cosmology and new activities like community-led ecotourism. (6) In COVID times, their income from ecotourism would have dropped, but their forests and community spirit give them all the food, water, energy, housing, medicines, enjoyment, health, and learning that they need. Across vast areas of Abya Yala and Turtle Island (native indigenous names for the Americas), Australia, and South-east Asia, indigenous peoples have fought for and in many cases obtained collective title for self-determination.

In central India, *adivasi* (indigenous) people from over 90 villages have formed a Mahagrame Sabha (federation of village assemblies) to move towards self-rule, resist mining, conserve and sustainably use forests by getting community rights recognized, and empower women and youth in decision-making (7). Some of their members who had migrated out to work have returned during the COVID lockdown, and have no income; the village assemblies are using funds collected by sustainable harvest and sale of forest produce, to help them tide over the crisis period. (<https://thebastion.co.in/politics-and/out-of-the-woods-how-the-fra-is-helping-a-village-in-maharashtra-during-the-covid-crisis/>)

Across the world, 'territories of life' conserved by indigenous peoples and other local communities have proven to harbor some of the most important areas of biodiversity and ecosystem functions, providing millions of people with basic needs and with critical back-up sources of food, water and energy during times of disasters and crisis (8) On a recent webinar organized by the ICCA Consortium, a global network of over 100 indigenous, community and civil society organizations, Giovanni Reyes of the Kankanaey Tribe of northern Philippines described how indigenous peoples

there have traditional systems of grain storages specifically for disease outbreaks and other such disasters.

Also, globally, the movement for the commons is reclaiming privatised or state-owned spaces for the public good, such as parking lots and disused governmental lands into collectively governed urban agricultural plots and unused private buildings into housing for the poor and for refugees, and so on). As David Bollier, who with Silke Helfrich has compiled several books of commoning examples and the principles that underlie them, notes: “Throughout history communing has always been an essential survival strategy, and so it is in this crisis. When the state, market or monarchy fail to provide for basic needs, commoners themselves usually step up to devise their own mutual-aid systems.” (10)

Most such examples have had to struggle against adverse macro-economic and political contexts, so imagine how much more they could spread if they existed within positive policy environments. For instance in India, if the billions of rupees of subsidy for chemical fertilizers was to be given to small farmers to generate organic inputs, there would be a rapid transition to ecologically sustainable farming. But, they have also had to confront entrenched socio-cultural inequities and discrimination, especially related to gender, ethnicity, caste, ability and age.

Towards Eco-swaraj: a Radical Ecological Democracy

Crucially, such a transformation would mean a shift back to the *real economy*, focused on actual products and services, and not the crazy roller-coaster virtual economy of shares and bonds and derivatives on which a tiny minority of people have become immensely rich. It would bring back the importance of bio-cultural regions, defined by close, tangible social and ecological relationships. It would emphasize once again that instead of the privatization of nature and natural resources (including land, water, forests, and even knowledge and ideas), we need to place these in the public

domain, with democratic custodianship. It would also have to press for a significant reduction in overall material and energy use, and especially that of the world’s elite, as argued convincingly by Europe’s degrowth movement (11)



We need to keep land, water and forests in the public domain under democratic custodianship.

It is important that all this is accompanied by radical democracy, i.e. where people take political control in collectives where they are (rather than putting all their faith in elected parties); and by the struggles for social justice and equity (on gender, caste, ethnicity and other fronts). Here, I need to make it clear that I’m by no means supporting the xenophobic ‘shut the borders’ call of racist and religiously bigoted right-wing elements. Civil society initiatives in Greece and many other European countries have shown the possibility of open localization, in which attempts at self-determination and self-reliance are combined with the welcoming of refugees from war-torn areas (12). And it works both ways, as migrants show how they can give back; as part of the Barikama cooperative, African migrants who were once exploited as labor in Italy’s plantations, are working extra hard to produce and deliver food to the country’s locked down population (13).

In the long run, of course, conflict zones from where people

have to flee, themselves need to become areas of peaceful localization. Such attempts have been made by the incredibly brave autonomy movement of Kurdish people (especially its women) in the Syria-Iran-Iraq-Turkey border area as well as by the Zapatistas in Mexico. These movements show how communities can address multiple issues through local radical democracy informed by principles of ecofeminism. The worker-led 'one million climate jobs' campaign in South Africa (14), and the Green New Deal of Bernie Sanders in USA (15) and the Labour Party in UK (16), despite some serious flaws (17), demonstrate in earthy details how society can move towards justice and ecological sustainability.

The transformation also needs to encompass people's spiritual or ethical reconnection with the earth, and with each other. Indigenous peoples have long warned of the consequences of our alienation from the rest of nature, the penchant of modernity to think of human beings as outside of nature, somehow not bound by the limits and norms of the planet around us. In their movements they have brought back a diversity of ways of being and knowing ... buen vivir, ubuntu, sumac kawsay, kyosei, country, minobimaatasiwin, swaraj, and many others ... that speak of living with the earth and each other in harmony (18) 'Ordinary' people have shown extraordinary innovation in forging eminently practical, and socially and ecologically sensitive solutions to everyday needs across the world. Now it's up to the rest of us to heed the warnings, resist injustice, undermine the systems of oppression, and learn from the pluriverse of alternatives already available.

Am I hopeful we will take this opportunity? We did not when the 2008 financial collapse shone a blazing torch on the ills of economic globalization and the capitalist-statist-patriarchal forces underlying it. But this crisis is much bigger, it is different, it is showing much more vividly the dangers of economic hyper-connectivity even as it highlights the crucial ecological connections our lives are dependent on. It is

bringing out humanitarian and community spirit in wonderfully diverse ways, including singing along with neighbors, distributing leaflets offering help to the elderly, volunteering for health care, learning to live slower, less consumerist lifestyles. It is pushing or encouraging young people to go back to their communities, learn from their elders how to live off the land, such as amongst indigenous peoples of Turtle Island (Canada) (19). It is showing how communities that have regained governance over the natural ecosystems around them (such as some in India using the Forest Rights Act), have built up economic reserves that can be used to support members who no longer have a job because of the COVID-related economic collapse.

Movements of youth, women and indigenous people and other marginalized populations, already vocal for many years on many issues, must use these opportunities to push for radical transformation, personal to global. Therein lies the hope.

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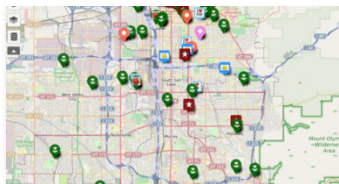
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