

The Global Tapestry of Alternatives meets in Kenya

An Assembly of colourful hope

13 SEPTEMBER 2023, ASHISH KOTHARI



GTA Assembly participants with live tapestry, Bantu Mountain Lodge near Nanyuki, central Kenya

Seven years ago, a crazy dream was voiced at an international gathering of people involved in practicing or conceiving a world beyond economic growth, one that could help heal the earth from the ravages of destructive industrial activity. The dream: a global confluence of radical alternatives to industrialism; the gathering: the International Degrowth conference at Budapest, 2016. Seven years later, in early August 2023, nestled amidst the lovely landscape of Mount Kirinyaga (also called Mt. Kenya by British colonialists who occupied what is now called Kenya), the dream landed on solid ground. Fitting, for if humanity is to embark on a journey to repair its relationship with the planet that gave it life, what better place than the continent where it first evolved?

From 8th to 13th August 2023, the [Global Tapestry of Alternatives](https://www.meer.com/en/75735-the-global-tapestry-of-alternatives-meets-in-kenya) (the GTA) held its first physical Assembly at the Bantu Mountain Lodge near Nanyuki, central Kenya. Over 60 representatives of Indigenous peoples and other local communities,

people's movements, civil society organisations, activist and academic networks, from over 20 countries and regions, came together to deliberate the global crises we face, share people's responses of resistance and constructive alternatives, and work out modalities of a global confluence. The 6 days together were not only filled with dialogue and discussion, but also celebration and festivities, songs and art, spiritual offerings, and lots of great food. Given the landscape we were in, we were also constantly reminded that the earth is not only for humans - Olive baboons, Syke's monkeys, Colobus monkeys and stunningly beautiful birds were also in attendance, as it were.

A bit of history

The GTA, though first proposed in 2016 (then labelled as the Global Alternatives Confluence), was formally launched only in 2019. The three years in between were spent discussing the idea with several global and regional networks of people's organisations. It was also the period in which a small and dedicated group of people coalesced voluntarily to hold the process. While I may have voiced it first at the Budapest conference (basing it on a national confluence process we'd begun in India, Vikalp Sangam, in 2014), it was clearly an idea that many others were also considering around the world. It would be fitting to name here especially Gustavo Esteva, one of the world's foremost critics of 'development' as a force of destruction, as also conceiver and practitioner of radical alternatives. Fitting, because tragically Gustavo left his physical body in 2022; the Assembly paid special tribute to him. When I first wrote to Gustavo about the idea in 2018, he immediately responded with an enthusiastic nod, remarking that he, Arturo Escobar (another remarkable proponent of a *pluriverse* of radically different paths for humanity) and others in Mexico and Colombia were also thinking along similar lines.

The GTA was formally launched in mid-2019, after some preliminary gatherings at 3-4 international events in 2018-19. Soon after, the COVID pandemic (and the response of governments to it) stymied efforts to meet physically, so the next couple of years were spent consolidating it online, through webinars and dialogues and emails. This included bringing on more endorsers, strengthening a core team of facilitators to hold the process (most of them contributing voluntarily), and identifying some national or regional 'weavers' who were already creating networks of grounded initiatives across various sectors and geographies and cultures. It was only in mid-2022, using the occasion of the World Social Forum in Mexico City, that a part of the core team was able to meet physically, and organize some on-ground sessions with partners. But this too was only a small part of the GTA constituency. Meanwhile, a GTA Assembly consisting of all the constituents was formed in August 2021, and then met every three months, but only online.

It was therefore with great excitement that we planned the GTA's first ever physical Assembly, in Kenya. Though acutely conscious of the ecological footprint of 60+ people travelling from various parts of the world, we also felt that there was no substitute to an in-presence gathering. Trust, understanding, and real human

connections are very hard to build in virtual spaces; we already knew this from previous experience, and the six days we were able to spend together in Kenya greatly reinforced it.

Vision and activities of the GTA

The long-term vision and objectives of the GTA are to help form a critical mass of ground-to-global solidarity that can both support local, people-led initiatives as also influence macro-change at national, transnational and global levels. It firmly challenges the current structures of oppression and unsustainability, including patriarchy, capitalism, statism, racism, and anthropocentrism; but going beyond this, it promotes alternative ways of meeting human needs and aspirations that fully respect all life and the regenerative capacities of the earth.

Already in its various goals and activities, the GTA supports mutual learning through dialogues among diverse worldviews, ontologies, and epistemologies; builds collaborations amongst peoples and civil society groups to expand their scope, increase their depth, and spread their impact. It also aims to provide support in times of need, e.g., when communities and initiatives are attacked by the state or corporations, or face other situations of conflict and crisis. It stimulates new weaving of networks and platforms where they do not yet exist; and generates collective envisioning of alternative futures, while respecting the pluriverse of initiatives across the world.

Apart from weaving its own constituents, the GTA has also generated additional global networks. These include [Adelante](#), a platform of eight global networks and platforms (Global Green New Deal, Beyond Development Global Working Group, Grassroots to Global, Global Dialogue for Systemic Change, Multiconvergence, constituents of World Social Forum, and Progressive International), to synergise activities, create more cross-learning, and generate a collective manifesto on global crises and radical alternatives. Another, the Post-Development Academic-Activist Global Group ([PeDADoG](#)), is a forum for academics and activists working at 'higher' education levels to share courses, pedagogies, and approaches that are alternatives to mainstream education.

The Assembly

Months of planning preceded the gathering in Kenya, involving not only the core team mulling over agenda, logistics, and raising the funds to bring several dozen people to Kenya, but also seeking inputs from the wider membership of the GTA. This pre-Assembly preparation paid off, as participants (well, at least several!) came with a level of understanding of the aims and structure of the meeting, as also with their own offerings in the form of presentations, posters, ceremonial activities, gifts, and traditional foods. Many brought their own cloth and textile pieces, for a live weaving of a tapestry symbolizing the growing solidarity of constituents of the GTA. Those with no talent for sewing, like myself, were encouraged to learn and

participate (also to break the gender stereotype of only women making cloth tapestries!). The Mexican contingent, active in the weaver [Crianza Mutua](#), involved participants in a collective cooking session of a scrumptious traditional maize and mole meal, topped up with a delicious kheer (rice pudding) dessert conjured up by the [Indian weaver participants](#). The latter also brought some spicy western Indian snacks, friendship bands made by women of the Himalaya, and other offerings. Members of Colombia's weaver [Crianzas Mutuas](#), many of them of African descent, celebrated their emotional 'home-coming' with offerings of many ceremonial items, and a moving prayer to the earth and cosmos and all their beings. Those coming from a weaver spread across many countries of South-East Asia, the [Movement for Alternatives](#) and Solidarity in South-East Asia (MASSA), brought their own visual and handicraft offerings, and a diversity of languages (other than English and Spanish, which predominated) that were music to the ears.

While all these took place over the period of the Assembly, the opening on the first day was itself symbolic of the 'full-body' and 'humans-within-nature' character of the gathering. Elders of two local communities, the Kikuyu and Tharaka, offered prayers to the gods and the earth, including to Mt. Kirinyaga, and blessed the gathering under a sacred fig (ficus) tree. When we learnt that this was one of the trees under which rebels of the Mau Mau uprising against British rule had sought blessings, we felt we were in the right place, for the GTA has an explicit orientation against colonial and neo-colonial impositions of any kind. Participants also connected with these communities, and with the Masaai, in two visits to see local initiatives. Through this and in our interactions with the staff of the Bantu Mountain Lodge (most of them from local communities), the Assembly attempted to move away from the typical 'fly in, use local resources, and fly out' nature of many international events. This was also made possible by our local host organisation, Society for Alternative Learning and Transformation, whose members, themselves from the local communities, work with them on issues of nature-based livelihoods and local self-determination, reviving traditions that connect people with and within nature. The Lodge did its part, with a wonderful, ever-smiling staff demonstrating the epitome of African hospitality, and its mostly locally-sourced food (with plenty of fresh greens and fruits) keeping us energized. And how could our souls not wake up gladly to the sounds of dozens of species of birds, and just a step away from our rooms, families of Colobus monkeys feasting on fruits and leaves and flowers, and baboon mothers with their babies on their backs walking the lawns.

Within this context of celebrating and reminding ourselves in many bodily ways of our deep connections with ourselves and the rest of nature, the Assembly participants also engaged in intense conversations on a range of topics. The vision and objectives of the GTA, its modes of functioning, and its activities were one thread of these discussions. Participants endorsed the resolve to sustain a horizontal, non-hierarchical way of weaving alternatives across the world, but also challenged the core team and everyone else to find stronger, more explicit ways of doing this.

This fed into another crucial topic: ways of weaving such that all initiatives and networks retained their uniqueness yet found common threads to connect on a foundation of solidarity, trust and understanding. The challenge of doing this across hundreds of cultural contexts (including languages and ways of knowing, deliberating, dreaming, and acting) was acknowledged. One decision for follow up was to build a 'dictionary' of diverse terms and concepts for greater mutual understanding, with existing materials like [Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary](#) as a base.

Participants also decided to work on a 'toolkit for weaving', learning from the experiences of those processes that are already creating connections across cultures and themes and geographies, and helping to stimulate more such weavers where they don't exist. A full day of the four GTA weavers describing their efforts at weaving grounded alternative initiatives, provided much fodder for such a toolkit. Crucial perspectives were added by GTA endorsers who are in their own ways also networking alternatives. A strong African flavour was brought in by the [African Biodiversity Network \(ABN\)](#), a platform of initiatives aimed at finding African solutions to African problems on issues of biodiversity and community rights; [WoMin African Alliance](#) which networks groups resisting extractivist development and promoting alternatives that respond to the needs of the majority of African women; and the [African Food Sovereignty Alliance \(AFSA\)](#) which brings together of communities and civil society groups advancing the objectives of small-holder, biologically diverse agriculture initiatives. The Assembly also heard from the European network of solidarity and sustainable economy initiatives, ECOLISE; and the global network of Indigenous peoples and local communities defending their 'territories of life' for conservation of biodiversity and sustainable livelihoods, ICCA Consortium. North American groups such as May First Movement Technology spoke of their struggles to promote emancipatory approaches, including the technological commons, in an intensely capitalist society.

All these and other groups also highlighted a crucial challenge: how to ensure the GTA process remains firmly rooted in grounded initiatives, while connecting the 'local' to the 'global' (acknowledging also that this is a false binary, since the local is also global and vice versa)? What would this mean, for instance, for appropriate representation of such initiatives at global gatherings? Then there were dialogues on how participants understand terms and practices of radical alternatives in democracy and the relationship with the state, learning and education, health and healing, solidarity economies, food and agriculture, peace and conflict transformation.

Particularly relevant for all these was the powerful experience of the Kurdish freedom movement, particularly its revolutionary praxis in Rojava (within the Syrian nation-state) based on the unique ecofeminist ideology *jineoloji*, brought to the Assembly by members of the Jineoloji, the Civil Diplomacy Centre of North and East Syria, and Academy of Democratic Modernity. Activist-researchers who have worked with the Zapatista and other Indigenous Peoples in what is now called Mexico, also brought such flavours of autonomy and non-state governance to the

gathering. Overall, while the GTA idea and process were strongly endorsed, the grassroots and conceptual power of participating communities and organisations were much in evidence, bringing in many nuances and challenges. An impromptu Women's Assembly during an extended lunch break also reminded everyone of the need to break millennia-old patriarchal tendencies, and move beyond gender binaries.

Much is still to evolve in this process. There are few global processes to learn from. Valuable lessons could be from mistakes made by those on the conventional left in their attempts at creating 'progressive' international platforms. These include a tendency to centralise decision-making powers in the people who initiate the process, sometimes as an explicit part of the design, sometimes as a problem that comes creeping in without being checked. Or there is the difficult challenge of needing substantial resources (financial and others), but getting them from sources that are not themselves involved in destroying the earth, and managing them in ways that do not create ossified bureaucracies. And then there is the need for a huge amount of voluntary energy and capacities, balanced with those of at least a few people whose livelihood can be sustained in servicing such a process. Already the GTA core team is finding it difficult to sustain some initiatives such as Adelante and PeDAGoG. These and many more issues will challenge the GTA process over the next few years. The energy and ability to be frank yet in solidarity, demonstrated by the Assembly participants provides hope that it will be able to deal with them, evolving and morphing as it needs to.

One of the slogans resounding through the Assembly was *'jin, jiyan, azaadi'* (women, life, freedom), emerging from the Kurdish movement. This and many other such revolutionary slogans, chants, prayers, and concepts that were voiced by the participants in their own languages, must have stayed long in the hearts and minds of participants as they wound their ways back home. As we bid each other bye (and not 'goodbye'), many of us were moist-eyed, but also hopeful from the stories and aspirations we had shared, buoyed by the knowledge that we are not alone in the struggles for a just, beautiful world.

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Ashish Kothari

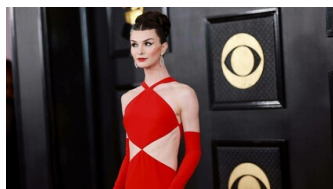
An environmentalist based in India, Ashish has helped found several national and global organisations and networks. Views expressed in this column do not necessarily represent the views of any of these.

[Author profile](#)



1. GTA participants at Assembly, day 4, Nanyuki, central Kenya 11.8.2023 @ Marco Andrade
2. Display of offerings, GTA Assembly, Aug 2023, Nanyuki, central Kenya @ Ashish Kothari
3. GTA participants at Assembly after ceremonial opening, Nanyuki, Kenya 8.8.2023 @ Marco Andrade
4. Elders Mathenge Iregi and Itonga blessing GTA Assembly, Nanyuki, central Kenya, 8.8.2023 @ Ashish Kothari
5. Invoking earth-cosmos blessings for GTA Assembly, Aug 2023, Nanyuki, central Kenya @ Ashish Kothari
6. Women's Assembly at the GTA Assembly, Aug 2023, Nanyuki, central Kenya @ Ashish Kothari

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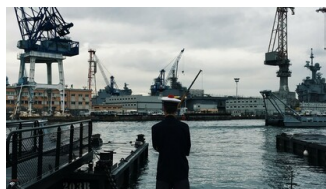
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