



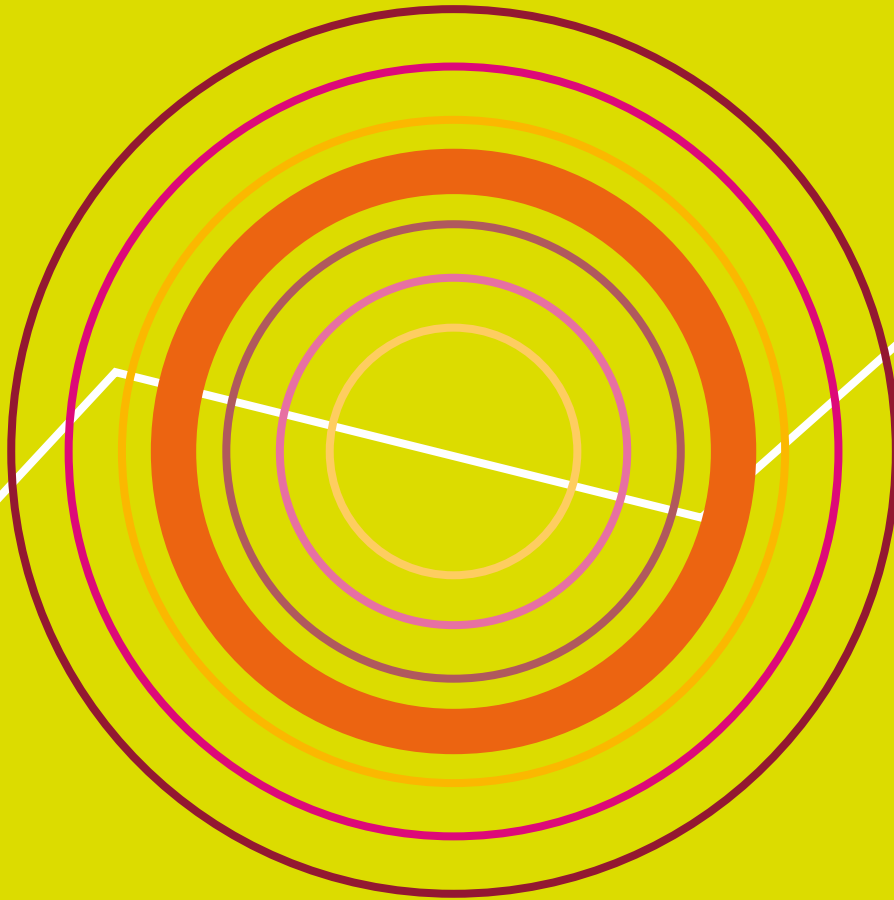
Beyond Growth? Alternative Models for Economic Development

AN EXPLORATIVE READER

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ECO-SWARAJ: THE FLOWER OF
TRANSFORMATION – LESSONS FROM
RADICAL ALTERNATIVES FOR LOCAL
TO GLOBAL COOPERATION

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Chapter 4

Eco-swaraj: The Flower of Transformation – Lessons from Radical Alternatives for Local to Global Cooperation

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As the world emerges from the unprecedented period of the COVID pandemic, we must ask ourselves: *what lessons can we learn from this crisis, as also from multiple other local-to-global crises we have been going through? What changes are needed in the way we organize our economy, our politics, our social and cultural systems, and in our relations with the planet that is our home? And what is the role of global cooperation in this?*

It is understandable that there is a deep, widespread of anxiety and pessimism in society, including today's youth. With daily news of war and conflict, ecological and climate catastrophe, stark inequalities, health crises related to both poverty and affluence, the authoritarianism of governments, and the stranglehold of banks and mega-corporations in all aspects of our lives, it is difficult to be hopeful of humanity's future. But there are powerful counter-trends, which we need to understand, take inspiration from, and help nurture and sustain. These include mass resistance to dominant structures and their manifestations, as also grounded radical alternatives that demonstrate the possibilities of a more just and sustainable world.

This essay first describes some of these counter-trends, assesses the lessons and describes a framework emerging from them, and then examines how these lessons have a bearing on the principles and practice of global cooperation.

COUNTER-TRENDS: RESISTANCE AND ALTERNATIVES

Across the world, there are thousands of movements of resistance to the dominant system of statism, capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and anthropocentrism. These are refusing the accepted orthodoxies of what this system is telling us about 'development', 'progress', and so on. Sometimes emerging from these, sometimes independent, there are also thousands of initiatives at meeting human needs and aspirations in ways that are ecologically sensitive and equitable. One can see these in several spheres of life: political, economic, social, cultural, technological, ecological. To give some examples:

Political transformations: The Kurdish Rojava and Zapatista autonomous regions in western Asia and Mexico, respectively, began as movements of resistance against the violent imposition of nation-state colonisation of their territories, and moved into the assertion of complete regional *autonomy from these nation-states*¹, through direct, radical *democracy or democratic*² confederalism for the communes and settlements that are encompassed in these regions. Indigenous peoples in many parts of Latin America, North America, and Australia have similarly struggled against colonisation and extractivism, and for self-determination, not necessarily as autonomous as the first two mentioned, but with most or all key decision-making vesting in them rather than in

the governments of the countries they are located in. In central India, beginning with the village Mendha-Lekha and moving on to a federation of nearly 90 neighbouring villages, the *Korchi Maha Gramsabha*⁹, there is resistance to mining or forest logging, and an assertion of 'swaraj' or self-rule. The 'freetown' *commune of Christiania*¹⁰ in Copenhagen city, Denmark, also claims self-governance, and many neighbourhood assemblies in many other cities in Europe stress that they should be at the core of any urban decision-making.

Some of these (famously, the Kurdish Rojava and Zapatista) engage minimally with (and explicitly reject as part of their core ideology) the nation-state. Others, however, do relate to the state to demand recognition, claim what is due to them from official welfare or rights-based schemes, safeguard against corporate or other abuses, and/or other such support which they feel is the duty of any government to provide (not as charity). As the Indian village of Mendha-Lekha said three decades back, "we elect the government in Mumbai and New Delhi, but in our village, we are the government".

Economic transformations: Encompassed in all the above initiatives is also the ability to claim governance and management rights over resources important for economic survival and security. This could be collective rights to land, forests, water, seeds, and biodiversity, as for instance in the food sovereignty movements of several million small-holders who are members of the global platform *La Via Campesina*⁵. Or it could be democratic control over industrial or craft-based means of production, such as worker-led production in Greece, Argentina and elsewhere. Then there is the network of social and solidarity economy initiatives in Europe and North America, or *community economies*⁶ across the world, showing how *non-capitalist businesses*⁷ can thrive as economic units while ensuring that marginalised sections like refugees or people with disabilities get dignified livelihoods in them. And there are movements to re-establishing *the commons*⁸ where physical spaces and knowledge

have been privatised.

But economic democracy is also about trying to get relative independence from centralised monetary systems, e.g. through alternative or *community currencies*⁹ and *time-banking*¹⁰. More than 6 million hours have been exchanged, without money, in *Timebanking UK which runs across the United Kingdom*¹¹. And it is about bringing back recognition to the enormous economic contribution of 'caring and sharing', often carried out by women and the elderly, which is invisibilised in conventional calculations of GDP, but crucial basis of any society. As argued in a recent book by Anitra Nelson, it is eminently possible to move *beyond money*¹² in these and other post-capitalist ways.

Movements for alternative economies are also challenging GDP and economic growth rates as indicators of development, and proposing a series of *well-being approaches*¹³ that could provide a much more robust, and locally relevant, idea of whether people are satisfied, happy, secure, and contented. Bhutan's Gross National Happiness model is well-known (with all its flaws, still a bold experiment at moving away from GDP) and more recently, New Zealand, Finland, Iceland, Wales and Scotland have formed a Wellbeing Economy Governments (WEGO) partnership to *build in more wellbeing indicators*¹⁴ in their planning.

Social transformations: Arguments for political and economic self-determination can also go horribly wrong, if they are driven by narrow, xenophobic considerations such as those pushed by extreme right-wing movements in Europe, or if they continue local relations of inequality based on gender, class, caste, race, ability and other marginalisations. So, as important as political and economic transformations, are struggles for social equality and equity, away from traditional or modern discriminations of various kinds, such as the movements for respecting the human rights of Dalits in India, feminist and LGBTQ+ struggles across the world, and the Black Lives Matter anti-racism movement in USA.

Cultural and knowledge transformations: As threatened as the earth's biological diversity, is its diversity of languages, with hundreds already lost or on the verge of extinction. Several indigenous peoples or other local communities are now trying to sustain their mother tongue, or revive it where it has all but disappeared. The group Terralingua helps document and support such initiatives across the world through its *Voices of the Earth project*¹⁵. In India the organisation Bhasha ('language', in Hindi), started by linguist Ganesh Devy, coordinated the People's Linguistic Survey of India, which described 780 languages¹⁶.

Decolonisation – the attempt to shake off the domination of colonial languages, cultures, cuisines, knowledge, cartography, and much else - is part of these initiatives. For instance, there are several initiatives at re-mapping or *decolonial mapmaking*¹⁷, to bring back depictions of the landscapes and of nations from the *point of view of Indigenous peoples*¹⁸ or other local communities whose mental and physical maps have been erased or drastically changed by colonial powers and nation-states. Similarly movements for asserting the importance and validity of traditional knowledge systems, in themselves or in partnership with modern ones, are making headway in many movements as also in some official governmental or UN institutions. In the case of the climate crisis, the *Indigenous People's Biocultural Climate Change Assessment Initiative*¹⁹ produced valuable analysis based on Indigenous knowledge. It is also increasingly recognised that the complementary use of multiple knowledges is necessary to understand what is taking place and to deal with it, such as for instance the collaboration between Indigenous peoples of the Arctic circle and modern scientific institutions in the project *Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna*²⁰.

Ecological transformations: Several movements for territorial self-determination or collective rights are also focused on, or leading to, the conservation and restoration of natural ecosystems, wildlife populations and biodiversity. The global network, ICCA Consortium, has brought

attention to the fact that such local stewardship of *Territories of Life*²¹ may be as or more powerful a mechanism for conservation as official protected areas, the westernised model of which has been very top-down, undemocratic, and alienating for local communities. In a broader sense, what such communities have enshrined for millennia – living life within nature rather than apart from it, and thinking of nature as a circle of life rather than as a pyramid with humans on top – is also sinking in to people in the industrialised parts of the world. In these, as a result, there are movements for *Rights of Nature*²², or of its components such as rivers, mountains, species. It is important however that this is seen only as a first step towards a more general respectful reintegration within nature, not remaining limited to formal statutory law.

THE FLOWER OF TRANSFORMATION

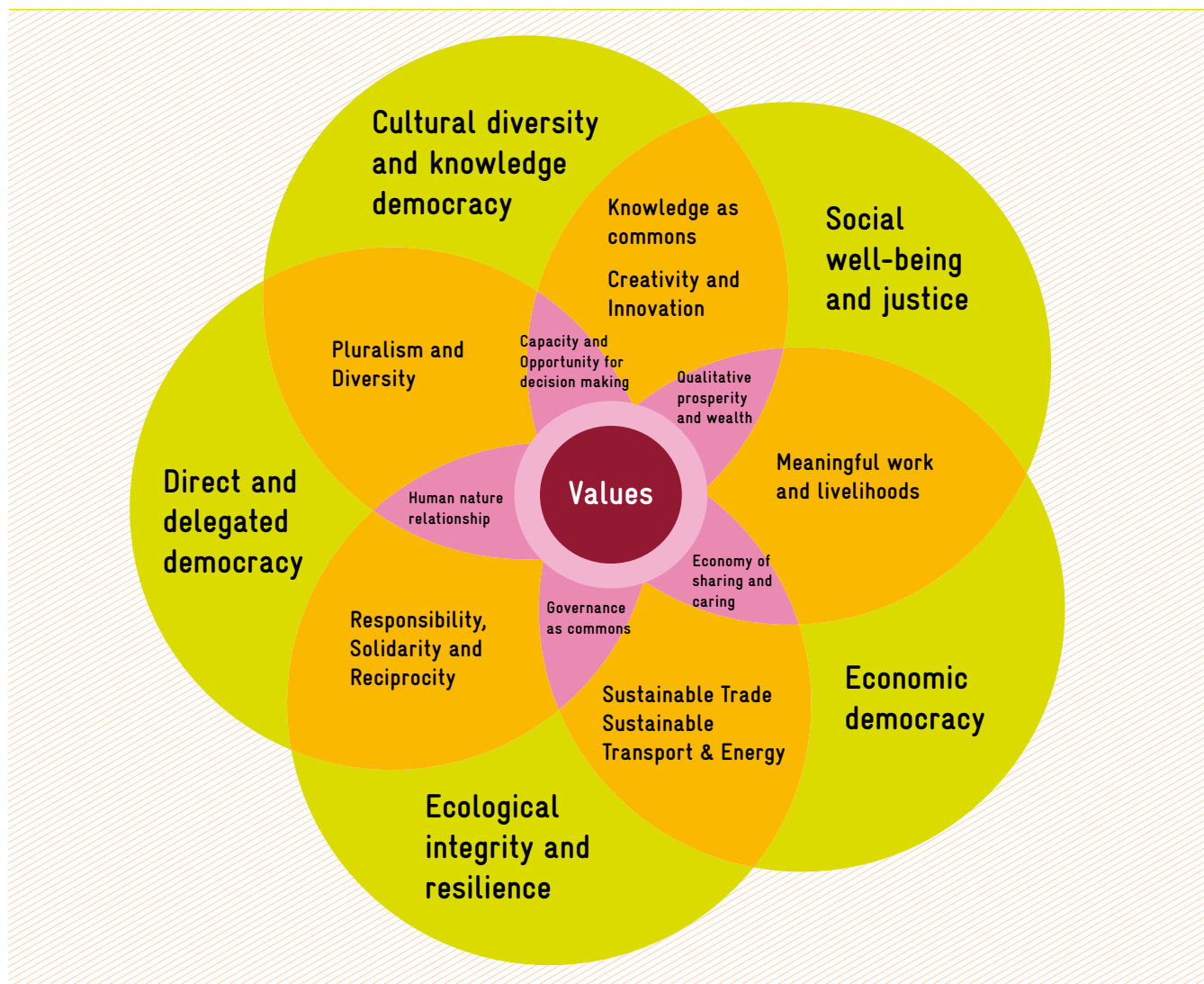
Based on an understanding of these and many other *initiatives for transformation in India*²³ and *other parts of the world*²⁴, we begin to get a sense of what holistic transformations are beginning to take place and what more needs to be done. One emerging *framework on radical alternatives*²⁵, proposes that alternatives are built on the following key spheres, interconnected and overlapping in a 'Flower of Transformation' (see Figure below):

- a. **Ecological integrity and resilience**, including the conservation of nature and natural diversity, maintenance of ecological functions, respect for ecological limits (local to global), and ecological ethics in all human actions.
- b. **Social well-being and justice**, including fulfilling lives (physically, socially, culturally, and spiritually), equity between communities and individuals, communal and ethnic harmony; and erasure of hierarchies and divisions based on faith, gender, caste, class, ethnicity, ability, and other such attributes.

- c. **Direct and delegated democracy**, with decision-making starting in spaces enabling every person to participate meaningfully, and building from this to larger levels of governance by downwardly accountable institutions; and all this respectful of the needs and rights of those currently marginalised.
- d. **Economic democracy**, in which local communities and individuals have control over the means of production, distribution, exchange, and markets, based on the principle of localization for basic needs and trade built on this; central to this would be the replacement of private property by the commons.

- e. **Cultural diversity and knowledge democracy**, with multiple co-existing knowledge systems in the commons, respect for a diversity of ways of living, ideas and ideologies, and encouragement for creativity and innovation.

FIGURE: THE FLOWER OF TRANSFORMATION



At the core of Flower is a set of ethical principles and values. These may be embedded in practice and worldview without being spelt out, or they may be explicitly spoken of and passed down generations through myth, folklore, songs, music, or teachings. These contrast with the principles underlying today's dominant economic and political systems. They include:

- › Respecting the *functional integrity and resilience of ecological processes and biological diversity*, enshrining the *right of nature* and all species to thrive in conditions in which they have evolved.
- › *Equitable and inclusive access* of all people, in current and future generations, to the conditions needed for human well-being
- › The *right of each person and community to participate* meaningfully in decision-making and the *responsibility* to ensure this is based on ecological integrity and socio-economic equity.
- › *Autonomy* and self-determination, individual to community, while ensuring that this does not undermine the autonomy of others.
- › *Self-reliance* for basic needs, material and non-material.
- › Respect for the *diversity* of environments and ecologies, species and genes, cultures, ways of living, knowledge systems, values, economies and livelihoods, and polities.
- › *Collective and cooperative thinking and working* founded on the *commons*, respecting individual freedoms and innovations within such collectivities.
- › Social and human *resilience* in the face of external and internal forces of change.
- › Mindfulness towards *interconnectedness* and *reciprocity* among humans, and between humans and the rest of nature.
- › *Simplicity and enoughness*, with *satisfaction* and *happiness* derived from the quality of relationships.
- › Respect for the *dignity and creativity of labour and work*, with no occupation or work being inherently superior to another, and the need for work to be dignified, safe, free from exploitation, and enjoyable as a *livelihood*.

- › A commitment to *non-violence, harmony, and peace*, amongst peoples, and between people and the rest of nature.
- › Enabling spaces of *creativity* and *joy* in all activities and processes of life.
- › Similar sets of values are embedded in *alternative worldviews*²⁶ of other peoples and regions across the world, though their interpretations and local manifestations may be different.

INTERSECTIONALITY

While the above framework 'divides' life into five spheres, in daily reality these are inextricably intertwined. This is so both for the problems and crises we face, and the transformations people are attempting. Discrimination and marginalisation, for instance, are intersectional, e.g. environmentally poor working and living conditions are most pronounced for those who are marginalised in race, caste or class terms, or inadequate access to nutritious food can build on other discriminations against women. And so the responses, the radical alternatives mentioned above, are also intersectional, deliberately so as part of their unintended consequences.

The Kurdish freedom movement, for instance, insists that the 'revolution is now', and that all aspects of transformation must be attempted simultaneously. At the core of their struggle is the liberation of women from patriarchy based on the philosophy of *jineoloji*²⁷, and various forms of economic democracy through cooperatives, ecological regeneration, and cultural assertion are intricately connected (though facing enormous challenges and frequent setbacks due to violent attacks by the nation-states they are colonised by, especially Turkey). At the Parque de la Papa in Peru, the Quechua Indigenous peoples have established political self-determination, control over crucial economic resources, and the *continued celebration and use*²⁸ of cultural and spiritual traditions while also learning elements of modernity, and custodianship of natural ecosystems and biodiversity. At Christiania in Copenhagen, local self-governance goes hand-

in-hand with holding most economic resources in the commons (no private property), running of many services by worker cooperatives, and constant collective cultural activity. The Dalit women farmers of *Deccan Development Society*²⁹ in southern India have challenged gender and caste discrimination while moving towards food sovereignty and sustaining a respectful, spiritual relationship with the earth and with seeds. Also in southern India, the *Dharani Farming and Marketing Cooperative*³⁰, set up by Timbaktu Collective, ensures fair remuneration to farmers who commit to organic production, combining the economic and ecological spheres.

An exciting new approach to intersectionality is bioregionalism (or biocultural regionalism). In many parts of the world, especially those colonised over the last few hundred years, political boundaries intersect and interrupt the flows of nature (e.g. a national boundary cutting a river basin), or cultural connections (e.g. fences and armies blocking traditional routes of nomadic pastoralists). In South Asia, for instance, the borders between India and its neighbouring countries have caused significant disruption, especially where fences and armies are placed along them. This kind of interruption or blockage has many negative ecological, economic and socio-cultural consequences. The bioregionalism movement questions such political boundaries, and attempts to re-imagine as also plan and implement policies and practices that can re-establish flows and connectivity across these boundaries. For instance the *Amazon Sacred Headwaters Initiative*³¹ involves Indigenous nations and civil society groups in an attempt to envision and plan for a large part of the Amazon that straddles the Ecuador-Peru border. A *South Asia Bioregionalism Working Group*³², initiated recently, has been conducting research on past bioregional approaches and discussing what the potential is in this part of the world. John Lennon's vision – “imagine, there's no country” – may seem very far off, but let's keep in mind that nation-state borders are also pretty recent in human history, and there is nothing sacrosanct about them.

ECO-SWARAJ AND OTHER WORLDVIEWS OF WELL-BEING

One of the many frameworks emerging from the transformations described above, in the context of India, is Eco-swaraj, or Radical Ecological Democracy (RED). This builds on the notion of swaraj, loosely translated as ‘self-rule’, which was popularised when used by Gandhi as part of India's freedom movement against British colonial rule. However, its meanings extend more widely and deeply to include individual freedom and autonomy, the freedom of the human species, rights and responsibilities, and independence with inter-connectedness. The term RED is an English equivalent, first used in my writings in 2008-09, and then as one of the *People's Sustainability Treaties*³³ that civil society organisations forged on the occasion of the Rio+20 conference in 2012.

Eco-swaraj or RED refers to socio-cultural, political and economic arrangements in which all people and communities have the right and opportunity to fully participate in decision-making, based on the twin fulcrums of ecological sustainability and human equity. Rights extend to all of life, beyond the human, and we recognise and act our role as stewards or custodians of the Earth, not its owners.

There are related worldviews across the world, that can be roughly termed as ‘well-being’, ‘post-development’ or ‘post-growth’ in that they do not posit development as the core aspirational model for peoples and countries, but rather insist on various forms of what it means for all of life including humans to be well, prosperous, abundant. These are embedded in or emerging from what some have called ‘nowtopias’, like the examples given above, and many more visible on the horizon, comprising a *Pluriverse*³⁴ of practices and worldviews.

VIKALP SANGAM, AND THE GLOBAL TAPESTRY OF ALTERNATIVES

An important question that often gets asked of those who promote alternatives is: how to achieve scale?

Most of the initiatives we speak of are either small or scattered, unable to make the changes necessary in macro-economic or political structures, and indeed continuously threatened by such structures. *How, I'm often asked, can we 'replicate' or 'upscale' alternatives?*

What is needed is neither replication, for a successful initiative in one context is not transferable in the same form to another, given the enormous diversity of ecological, economic, political and socio-cultural contexts); nor upscaling, since making a single initiative bigger and bigger, the corporate way of doing things, is likely to lead to hierarchy rigidity, and uniformity. The alternative approach is 'outscaling', i.e. learning the crucial lessons and principles of radical initiatives, applying these with necessary modifications in other situations, and then networking amongst these multiple initiatives to create larger and larger platforms.

One such modest effort in India, begun in 2013, is the Vikalp Sangam (VS) or 'Alternatives Confluences' process. This has provided *a national level platform*³⁵ for groups and individuals working on alternatives to the currently dominant model of development and governance, to come together. It has a *website with stories*³⁶ and perspectives from across India (with nearly 1800 such entries by mid-2022), regular media outreach, a mobile poster exhibition, various publications for outreach, nearly 100 videos on alternative initiatives, and other such outputs. Its most important activity, however, is the convening of regional and thematic Sangams (confluences) across India. By mid-2022, *about 25 Sangams*³⁷ have been organized in various parts of India bringing together initiatives taking place in particular regions or under themes such as food and agriculture, democracy, health, alternative economies, and energy. The Sangams and other VS activities create space for people to

exchange experiences and ideas emerging from their practices, to reflect on the larger meaning of these, to *collectively envision*³⁸ a transformed India, and to do joint advocacy for policy shifts.

Learning from this experience, and connecting to similar ones elsewhere, an international initiative with similar aims, *the Global Tapestry of Alternatives*³⁹, was started in 2019. This is a non-hierarchical, convivial platform for weaving: exchange, mutual learning, collaboration and collective visioning, to challenge the dominant. It stresses learning from Indigenous people and other local communities, along with radical counter-movements emerging within industrialised societies. The GTA process has been endorsed by over 50 global and regional networks and movements, and several dozen prominent individuals, spreading across all continents. It has setting up exchanges, dialogues, mutual learning and mapping to support on-ground action with several partners, building on the experience of networks like Vikalp Sangam in India, Crianza Mutua in Mexico and Colombia, and Movement for Alternatives and Sustainability in South-East Asia. It has also established a platform, *called Adelante*⁴⁰, to work with several other global processes that have similar overall objectives, though differing strategies and pathways.

Both these processes can also be seen as *acts of subversive democracy*⁴¹, in that they challenge the hegemonic past-present-future and envision a radically different process of how to interpret the past, recognise and sustain the 'nowtopias' already existing in the present, and envision the just world that can be our future – and all this without thinking of time and social evolution as linear.

LESSONS FROM COVID PANDEMIC

The 2020-22 period of global crises caused by the COVID pandemic and governmental responses to it, has enormous lessons for humanity. While it starkly exposed the vulnerability of hundreds of millions of people, it also showed what it takes for communities to be resilient to such crises. Examples from various regions of the world showed that communities whose basic needs were met within a short distance, whose collective systems of healthcare, food production, and localised economic exchanges were strong, and who had grounded forms of democracy and participation, fared much better. In India, the Vikalp Sangam network has put together several volumes of stories of *COVID-time resilience*⁴² of forest-dwelling communities, women farmer groups, youth collectives, urban neighbourhood initiatives, and others. The GTA has begun to do this more globally with *two volumes of similiar resilience*⁴³. These stories contain many lessons on how rural and urban communities can deal much better with shocks and crises than the globalised capitalist and statist system.

LESSONS FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

The well-being, post-growth or post-development approaches outlined above present a fundamental challenge also to formal agencies involved in international cooperation. The stated intentions of such cooperation are to help in the 'development' of countries and peoples who are 'poor' or deprived, aid in the 'empowerment' of the marginalised, and so on. *But if the project of development is itself flawed, not only in execution but in conception, where does this leave such agencies, mostly of the global north?*

Possibly the most crucial and urgent task for all those who look to aid processes towards justice, equity and sustainability, is to assess how much they are contributing to the maintenance of the dominant economic and political system, and conversely, how much they are enabling radically alternative approaches. This entails at least the following:

- › *A comprehensive, holistic assessment of the impacts of activities*, including how interventions in one sector can have impacts in other sectors, e.g. how so-called poverty alleviation or eradication programmes impact ecological sustainability, or how biodiversity conservation projects (like protected areas) impact human rights. One of the tools that has emerged from the Flower of Transformation approach, as part of a global project called Academic-Activist Co-generation of Knowledge on Environmental Justice (ACKnowl-EJ), is the *Alternatives Transformation Format*⁴⁴. Something like this, akin to a system's approach, can be used to assess the extent of holism, comprehensiveness, and internal coherence of transformations, and work out necessary interventions where lacking in these. To put it differently, the question to ask is: *is international cooperation leading to greater community strength to take on and sustain initiatives like the ones mentioned above, increasing self-reliance and resilience to deal with shocks and crises?*
- › Assessments to distinguish between *transformative and reformative* initiatives. This is not to say that reforms are not necessary, many are indeed important in the *transitional phase*. But it is important to assess if they are actually leading to fundamental transformations, or conversely, only strengthening status quo while giving it a 'green' face. For instance, recycling is important in the current phase given the amount of waste being produced, but unless it builds in or is inextricably connected to approaches that reduce the waste in the first place, and ask hard questions of corporate profit-making that leads to wasteful production, it will only be an excuse to continue wasteful consumerism. The ATF approach, mentioned above, could help in making the distinction between status quoist reforms, and transformatory ones (while acknowledging that sometimes there is a fuzzy dividing line between the two).
- › Assessment of how much support is given to *processes* rather than *projects*. Radical transformative is a complex, often messy process with lots of learning along the way, and rarely possible

to achieve in the 3-to-5 year project period that most agencies tend to limit their support to (acknowledging that some agencies do commit to multiple periods of such terms upfront). Partnering for longer term periods, and having the flexibility of mid-term changes that may be needed along the way, is crucial.

- › Assessment of the *global impacts of their own country's economies*. All industrialised countries and rich *within* the South have big global ecological and socio-cultural footprints, and corporations based in the North have global operations with serious and widespread impacts. Yet, agencies involved in international cooperation have rarely looked within to question how much of global ecological (including climate) space their own countries use up, squeezing the space that the global South has to achieve security of even basic needs.
- › As part of the above, agencies could also assess how their countries treat *their own 'global South'* (e.g. Indigenous peoples, or the homeless, within the North), in a similar way constraining their ecological space.
- › Assessments by agencies of *their own internal operations and structures* – this entails understanding how much they are 'walking the talk', including how hierarchical or horizontal, how iniquitous or equitable, how inclusive of diversity of various kinds, how ecologically sensitive, how much willing to learn from and be equal partners with the people they are 'helping', and what processes exist to help build local capacity to take over key functions rather than continue to station people from the North to direct operations in the South?

All of these need to be followed by fundamental changes in policy and practice. Not doing this will mean that neo-colonial, patronising and iniquitous forms of operating will continue in various degrees, undermining the credibility of agencies whose expressed objectives include justice, sustainability, and equity.

In many of the above, such a process would also entail the global North decolonising itself. Its past and continuing colonisation of the global South also embeds, in ways that most people do not even realise, a self-colonisation. In some ways, the dominant are as shackled as those they dominate, in that the full flowering of what it could mean to be human is denied to them too, as are the benefits of living lives much more in harmony with the earth. The increasing quest in the global North for spiritual and cultural transformations, is a sign of the unease caused by such self-colonisation. As the global North and South build relations of equity and mutual respect, decolonisation can become a pathway of freedom for all.

CONCLUSION

What I have outlined above in terms of approaches to radical transformation in economic, political and socio-cultural spheres of life, and the changes necessary in international cooperation policy and practice, are difficult ... very difficult. They will be continuously challenged by the currently dominant system, there are no ready blueprints for all that needs to be done, the process will be messy and complex, there will be many failures along the way, many people in the global South are themselves uncertain of or hostile to such transformations ... and meanwhile, ecological and other collapses are already taking place around us. But grounded 'nowtopias' or 'living utopias' are already showing the pathways and possibilities, and by taking their lead, helping nurture and spread and network them, and changing ourselves as activists or academics or international support organisations along the way, we have a fighting chance.

Endnoten

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