Global Tapestry of Alternatives:
Weaving Transformative Connections
Opening Essay for a GTI Forum

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The Challenge

Proactive responses to the multiple crises the world faces—ecological, socio-cultural, political, economic, spiritual—are widespread and diverse. They range from movements of resistance to the dominant ecologically destructive and socially inequitable model of "development" that has been imposed across the world, to people's initiatives at constructing or sustaining ways of life that meet human needs and aspirations without despoiling the earth and exacerbating inequalities. They are emerging from Indigenous Peoples and other rural communities, from urban neighborhoods, from both the Global South and Global North , from both marginalized sections and the privileged elite.[2]

However, countertrends to the destructive processes unleashed by neoliberal, growth-at-all-costs "development," authoritarian states, and continuing forms of patriarchy, racism, and colonialism have a mixed record. Yes, resistance movements have often won victories—stopping, delaying, or replacing oppressive regimes, or successfully defending Indigenous and community territories from extractive projects and processes. Anti-racist, feminist, peace, and decolonial movements have pushed back forces of oppression and violence in many instances. Yet many, perhaps most, such movements have fallen short of their goals, while destructive forces continue to dominate across the globe, taking the earth to the brink of survival, and subjecting many peoples and regions to war, violence, deprivation, and dispossession.

Time and time again, protest movements have placed a relatively low priority on developing strategies for systemic transformation towards structures and relations that do not replicate or approximate those being resisted. For instance, "revolutionary" parties have managed to defeat neoliberal opponents and gain control of the state in many countries. But lacking prefigurative

visions of holistic transformation grounded in practices emerging from communities, such ruling parties often revert to conventional macroeconomic and governance policies.

Many people's movements, on the other hand, are moving towards more radical, autonomous forms of governance and greater economic localization and self-reliance. In these groups, there is a resurgence of ways of life that center respect of nature (including humans), co-existence, and justice. Although such radical movements can emerge within ancient cultures or within industrial societies, all share core ethical values that put *life* (in its various forms) at the center of their practice.

Thousands of such movements and groups remain largely scattered, not yet a collective force broad and deep enough to shift the macro-picture. The most notable attempt to bring them together has been the World Social Forum, which has for two decades provided a platform for networking on action and vision. While its slogan of "Another World is Possible" pointed to a politics of hope, the WSF has remained largely a forum for amplifying critiques of the dominant neoliberal order, rather than for amplifying and consolidating constructive counter-initiatives. Seeing such a need, the Global Tapestry of Alternatives (GTA) was initiated in mid-2019 as a confluence of movements of radical transformation for collaboration, solidarity, and visioning from local to global levels.

The Opportunity

Many movements of radical transformation already exist worldwide, representing a pluriverse of worldviews and cosmologies, and exhibiting a bewildering range of practices. These include, to quote from GTA's introductory document, "sustainable and holistic agriculture, community led water/energy/food sovereignty, solidarity and sharing economies, worker control of production facilities, resource/knowledge commons, and inter-ethnic peace and harmony, to more holistic or rounded transformations such as those being attempted by the Zapatista in Chiapas and the Kurds in Rojava."[3]

These diverse initiatives form a veritable *pluriverse*—to paraphrase the Zapatista movement, "many worlds within a world"—in which we can discern key common threads. Such movements seek systemic, radical transformation (i.e., in the structures and relations of oppression, inequity, and unsustainability, including capitalism, statism, patriarchy, racism and anthropocentrism), not succumbing to the superficial and often counterproductive solutions of market measures and techno-fixes. It is in their shared resistance to mainstream forces and policies that these initiatives

can be called "alternatives" (though many in their own traditional contexts would be part of everyday life). These movements are based on a foundation of values and ethics, including solidarity, interconnectedness, cooperation, diversity and pluralism, autonomy, rights with responsibilities, mutual respect, equality, non-violence, and peace. The worldviews they embrace differ fundamentally from the cutthroat, competitive, selfish individualism promoted by industrial modernity and capitalism.

This pluriverse of movements and initiatives is effecting change across five spheres:[4]

- **Ecological integrity and resilience**, which includes conservation of nature and biodiversity, maintenance of ecological functions, respect for ecological limits (local to global) and the rights of nature, and ecological ethics in all human actions.

- **Social well-being and justice**, which entails facilitating the pursuit of 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.

- **Direct and delegated democracy**, which locates critical decision-making in spaces that enable every person to participate meaningfully, then builds toward larger levels of governance by downwardly accountable institutions, and reconceptualizes political boundaries to align with ecological and cultural flows ("biocultural regions").

- **Economic democracy**, which ensures that local communities and individuals have control over the means of production, distribution, exchange, and markets, based on the principle of localizing the provision of basic needs and nurturing the commons (as opposed to private property), and replaces GDP as an indicator of progress with meaningful measures of human and ecological well-being.

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

These spheres, of course, intersect with one another, and life is mostly lived in these intersections. Almost no initiative is achieving transformation in all spheres, but as a rough rule of thumb we can consider them an alternative if they are doing so in at least two, not seriously violating any of the other three, and considering actions in those as well.

Macro-transformation does not happen from individual initiatives acting alone: large shifts become possible when a critical mass of movements for radical resistance and constructive alternatives is able to coalesce through horizontal networks. It is not about the *replication* of successful initiatives (or simply copying from one to another, which different contexts make inappropriate), nor is it about *upscaling* (since making one initiative bigger and bigger tends to lead to bureaucracy, lack of nimbleness, and the weakening of original values), but rather about *outscaling*. In this mode, collectives and institutions learn from such initiatives, attempt transformation with modifications suited to their own contexts, and then network across geographic, cultural, and sectoral spaces to achieve scale. Such networks are grounded in place-and-interest-based collectives, with responsive and accountable larger-order institutions for coordination and amplification.

Such outscaling does not necessarily happen on its own, especially from the local to the global. Communities on the ground are often too caught up in their own struggles to find time or capacity for outscaling, and there are powerful cultural, geographic, and resource constraints with which they must contend. Larger-scale networking requires a special effort. This is where the vision of a Global Tapestry of Alternatives comes in.

Vision and Practice

The GTA was initiated in mid-2019, after several years of discussion and dialogue.[5] The proposal received an enthusiastic welcome at exploratory sessions held at international gatherings of regional and national networks. Involving several hundred people from various backgrounds and persuasions, these discussions contributed suggestions for improving the proposed process. Mindful of how some global processes can become exclusionary and alienated from the ground, participants asserted the importance of remaining rooted in and respectful of grassroots initiatives, and inclusive of community-level actors. This requires a process that operates in multiple languages and that starts from the local, builds to wider levels, and feeds back into the local. Participants also recognized that this endeavor would be enormously challenging, perhaps overly ambitious, and

that the process of achieving non-hierarchical and truly democratic functioning is an evolving struggle. Still, a consensus emerged that the sheer necessity of such a forum meant going forward despite huge risks.

GTA engages with alternative initiatives to support mutual learning and to strengthen hope and inspiration through dialogues among diverse worldviews, ontologies, and epistemologies. It also aims to build collaborations among these initiatives to expand their scope, increase their depth, and spread their impact. Other important objectives include providing support in times of need, e.g., when any of these initiatives is threatened by state, corporate, or other attack, as well as collaborative strategizing on actions to change the macro-situation and to spread and deepen initiatives. Through its activities, GTA can stimulate horizontal weaving of networks and platforms where they do not yet exist. Finally, it aims to generate collective envisioning of alternative futures, while respecting the plurality of alternatives across the world.

GTA has expanded through an ever-growing list of *endorsers* and *weavers*. Endorsers are mostly regional or global networks and groups who affirm a commitment to the values and mission of the GTA, and with whose strategic collaboration it could expand its work. Still more important, though, are our weavers, organizational hubs that bring together radical, grounded alternatives at national or regional levels. Four weavers are in place as of early 2023, with active dialogues underway with several more networks to become weavers.[6]

A GTA Assembly was established in 2020, consisting of the core team and representatives of weavers and endorsers. It has met online every three months and will meet face-to-face in August 2023. As GTA expands in terms of geographic scope and constituents, this Assembly will have to assume an increasingly crucial role in balancing the autonomy and uniqueness of each weaver and endorser with the need for some kind of central facilitation and coordination that does not become its own power center. Recognizing that a process like this can only be held together through regular collective activities and visible outputs, the core team, in conjunction with other constituents, has organized a series of activities. This includes webinars to elevate the voices of communities showing resilience on the ground amidst the global pandemic, a bimonthly periodical called *Weaving Alternatives*, and online dialogues amongst weavers to greater understanding of struggles in different cultural and geographic contexts.[7] It has also generated additional global networks.[8]

Through such efforts, GTA also tries to stimulate collective visioning of what a just world could look like and how we can get there. We have many questions to explore. What is the relationship between humans and the rest of nature where the latter also has agency? Within humanity, what is the relationship between current and future generations? How does one both challenge the political boundaries of nation-states that divide natural and cultural flows, indeed even challenge the state itself, while also dealing with the need to make current states accountable and responsive? What visions and strategies of change are most urgently needed and effective, from grassroots prefiguration to resistance? What is the relationship between grounded, local action where humans find meaning, and the global transformations necessary to push back and transform macro-economic and political forces? What could a global governance system look like that is responsive and accountable to communities and nature? How can local place-based identities (ethnic, cultural, national) relate to wider, even global identities (as humans, earth citizens, living beings)? How do real and perceived "trade-offs" get resolved, such as between urgent ecological concerns and the livelihoods of workers in "dirty" industries? While many of us in the GTA process have our own understandings and ideas about these and other crucial questions, we do not see ourselves as providing preconceived answers, but rather as offering a process in which the answers emerge collectively.

Such a local-to-global synthesis is obviously not easy, given the challenges of different ideologies, languages, cultures, and capacities. But if we get the *process* right, and spend time building trust and understanding, we have a fighting chance of emerging with something useful and potentially transformative. We are also clear that such a process must be built from within the Global South, with sensitive partnership of the Global North, reversing the kind of domination often seen even in alternative spaces.

The Future of GTA?

It is important that the GTA does not become institutionalized in ways that create bureaucratic, centralized structures of decision-making; it needs to remain an open-ended process, and an open platform, an identity that many can "own" and run with. While, at the start, there is a need for a core team to hold the process together and stimulate more connections and weaving, our hope is that eventually no central structure would be needed, that the weaving would happen in a distributed

way. This is a tall order in a world where humans have almost forgotten to live without centralized command and control, but it is by no means impossible.

We do not underestimate the enormous challenges a process like GTA faces. Not only are we up against the most powerful political and economic forces in history, but also against the very human frailties of territoriality, ego, and narrow-mindedness that inhibit collaboration. We must also work to encourage and sustain a sense of common purpose while respecting the plurality of GTA's constituents and affiliates. Our weavers are engaging in an ongoing dialogue to create a synthesis document on diagnosis and prognosis, common threads that can bind us together, differences we can mutually respect, and shared criteria to define radical alternatives. If collectively held through horizontal weaving, this can create a vision, not imposed from above as happens in a conventional party or organization, but which binds us together from below for coordinated global action.

We also realize that there is no end point in the movement towards a Great Transition; it will likely always be a work in progress as new issues come up, or old ones resurface. How can the process be nimble and reflective enough for such evolution to always take place, and to take place in a just manner? As it evolves, questions of power, democracy, production, exchange, consumption, individual-community relationships, and other such issues will also keep arising in search of resolutions that are relevant at least for the time. Its own internal dynamics, as it grows bigger and more complex, will require constant innovation and gentle facilitation. Can a platform like GTA, with other global platforms in collaborative spaces, help in reaching such resolutions through the processes mentioned above, especially the combination of visioning and practice, and the promotion of prefigurative and transfigurative politics? That is the hope, and the invitation.

Endnotes

1. With inputs from Christine Dann, Amy Lee, Franco Augusto, Ana Cecilia Dinerstein, Xochitl Leyva, Alex Jensen, and Carlos Tornel.

2. "Global North" includes privileged and powerful sections in the geographical South; conversely, "Global South" includes oppressed and marginalized peoples in the geographical North.

3. See https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/introduction. Scores of alternative worldviews and practices are reported in Ashish Kothari, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta, eds., *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary* (Delhi: Tulika Books, 2019); see, also, https://radicalecologicaldemocracy.org.

4. These spheres are drawn from the "Flower of Transformation" framework of the Vikalp Sangam (Alternatives Confluence) process in India; see https://vikalpsangam.org/about/the-search-for-alternatives-key-aspects-and-principles/.

5. This idea was first proposed at "Global Alternatives Confluence" in 2016 at the International Degrowth Conference in Budapest. Its inspirations were Vikalp Sangam (Alternatives Confluence) in India, the burgeoning degrowth and commons networks in Europe, platforms in the Americas such as Crianza Mutua, and strands of the World Social Forum focusing on transformation.

6. For a full list of weavers, see https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/weavers:index.

7. These can be found at https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org.

8. One, Adelante (https://adelante.global), is a platform of eight global networks and platforms including constituents of World Social Forum, Global Green New Deal, and Progressive International, to synergize their activities and create more cross-learning. Another, PeDAGoG (https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/pedagog), is a forum for academics and activists working at "higher" education levels to share courses, pedagogies, and approaches that are alternatives to mainstream education.

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