

Ökonomien und Gesellschaften im Wandel

Markus Hans-Peter Müller *Hrsg.*

Indien
im 21. Jahrhundert —
Auf dem Weg
zur postindustriellen
Ökonomie

India in the 21st Century —
On its way to a post-industrial economy



Springer Gabler

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Radical Well-Being Approaches for the Global South

18

Ashish Kothari

18.1 Eco-Swaraj- The Flower of Transformation¹

Across the world, overwhelming evidence of the ecological unsustainability and social injustice of the current path of development has led to a range of responses. A substantial part of governmental, corporate and civil society effort has been towards ‘greening’ the economy, elaborating and trying to adopt principles of ‘sustainable development’, ‘green economy’, or other such concepts and frameworks. The most ambitious of these has been the 2015 agreement amongst countries to adopt the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With evidence of the impacts of the climate crisis mounting, these responses have been added to more recent ones like ‘net-zero’, carbon trading, nature-based solutions, and technical fixes such as geoengineering.

However, several peoples’ movements and civil society organisations are also questioning these approaches, pointing out that they do not question the fundamental structures that cause inequality, unsustainability, and injustice in the first place: capitalism, statism, patriarchy, casteism, racism, anthropocentrism and other forms of unequal power distribution. If one needs to do this, one has to search for systemic, fundamental transformations. 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-

¹This essay uses and builds on material used in previous articles by the author.

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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 in 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.

What follows is an attempt to look at this in two ways, first a somewhat conventional way of setting planning goals for a country like India, and then, a more radical way of restructuring the local-to-global system itself.

18.2 Well-Being Goals for the Global South

Like most countries, India periodically goes through an exercise of setting itself time-bound targets, with a planning cycle of five years. Taking the SDG framework as a template, we could consider the following as a set of alternative goals for a country like India, extendable to the global South²:

1. **Safeguarding the natural basis of life:** *The integrity of natural ecosystems, wildlife populations, and biodiversity, must be safeguarded, by reducing and eventually eliminating biodiversity loss, and regenerating degraded ecosystems and populations. This would include recognising the rights of nature and non-human species; expanding the coverage of areas specially dedicated to (or assisting to) achieve biodiversity conservation through community-led and democratic means; integrating conservation principles and practices in land/water use activities across the board, in both rural and urban areas; sustaining or re-establishing ecological flows such as of rivers and migrating wildlife; and phasing out the use of chemicals in agriculture, industry, and settlements, that lead to irreversible ecological degradation and the poisoning of wildlife.*
2. **Ensuring basic needs for all:** *All people must have access to safe and adequate resources to fulfil basic needs, in ways that are ecologically sustainable and culturally appropriate. This includes safe and adequate drinking water and food to all, largely through decentralised harvesting and distribution systems; focusing primarily on agro-*

²These goals and related actions, indicators, and tools for assessment are laid out in more detail in Kothari, A., 2013, Development and Ecological Sustainability in India: Possibilities for a Post-2015 Framework, Oxfam India, New Delhi (<http://www.oxfamindia.org/sites/default/files/Working%20paper%2016%20-%20Dr.%20Ashish%20Kothari.pdf>).

ecologically sound practices and localized value chain systems including procurement for the Public Distribution System³; unpolluted air and safe sound levels for all; safe, adequate and sustainable shelter/housing to all, facilitating community-led, locally appropriate methods; energy security for all, optimizing existing production sources and distribution channels, regulating demand (especially luxury demand), and focusing most new production on decentralised, renewable sources; and adequate sanitation facilities to all families and communities.

3. **Ensuring universal employment and livelihoods:** *All families and communities must have access to dignified livelihoods that are ecologically sustainable and culturally appropriate.* This includes encouraging natural resource based livelihoods (forest-based, fisheries, pastoralism, agriculture, crafts, and small-scale quarrying) that are already ecologically sustainable; replacing unsustainable, unsafe and undignified livelihoods in all sectors by dignified, ‘green’ jobs (which according to ILO would yield more employment than conventional sectors); and investing heavily in livelihoods relating to ecological regeneration and restoration.
4. **Ensuring sustainable production and consumption:** *All production and consumption must be ecologically sustainable and socio-economically equitable, using a mix of incentives and disincentives.* This means converting and replacing unsustainable agricultural, fisheries, mining, industrial, and other production processes with sustainable practices; ensuring extended producer responsibility for sustainability at all stages from raw materials to disposal/recycling/reuse, through incentives and legislation; curbing unsustainable consumption including advertising that encourages such consumption (perhaps creating an “Above Consumption Line” measure as counterpoint to “Below Poverty Line” measure (Kothari, 2013)); encouraging innovations in, and making mandatory the use of, technologies of sustainability including those that reduce resource-intensity of products and processes, and discouraging (eventually eliminating) those that are inherently unsustainable and inequitable; achieving the overarching target of a zero-waste society.
5. **Ensuring sustainable infrastructure:** *All infrastructure development must be ecologically sustainable and socio-economically equitable.* This entails integrating practices of sustainability into existing infrastructure, replacing unsustainable practices with sustainable ones (e.g. focus on public instead of private transportation); and ensuring all new infrastructure is built on principles of ecological sustainability.

Both the above goals would require much stronger environmental and social governance steps that include independent, participatory impact assessments (for not only individual projects but also entire sectors). A crucial step could be creating institutions of independent oversight on environmental matters, such as an office of an Environ-

³The Public Distribution System is a government programme in India that has been crucial in reaching subsidized food and fuel to several hundred million people who are unable to buy these in the open market as well as other food schemes for the poor.

ment (or ‘Sustainable Well-Being’) Commissioner who has a Constitutional status similar to Chief Election Commissioner (Kothari, 2006).⁴

6. **Ensuring sustainability in services and welfare:** *All service and welfare sectors must integrate principles and practices of ecological sustainability.* Health services should focus on preventing ill-health due to environmental degradation (e.g. unsafe or inadequate food and water), and on curative practices that are ecologically sound (including nature-based solutions). Local and wider ecological, cultural, and knowledge systems need to be integrated into education policies and practices, ensuring that ecological sensitivity and practice becomes a part of every subject. Tourism and visitation need to be converted to practices that are ecologically sustainable, culturally appropriate, and local community driven.

While the above may seem possible within the current political and economic framework of a country, in actuality they can only be fully achieved with a significant reconfiguration. Fundamental changes will be needed in macro-economic policy, political governance, and socio-cultural relations if the objectives of sustainable and equitable well-being are to be achieved. This is the focus of the next section.

18.3 Radical Ecological Democracy or Eco-Swaraj: Framework and Contours

Why do we want ‘development’, ‘growth’, or ‘progress’? These clearly are not intended as ends in themselves (though official pronouncements often appear to make them so!), but as means towards human well-being. But if well-being is about having secure ways of meeting basic needs, being healthy, having access to opportunities for learning, being employed in satisfactory and meaningful tasks, having good social relations, and leading culturally and spiritually fulfilling lives, economic growth *per se* does not achieve these. And there is no reason that they have to be achieved through ecological devastation, or that only some people should get to enjoy them. Human well-being can be achieved without endangering the earth and ourselves, and without half or more of humanity remaining (or becoming further) impoverished, through a diversity of alternative pathways and frameworks.

Beginning 2013, the Vikalp Sangam (‘Alternatives Confluences’) process has provided a platform for networking of groups and individuals working on alternatives to the currently dominant model of development and governance, in various spheres of life (Daga, 2014; Kothari, 2015; Thakaekara, 2015). Its major activity is the convening of regional

⁴Many countries have similar constitutional authorities who have relative autonomy in functioning so they can monitor the government also.

and thematic Confluences across India⁵; additional activities are a website with stories and perspectives from across India (www.vikalpsangam.org or www.alternativesindia.org), a mobile poster exhibition (Kalpavriksh, 2015), and films on alternative initiatives.

The Sangams are a space for people to exchange experiences and ideas emerging from practice and thinking in a whole range of endeavour: sustainable agriculture and pastoralism, renewable energy, decentralised governance, community health, craft and art revival, multiple sexualities, inclusion of the differently abled, alternative learning and education, community-based conservation, decentralised water management, urban sustainability, gender and caste equality, and more. People practicing and conceiving some of the most amazing initiatives in the country have been able to get together and share them. This has also spawned a global process with similar aims and activities, the Global Tapestry of Alternatives, which I will come back to later.

The Vikalp Sangam process also involves visioning, through an evolving note that has been discussed and continuously changed over many Sangams.⁶ This framework identifies the main spheres of transformation, and the core values that such transformation embed (see next section). Around the world, both ancient and modern worldviews that are focused on life articulate similar ideals. Indigenous peoples and other local communities have lived by worldviews such as *buen vivir*, *swaraj*, *ubuntu* (all philosophies that see the well-being of all living beings as interconnected) and many other such ethical systems for centuries and are reasserting these (Kothari et al., 2019a). Simultaneously, concepts like degrowth and ecofeminism are emerging from within industrial societies, seeding powerful counter-cultures.

At the heart of these worldviews lies a simple principle: that we are all holders of power--and that in the exercise of this power, we assert not only our own autonomy and freedom, but are also responsible to the autonomy of others, human and non-human. Ecological sustainability and justice of all kinds merge in this framework of well-being called Radical Ecological Democracy (RED) or *eco-swaraj*⁷: **a socio-cultural, political and economic arrangement in which all people and communities have the right and full opportunity to participate in decision-making, based on the twin fulcrums of ecological sustainability and human equity** (Kothari, 2014). Here, **ecological sustainability** is the continuing integrity of the ecosystems and ecological functions on which all life depends, including the maintenance of biological diversity as the fulcrum of life; **human equity**, is a mix of equality of opportunity, access to decision-making forums for all, equity in the

⁵As of late 2022, over 25 Sangams have been organized in various parts of India; several bring together initiatives for a particular region, and several others are thematic (such as on Food and Agriculture, Democracy, Health, Alternative Economies, Energy, Well-being, Youth, Worldviews).

⁶See <https://vikalpsangam.org/wp-content/uploads/migrate/Resources/alternativesframeworkbook-letrevisedfinal1512.pdf>.

⁷*Swaraj* is loosely translated as 'self-rule'. It became popular when used by Gandhi as part of India's freedom movement against British colonial rule, but has much deeper and wider meaning, ranging from individual freedom and autonomy to the freedom of the human species, combining rights and responsibilities, independence with inter-connectedness.

distribution and enjoyment of the benefits of human endeavour, dignified livelihoods, and cultural security.

RED is at once a political, economic, ecological, socio-cultural, and ethical paradigm, or set of paradigms. I present below the key elements of the framework, not only because of their relevance for transformation in India but also because they are finding resonance in and influencing more global processes.

18.4 The Flower of Transformation

Eco-swaraj processes ask a basic question, which also runs like a thread through the Vikalp Sangam process and its framework: what constitutes a systemic or transformational alternative? The Framework states that “alternatives can be practical activities, policies, processes, technologies, and concepts/frameworks. They can be practiced or proposed/propagated by communities, government, civil society organisations, individuals, and social enterprises, amongst others. They can simply be continuations from the past, re-asserted in or modified for current times, or new ones; it is important to note that the term does not imply these are always ‘marginal’ or new, but that they are in contrast to the mainstream or dominant system.”⁸

Based on an understanding of these and many other initiatives for transformation in India and other parts of the world, 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, proposes that alternatives are built on the following key spheres, interconnected and overlapping in a “Flower of Transformation” (see Fig. 18.1):

- 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.

⁸Unless otherwise cited, all further quotes are from the Vikalp Sangam Framework note.

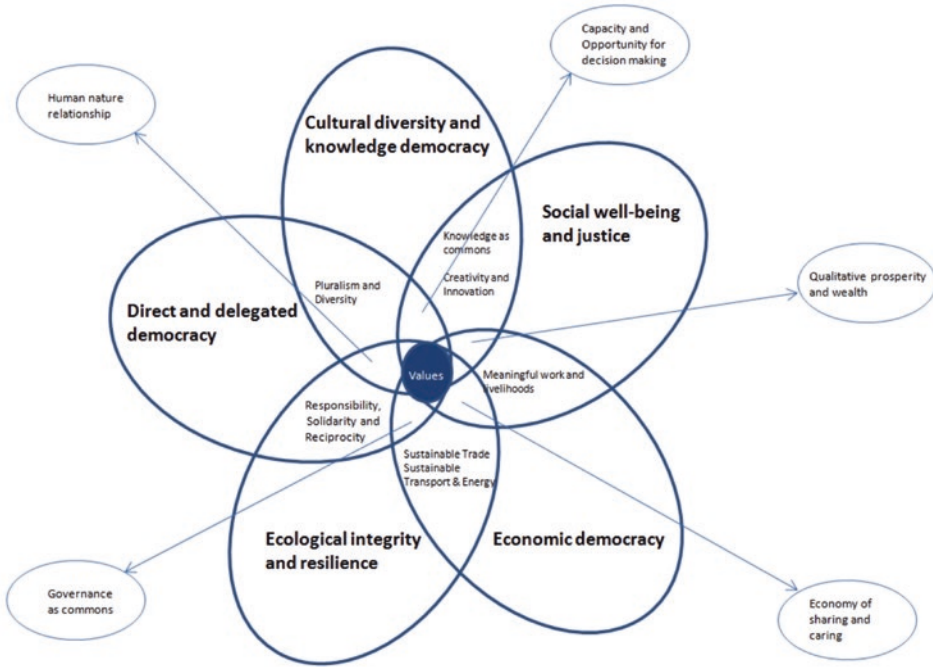


Fig. 18.1 Flower of transformation

- 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.

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 (Kothari et al., 2019a) of other peoples and regions across the world, though their interpretations and local manifestations may be different.

18.5 Counter-Trends: Resistance and Alternatives⁹

These principles point to the need for fundamental transformations in five interconnected realms. In the economic sphere, we need to get away from development paradigm--including the notion that economic growth, as measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP), is the best means of achieving human goals. In its place, we need systems for respecting ecological limits, emphasizing human well-being in all its dimensions and localizing exchanges to enable self-reliance--as well as measures of these indicators (Stiglitz, 2020). Bhutan has long experimented with Gross National Happiness as an index¹⁰; the idea has spawned variants, such as New Zealand's recent focus on mental health and other such measures of progress; all such approaches are still partial

⁹This section is adapted from broad guidance used by the website www.vikalpsangam.org, with additional guidance from the Alternatives Transformation Format (<https://kalpavriksh.org/publication/alternative-transformation-format/>), and material from the Radical Ecological Democracy and Global Tapestry of Alternatives websites (<https://radicalecologicaldemocracy.org> and <https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org>).

¹⁰For further information on the Gross National Happiness Index of Bhutan refer to the website <http://www.gnhcentrebhutan.org/what-is-gnh/>.

and have conceptual and implementational flaws, but they point to very different possibilities than GDP.

Also needed is relative freedom from centralized monetary and financial control. Many experiments in alternative or complementary currencies and community economies based on trust and local exchange are underway.¹¹ Perhaps the most innovative of these is “time-banking,” a system for swapping services – giving an one-hour-long yoga lesson for credit that can be redeemed for an hour’s work on bicycle repair, for example. The underlying principle is that every skill or occupation merits equal respect.

In many parts of the world, workers are seeking to control the means of production: land, nature, knowledge and tools. 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*.¹² Or it could be democratic control over industrial or craft-based means of production, such as worker-led production in Greece, Argentina and elsewhere. A few years back, I visited *Vi.Ome*, a detergent factory in Thesolinniki, Greece, which workers had taken over, converted from chemical to olive-oil based and ecofriendly production and established complete parity in pay, regardless of what job the worker was doing. The slogan on their wall proclaimed: “We have no boss!”

In fact, work itself is being redefined. Globalized modernity has created a chasm between work and leisure--which is why we wait desperately for the weekend! Many movements seek to bridge this gap, enabling greater enjoyment, creativity and satisfaction. In industrialized countries, people are bringing back manual ways of making clothes, footwear or processed foods under banners like “the future is handmade!” In western India, many youths are leaving soul-killing “deadlihoods” in factories to return to handloom weaving, which allows them to control their schedules while providing a creative outlet (Kothari et al., 2019b).

But economic democracy is also about trying to get relative independence from centralised monetary systems, e.g. through alternative or community currencies and time-banking. More than 6 million hours have been exchanged, without money, in Timebanking UK which runs across the United Kingdom.¹³ And it is about bringing back recognition to the enormous economic contribution of women and the elderly which are invisibilised in conventional calculations of GDP, but are crucial as the ‘caring and sharing’ basis of any society. As argued in a recent book by Anitra Nelson, it is eminently possible to move beyond money in these and other post-capitalist ways.

In the political sphere, the dominant paradigms must be interrogated. The centralization of power inherent in the nation-state, whether democratic or authoritarian, disempowers many peoples. The state – in so far as it continues to exist – would then mainly help with

¹¹ These experiments are outlined on the websites <https://ijccr.net/> and <http://www.communityeconomies.org/>.

¹² Further information can be found on the website <https://viacampesina.org/en/>.

¹³ Further information can be found on the website <https://timebanking.org/>.

larger-scale coordination, while being strictly accountable to decision-making units on the ground. The ancient Indian notion of *swaraj*, literally translated as self-rule, is particularly relevant here. It stresses individual and collective autonomy and freedom that is linked to responsibility for others' autonomy and freedom. A community that practices *swaraj* may not dam a stream, for example, if that threatens the water supply of downstream villages; its well-being cannot compromise that of others.

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 (Zibechi, 2012), through direct, radical democracy or democratic 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, there is resistance to mining or forest logging, and an assertion of 'swaraj' or self-rule with slogans like 'we elect the government in Mumbai and Delhi, but in our village we are the government'.¹⁴ The 'freetown' commune of Christiania 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.

Such a notion of democracy also challenges the boundaries of nation-states, many of which are products of colonial history and have ruptured ecologically and culturally contiguous areas. The Kurdish people, for instance, are split among Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. For three decades, they have struggled to achieve autonomy and direct democracy based on principles of ecological sustainability and women's liberation¹⁵ – and without borders dividing them.

Moving toward such radical democracy would suggest a world with far fewer borders, weaving tens of thousands of relatively autonomous and self-reliant communities into a tapestry of alternatives. These societies would connect with one another through "horizontal" networks of equitable and respectful exchange and also through "vertical" but downwardly accountable institutions that manage processes and activities across the landscape.

Several experiments in bioregionalism at large scales are underway, although many remain somewhat top-down in their modes of governance. A cooperative project amongst six countries spanning the Andes aims to conserve the Qhapaq Nan, a 30,000-kilometer

¹⁴ See articles and videos at: <https://vikalpsangam.org/article/reimagining-wellbeing-villages-opening-spaces-for-self-governance/>.

¹⁵ Principles are outlined in "Revolution in Rojava Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan" by Michael Knapp, Anja Flach and Ercan Ayboga. See also: <https://jineoloji.org> and <https://democraticmodernity.com>.

network of roads built by the Inca empire, along with its related cultural, historical and environmental features as a World Heritage Site.¹⁶ Indigenous nations of the Amazon are putting forward a bioregional plan that brings together 30 million hectares of the Peruvian and Ecuadorian rainforest; and a working group in South Asia¹⁷ is beginning to re-imagine the subcontinent beyond its nation-state boundaries (Bajpai, 2022).

Local self-governance may, of course, be oppressive or exclusionary. The intensely patriarchal and casteist traditional village councils in many parts of India and the xenophobic anti-refugee approaches of the right-wing in Europe illustrate this drawback.

A third crucial sphere of transformation is therefore **social justice**, encompassing struggles against racism, casteism, patriarchy and other traditional or modern forms of discrimination and exploitation. Fortunately, success in defying the dominant economic system often goes hand in hand with victories against discrimination – such as Dalit women farmers’ of Deccan Development Society in southern India shaking off centuries of caste and patriarchal oppression to achieve food sovereignty. Other movements for respecting the human rights of Dalits in India, or those of feminist and LGBTQ+ struggles across the world, and the Black Lives Matter anti-racism movement in USA, are examples of the crucial role of struggles for social justice.

Political autonomy and economic self-reliance need not mean isolationism and xenophobia. Rather, cultural and material exchanges that maintain local self-reliance and respect ecological sustainability would replace present-day globalization – which perversely allows goods and finances to flow freely but stops desperate humans at borders. This kind of localization would be open to peoples in need; refugees from climate change or war would not be turned away. Both grounded practice and shifts in policy could help transit towards such system. Also necessary, of course, are attempts to rebuild societies in regions of strife so that people do not have to flee from them.

Radical change also necessitates transformations in a fourth sphere: that of **culture and knowledge**. Several movements are confronting the homogenizing tendency of globalization, which devalues and eradicates languages, cultures and knowledge systems that do not adapt to the development imperative.

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 such as the Sapa nation in Ecuador 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.¹⁸ In India the organisation Bhasha (‘language’, in Hindi), started by linguist Ganesh Devy, coordinated the People’s Linguistic Survey of India, which described 780 languages.

Decolonisation – the attempt to shake off the domination of colonial languages, cultures, cuisines, knowledge, cartography, and much else – is part of these initiatives. For

¹⁶ Further information can be found on the website <https://whc.unesco.org/en/ghapaqnan/>.

¹⁷ See <https://vikalpsangam.org/south-asia-bioregionalism-working-group/>.

¹⁸ The project is described on the website <https://terralingua.org/our-projects/voices-of-the-earth/>.

instance, many communities are “decolonising” maps,¹⁹ putting back their own place names and defying political borders., to bring back depictions of the landscapes and of nations from the point of view of Indigenous peoples or other local communities whose mental and physical maps have been erased or drastically changed by colonial powers and nation-states. And increasingly, indigenous and modern sciences are collaborating to help solve humankind’s most vexing problems. The Arctic Biodiversity Assessment,²⁰ for example, involves cooperation among indigenous peoples and university scientists to address climate change.

One problem is that present-day educational institutions churn out graduates who are equipped to serve and perpetuate the dominant economic system. Around the world, however, there are several initiatives of people bringing community and nature back into spaces of learning. These efforts include Forest Schools in many parts of Europe that provide children with hands-on learning in the midst of nature, the Zapatista autonomous schools that teach about diverse cultures and struggles, and the Ecovercity Alliance of centers of higher learning that enable scholars to seek knowledge across the boundaries that normally separate academic disciplines. Even the colonial-era Mercator projection used to generate the usual world map is being upended: it was only recently, for example, that I realized that Africa is large enough to contain Europe, China, the U.S. and India put together.

The most important sphere of transformation, however, is the **ecological** – recognizing that we are part of nature and that other species are worthy of respect in their own right. Across the Global South, communities are leading efforts to regenerate degraded ecosystems and wildlife populations and conserve biodiversity. The global network, ICCA Consortium, has brought attention to the fact that such local stewardship of ‘Territories of Life’ 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. (ICCA Consortium, 2021). The tens of thousands of such initiatives, together covering possibly more than the government-declared protected area spread, include locally managed marine areas in the south Pacific, indigenous territories in Latin America and Australia, community forests in South Asia and Ancestral Domain territories in the Philippines, many of them now becoming officially recognised.

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,²¹ or of its components such as rivers, mountains, species. The United Nation’s 2009 Declaration on Harmony with Nature is an important milestone towards such a goal. It is important how-

¹⁹ Referring to the website <https://decolonialatlas.wordpress.com/>.

²⁰ For further information, see <https://arcticbiodiversity.is/>.

²¹ See <https://www.garn.org/>.

ever that this is seen only as a first step towards a more general respectful reintegration within nature, not remaining limited to formal statutory law.

18.6 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. This includes, as an exciting new approach bioregionalism (or biocultural regionalism), mentioned above. 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.

18.7 Closing Remarks

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, especially in the context of extreme inequalities of wealth and power prevalent in the world today, 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 of forest-dwelling communities, women farmer groups, youth collectives, urban neighbourhood initiatives, and others.²² More globally, the Global Tapestry of Alternatives has put together about 20 from various countries.²³

The slap in our face that the coronavirus has delivered might be our best chance yet. This unprecedented interregnum provides an opportunity for humankind to choose. Will we head right back toward some semblance of the old normal, or adopt radical pathways out of global ecological and social crises? To maximize the chances of the latter, we need to go well beyond the Green New Deal approaches in the U.S., Europe, South Korea and elsewhere. Although very welcome for their intense focus on the climate crisis and transi-

²² See <https://vikalpsangam.org/extraordinary-work-of-ordinary-people-a-series/>.

²³ See <https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/reports/pandemic:index>.

tions that are just to workers, they fail to challenge unsustainable consumption patterns in the Global North, ignore the glaring inequities between the Global North and the Global South and continue to rely on centralized nation-states (Kolinjivadi & Kothari, 2020).

Truly life-sustaining recoveries would instead emphasize all the spheres of Eco-swaraj, a veritable Rainbow New Deal, arrived at via three pathways (Kothari, 2020). One is the revival of dignified, secure and self-reliant livelihoods for a billion people based on collective governance of natural resources and small-scale production processes like farming, forestry, fisheries, pastoralism, crafts, manufacturing, services and others. Another is a program for regeneration and conservation of ecosystems, led by indigenous peoples and local communities. A third is immediate public investments in health, education, transportation, housing, energy and other basic needs, planned and delivered by local democratic governance. These approaches would integrate sustainability, equality, and diversity, providing a voice for all, especially the most marginalized.

None of this will be easy. But if we want to make peace with Earth and amongst ourselves, we do not really have the option of continuing business as usual. However hard, and however long it takes, Eco-swaraj in all its different forms can and must be forged.

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