

# Deadlihoods to livelihoods

Can we make the transformation towards meaningful work?

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Lonwabo Dlamini, Xolobeni region (South Africa), staying back to practice agro-ecology & ecotourism @ Ashish Kothari

In late September this year, I visited the Amadiba people of Mpondoland in the eastern Cape area of South Africa. This is the site of a two-decade old resistance movement by the local communities against various kinds of ‘development’ projects imposed from outside: mining titanium, seismic exploration for oil and gas in the oceans, a so-called ‘smart city’, and a highway that will go through community territory. All of this threatens what is one of the country’s most important biodiversity hotspots. In their articulations against these, local people mobilized under the banner [Amadiba Crisis Committee](#) (ACC), asserting that they are not poor as they are labeled, that they have productive land and oceans, and sophisticated knowledge through which they carry out sustainable livelihoods. What the state proposes as ‘development’ will only destroy their economy and ecosystems, and their spiritual and cultural links to the land and the ocean. At best, a few of them will get jobs as labourers, replacing their current lives of dignity and self-determination.

What the Amadiba people are articulating is what I would call a preference for *livelihoods* over *deadlihoods*. In 2020, in the midst of the COVID pandemic, I had written about the difference between the two and how the crisis the whole world was engulfed in, was also an [opportunity to forge](#) more just, equitable, sustainable pathways. I had explained the terms in this way: *livelihoods* as “ways of life, with no sharp division between ‘work’ and ‘leisure’, which intricately connected the economic with the social, cultural, and psychological” and were mostly tied to land, place, and nature. And *deadlihoods* as ‘jobs’ that were for the most part uncreative, in mass assembly lines, with workers subject to the mercy of some corporate or government boss.

As I noted: “Well before COVID hit us (brought about, as everyone now knows, by our own ecological stupidity), globalized economic development and modernity was already decimating millennia-old livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people occupied in farming, fisheries, pastoralism, forestry, crafts, and small-scale manufacture. And in their place, it was offering ‘jobs’, for the most part in mass assembly lines, with little chance of ‘labourers’ being able to express their own creativity or actually enjoy their work.”

Modern development has certainly created jobs, but the vast majority of these are mechanical, soul-deadening, alienating, and boring—engendering the neat division between 9-to-5-Monday-to-Friday when we ‘work’, and evenings and weekends and vacations, which are for ‘leisure’. In the traditional sectors too, relatively self-employed work has been replaced by wage labour, subject to the whims and fancies of new corporate or state owners of land, forests, and natural ‘resources’. For workers living on the edge, there is no escape. For those who can afford it because they are relatively better paid (as in the IT sector), they try to escape temporarily by vacationing, or getting hooked to endless video streaming as a form of ‘screen junkie’.

Across this spectrum, workers are subject to the alienation that Marx astutely pointed to as an inevitable consequence of capitalist exploitation, resulting in dehumanization. I would call this a mass transformation into deadlihoods, or what the brilliant late anthropologist-activist David Graeber called ‘bullshit jobs’ (I wish I’d known him when alive; I would have playfully taken him up for insulting bullshit, which is for organic farmers a crucial resource!). Capitalist modernity has also created a new category of those with uncertain jobs, [called the precariat](#).

With several hundred million people [losing their livelihoods](#) or jobs during COVID, there was an opportunity to re-assess the nature of work and re-evaluate what we mean by jobs. We could have moved towards re-establishing livelihoods that are resilient to shocks, and ensuring security of basic needs such as food and health. Indeed, in several places, communities which witnessed the return of their members from industrial or urban work, did try to create such opportunities, as documented in some of the stories we put together as [Extraordinary Work of 'Ordinary' People](#). Across the globe we unearthed [more stories of community resilience](#) and

regeneration in the COVID period. Through the national platform Vikalp Sangam, we generated lessons from such examples, and advocated changes in policies that could enable further such revitalization of local livelihoods.

Unfortunately, both in India and elsewhere, such lessons appear to have been rapidly forgotten, and the world's economic elite have renewed their push towards deadlihoods. To old-style extractivism has been added a push for [land and resource-grabbing](#) in the name of climate action, such as devastating lithium mining for electric vehicles, or taking over community lands and rich ecosystems for mega-solar, wind, and [biomass and plantation projects](#).

## Challenging develop-mentality

Over the last few decades, building on notions imposed across the globe by colonial expansion, 'development' and 'progress' have been defined as a one-way movement from hunting-gathering to agriculture to manufacturing to services and now the digital knowledge economy. Accordingly, countries and peoples are classified as underdeveloped, developing, or developed. These are also conflated with being 'educated' or 'uneducated' (narrowly defined using criteria such as literacy), 'primitive/backward' or 'modern' (into which entire cultures, cuisines, attire, etc get pegged). In schools around the world, students are taught that land-based occupations such as farming, forestry, pastoralism, fisheries, and nature-based crafts, are outmoded, and one must aspire to modern sector jobs like IT. This is tragically ironic, given that such livelihoods have kept human society going for tens of thousands of years (and still do), and sustained the elements of nature that sustain us, whereas much of industrial modernity is causing the planet to collapse.

Livelihoods of this kind are invisibilised in the formal economy. The massive contribution that small-scale farmers, fishers and pastoralists make in feeding and sustaining the lives of hundreds of millions of people (through self-consumption and non-monetary sharing/exchange), does not figure in GDP calculations, unless there is a market transaction involved. There is also a serious gender dimension here, since much of the work in such livelihoods is done by women, or in the way that women sustain households and families while men 'go to work'—the social reproduction that is the foundation of production. This invisibilisation also enables the mainstream economy and state to justify giving poor prices for their outputs, to grab community lands and resources for commercial-industrial projects, and displace them for so-called 'development'. And, because the crucial role of nature in reproduction (where would we be without marine algae producing the oxygen we breath?!) is also absent in GDP calculations and from the mindset of economic planners, its exploitation is also justified in the name of 'development'.

It is this develop-mentality that has led to the eviction of over 60 million people in India alone, and to many millions more being dispossessed of their sources of livelihoods. The results are massive unemployment, underemployment, and toxic employment as these people find no alternative jobs, or have to take up impermanent work in industries and cities. People who had the most intricate skills

in, for instance, handmade crafts and produce, are suddenly rendered ‘unskilled’ and join the long lines of unemployed. In India, 90% of jobs are in informal or unorganized sectors. While this includes a few million people who are still able to carry on dignified self-employment in traditional occupations, it is increasingly comprised of people insecurely and exploitatively employed in the above ways—labourers without identity, kicked out at any employer’s fancy, underpaid, with no rights to decent and safe working or living environment. This is a mass push towards deadlihoods.

It is also this mentality that has enabled the diversion of natural ecosystems for ‘development’ (such as the damming of rivers), ignoring the consequences for wild plant and animal species, and for the earth’s ecological integrity as a whole. The pushing of millions of species towards extinction (estimates vary widely, but all are agreed we are staring at a period of mass extinction), is also part of the regime of deadlihoods.

## Privileged deadlihoods

The rich are not as immune as we may like to believe. From a predominantly financial point of view, they are of course more secure. But more and more studies are showing that in terms of quality of life, they too face enormous problems. An IT professional will, on average, get better remuneration than, say, a farmer, but are they necessarily happier? Are those running capitalist profit-making companies free of tensions and stresses that affect the working class, albeit perhaps of different kinds? Are they necessarily healthier, even from physical points of view, given the alarming rise in affluence-related diseases worldwide?

As I wrote in the previous article, behind the “glamour and glitz (of the IT industry), there is the sad story of the majority of its employees being just cogs in a vast assembly line stretching across the globe. Early morning to late night, slouched on a computer terminal, tracking financial market fluctuations day after day, or responding to customer service calls (including Indians trained to sound American in ways parodied in Hollywood movies)... How many of these people can honestly say that these are not deadlihoods, killing the human spirit, destroying or suppressing our independence and our innate creativity? How many can say that they are actually enjoying their work?”

This is a massive crisis for today’s youth, unable to find satisfying livelihoods in either the traditional or the modern sectors. What kind of development is this?

## Pathways to fulfilling livelihoods

While the above scenario prevails, there are also powerful counter-trends. Across the world, there are exciting initiatives at sustaining or enhancing the value of satisfying livelihoods. In the Amadiba community mentioned above, they are developing [alternative well-being](#) plans that combine agriculture, fishing, animal husbandry, and products like grass mats, with community-managed ecotourism and

other opportunities that bring revenue but also sustain their ecological and cultural commons. Amongst the Sapara Indigenous nation of the Ecuadorian Amazon, sustaining an ancient way of life in tune with the spirits of the land, forests, and rivers, is combined with [carefully managed visitation](#) in which people from outside are able to benefit from local healers.

Such initiatives show us pathways towards reviving, rebuilding, or innovating towards fulfilling livelihoods. These can do away with the drudgery, or inequalities (caste, gender, etc.) associated with many traditional occupations, as well as create dignified, creative livelihoods in modern sectors. More often than not, these are or could be hybrid livelihoods, combining the best of both traditional and modern. For instance, many young people have come back into handloom weaving in Kachchh, western India, in which they mix a firm commitment to the traditional motifs their ancestors have handed down, with designing new products that consumers will be attracted to. Or, several young people have returned to their villages in the Himalaya to take up a combination of farming and ecotourism or nature guiding. In the Amadiba area in South Africa I spoke to Lomwabo Dlamini, who told me [he much prefers staying back in his village](#) and combining farming with running a tourism company that is sensitive to the local ecological and cultural fragility. And, also participating in the community's struggle against destructive projects mentioned above.

Even in the predominantly modern sector, there are many meaningful and enjoyable occupations. In Europe and North America, or amongst the more privileged sections of society in the south, people are engaged in non-profit cafes, open source software collectives, community repair shops (to challenge the throw-away culture they are otherwise trapped in), decentralized renewable energy and ecologically sensitive construction, publishing houses that believe in knowledge commons, ethical hacking, alternative teaching, citizens' science that democratizes the production of knowledge, and crafts (I recall in some places in Europe seeing the slogan: 'the future is handmade'). These and other enterprises labeled as 'social and solidarity economy' break free of capitalism and state dominance and rebuild collectives rather than go down the deadly path of individualistic competition.

All these are still marginal compared to the dominant economy, but show the enormous potential of regenerating livelihoods. We have helped document hundreds of such [alternative initiatives in India](#), and many [across the world](#). Movements of climate justice in many countries, such as South Africa's [Climate Justice Charter Movement](#), have shown how millions of dignified occupations can be created in the transition away from a fossil-fuel based economy, in sectors such as socially owned decentralised renewable energy, public transportation, agro-ecology, and more.

## Shifting the narrative



Given the seductive power of the development discourse, backed by the communications prowess of corporations and mass media, we urgently need counter-narratives to gain traction. We have to be able to show, not only in intellectual-rational ways but also (or even more importantly) in ways that reach people's hearts and emotions, that the above kind of livelihoods are by far more attractive than those dished out in the name of development. This needs transformations in many spaces: the formal education sector (which is where we learn what is important in life, what we want to be when we grow up), media, including the so-called 'social media' (reclaiming it from the control of corporations and nation-states), and community spaces of interaction such as village and town assemblies, resident welfare associations, and civil society organisations.

In education, moving away from the competitive, rote-oriented approach prevalent across most of the world, we need approaches that are rooted in community and nature, combine enjoyment with learning, help develop not just the mind but the hands, feet, and heart in a holistic experience (what Gandhi called the 'Nai Taleem' or new way), and where physical labour is equated with intellectual. This way, perhaps children of workers will come to respect occupations tied to the land and sea, as well as understand the true value of nature. We also need to move away from rigidly gendered division of labour, in which women are seen as capable only of carework and men must go out to earn.

Other aspects of shifting the narrative include re-uniting producers with the means of production (away from state or corporate control), re-establishing an ethic of workers and their tools or land and knowledge being one indivisible whole, creating more respect for producers amongst those who consume what they produce (how many of us value the work that goes into making clothes, or producing food?), giving equal value to physical and intellectual labour, and removing the hard boundaries between different kinds of livelihoods. As Marx said, one should be able "to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming a hunter, fisherman, herdsman, or critic."

This also means reducing our dependence on 'professionals' and 'experts', by taking back control over our bodies (not having to run to doctors all the time), building (or rebuilding) skills in communities to manage repairs and management of essential infrastructure, exchanging our respective skills and experiences with each other in non-monetised ways (movements for 'time-banking' are trying to bring such sharing back in highly commercialized societies). And it means questioning our lazy proclivity to succumb to the [fatal attraction](#) of 'convenience' without considering the consequences for ourselves and others.

None of this is going to be easy. But not doing it will be even harder, in that deadlihoods will continue to spread like a cancer, ultimately engulfing life itself. The choice before us should be clear.

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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.

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