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Local Futures: The Power of Decentralization

Contribution to GTI Forum [Experiments in Movement Unity](#)

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At [Local Futures](#), we are convinced that the biggest obstacle to a strong united movement is a lack of understanding of the global economic system. This centralized system—*which now affects the entire global population*—is a vast invisible hand that exerts ever more power, not only over our political and economic systems, but also over our view of history, our view of human nature, and our view of ourselves. Rather than looking critically at this potent force, much of humanity has been sold on the idea that the modern industrial economy has brought us genuine progress, freeing us from the bonds of inferior, premodern cultures. Nothing could be further from the truth.

We believe that what is needed is to disseminate a clear, holistic analysis that explains the common root cause of the many crises we face, and that points to a conceptually simple solution to all of them. Uniting around a common *vision* would allow us to speak with a shared *voice*.

Even among grassroots activists, unfortunately, there is little awareness that the same global economic policies that are driving up emissions and environmental problems are making the vast majority poorer year by year: even in the so-called “rich” countries, people have to work harder and harder just to put food on the table and a roof over their head.

From its foundations in slavery and enclosures, the global economy has created an artificial scarcity of jobs, widened the gap between rich and poor, and destroyed ecosystems worldwide. It has manipulated the financial system and our worldviews, all the time favoring energy and resource-intensive production over more human-scale, ecological production. It has imposed both biological monoculture and a human consumer monoculture—a systematic destruction of diversity that is fundamentally anti-life. It is the underlying cause of our multiple crises.

But the response from civil society around the world has generally been to focus on individual impacts as though they were separate issues. Instead of supporting an economic shift away from the global and toward the local that would solve multiple social, environmental, and economic problems, movements focus on poverty, human rights, destruction of forests, toxic pollution, etc. This essentially puts them in competition with one another for scarce funding, public attention, and volunteers. And because the economy has operated hand in hand with national governments, local responses usually focus on those governments rather than the largely invisible global empire behind all of them. This rejection of government can easily become fodder for right-wing demagogues.

With the help of the mainstream media, the global economic suprastructure has encouraged further and further fragmentation. Rather than robust discourse, we are instead given a theatre of polarized divisions: left vs. right, social vs. environmental, spiritual vs. political, and so on. Even worse, we are subjected by social media to psychological warfare—supported by algorithms and AI—that encourages an extreme politics of identity that can turn violent and hateful.

We believe that the task before us is to encourage economic localization. As part of that, we need to distinguish between “resistance” and “renewal.” There is an absolute need for global collaboration to create widespread resistance to the global corporate system, with campaigns that can look very similar wherever in the world they happen. And there is an equally important need to encourage the renewal of decentralized economic structures that are adapted to biological and cultural diversity, and that will look very different depending on local contexts. Together, resistance and renewal are the essence of localization.

Resistance requires international collaboration—even a certain degree of centralization—to protect society and the environment from the centralized global economic juggernaut. But the need for structures, treaties, and collaborations to protect ourselves from top-down structures does not mean we should create centralized top-down structures to impose “ecological measures” on diverse countries and ecosystems. We need, for example, worldwide protection from the tools of the corporate system, such as DDT, glyphosate, and asbestos—monocultural tools that have been imposed on ecosystems worldwide. On the other hand, it would be foolish to believe that

ecological and equitable “solutions” in food and farming can be imposed from above rather than arising from the local knowledge of communities themselves.

Localization means adaptation to the diversity of life. It is essential for our survival. The degree of localization or decentralization as an ultimate goal is an issue that needs democratic involvement and vigorous debate. In any case, reversing the effects of today’s global empire is a prerequisite for survival and for any hope of genuine democracy. (Decentralization/localization itself is not a guarantee, but a prerequisite for genuine democracy.)

Uncovering and renewing respect for traditional cultures would reveal that there are countless alternatives that are linked to the diversity of the living world. These localized knowledge systems—including new initiatives that are arising from the grassroots—are essential to set us back on track for evolution in the arms of Mother Gaia. It is only blind hubris that allows us to believe that we humans hold the Earth in our hands, or, even worse, can create a metaverse that is superior to life itself.

The global view needed to create a global citizens movement requires better cross-cultural communication and collaboration. Local Futures has been working for almost fifty years to foster this deeper dialogue. There is a major vision/information gap between land-based, less-industrialized communities on the one hand, and people in the urban industrialized parts of the world on the other. It is our experience that, paradoxically, most traditional peoples are highly vulnerable to the propaganda that rural communities are inferior to the shiny, clean, images of urban consumer culture. At the same time, some of the strongest resistance to corporate rule comes from people who have experienced the spiritual poverty of the consumer culture. In order to create bridges of communication, Local Futures has run “reality tours” in both directions.

Our work has consisted of books, films, web-based materials, workshops, and regional conferences, all with the goal of encouraging the formation of networks and alliances that bring people together to resist the monoculture while simultaneously building the community and ecological fabric essential for human and ecological well-being.

From many years’ experience in Ladakh and Bhutan, we became aware of the global economic system’s destructive impact on food and farming. Since the 1970s, we have been raising awareness

of the vital importance of protecting and renewing diversified, small-scale farms linked to local markets. We have carried the message of Via Campesina to urban audiences who were previously oblivious to their important message.

As part of this effort, we were the impetus behind the creation of the [International Forum on Globalisation](#) (IFG). At our “Future of Progress” conference in Stockholm in 1992, we brought together IFG funders and founding members from both North and South to highlight the effects of “free trade” and globalization on diverse cultures. At around the same time, we helped to co-found the [Global Ecovillage Network](#) and encouraged deeper collaboration between this originally Western initiative with villages and movements in the so-called Third World.

In 2011 we launched our film [The Economics of Happiness](#), which makes the case for a shift from global to local. The film not only describes the impacts of the global economic system, it also showcases the steps people are already taking worldwide to rebuild their local economies and communities. Translated into more than twenty-five languages, it has been used as an activist tool by grassroots groups on every continent. Building on the thousands of community screenings of the film, we launched an ongoing series of international Economics of Happiness conferences. To date, there have been twenty such conferences.

More recently, we set up the [International Alliance for Localisation](#), a network of people and groups committed to localization, and [World Localization Day](#), in which people across six continents organize events to celebrate the joy, beauty, and innovation of local economies and cultures.

This September, we convened a Planet Local Summit in Bristol UK. It was the biggest localization gathering ever, with cutting-edge thinkers, writers, policy makers, movement builders, and activists from five continents connecting over a clear vision to change the world.

About the Author



Helena Norberg-Hodge is a linguist, author, filmmaker, and pioneer of the new economy movement. She is the founder and director of Local Futures, and the convenor of World Localization Day and the Planet Local Summit. She is author of the *Ancient Futures*, and *Local is Our Future* and producer of the award-winning documentary *The Economics of Happiness* and of *Planet Local*. She is the founder of the International Alliance for Localisation, and a cofounder of the International Forum on Globalization and the Global Ecovillage Network. Helena is a recipient of the Alternative Nobel prize, the Arthur Morgan Award and the Goi Peace Prize.

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