



September 2020

From Domination to Partnership

Forum contribution: [After the Pandemic: Which Future?](#)

Asoka Bandarage

The COVID-19 pandemic can be an opportunity to redirect the trajectory of human social evolution from domination to partnership and to actualize a [Great Transition future](#). Doing so requires us to question the values, unsustainability, and inequality of the world in which we live. Prioritizing economic growth over environmental sustainability and human well-being has contributed to the emergence and spread of the current pandemic. But such priorities are only inevitable if we let them be.

Domination

The contemporary world economy disrupts the natural integration of planetary life, seeking instead to manage and control society and the environment through modern science, technology, and the market. The extremism of this approach is evident in efforts to redesign life and to create what some scientists call a post-nature, post-human world. The conventional response to the pandemic likewise seeks a quick-fix vaccine over systemic changes to public health and economic justice.

Technology and the market per se are not the ultimate problem: the underlying consciousness and intention that drive them are. At the root of the crisis we face is the disconnect between the exponential growth of the profit-driven economy and the equivalent development in compassion and wisdom. Indeed, our challenge today is not merely political, but human and ethical—how we see and conduct ourselves individually and collectively toward both the environment and each other. Without an intentional effort to change, individualism, competition, and domination will remain the driving force at the personal, national, and ethno-religious levels.

Both the US and China hope to return to “normalcy” by jumpstarting their economies. Trump has claimed that in the post-pandemic world, US economic growth will be bigger than ever. China will move forward with its massive Belt and Road Initiative despite social and environmental concerns. The pandemic has already led to increased corporate deregulation and bailouts, consolidating corporate and elite control in the US. The increasing shift to life online is widening and deepening surveillance and social control by large tech companies.

Partnership

The alternative is to nurture a universal consciousness grounded in the truth of unity within diversity. This higher consciousness sees “ego consciousness” as privileging the individualistic self, rather than the self as inherently interdependent. It weakens dualism and contributes to interdependence and partnership.

The environment encompasses human society and the economy within its fold. The economy is only one subsystem of society. The pandemic has revealed that the natural world does not need humanity for its survival: it is being rejuvenated amidst reduced human activity. However, humanity cannot survive without the natural environment—the air, soil, water, sunlight, etc. The central idea of the ecological approach (subscribed to by indigenous thinking, Eastern spirituality, and fields of Western science like evolutionary biology and ecology) is that we are part of the Earth, not apart and separate from it.

We have to stop letting the economy dominate and subsume society and the environment within the logic of exploitative economic growth. The components of the economy—technology, property relations, the market, and finance—must be redesigned to serve the needs of environmental sustainability and human well-being. The exploitation of people and plunder of the Earth must be replaced by systems that honor environmental sustainability and social justice.

It is time to transition to a more balanced, ecological civilization that respects the environment and upholds bioregionalism and local communities. The unprecedented global crisis brought forth by the COVID-19 pandemic is making people more sensitive to the fragility and insecurity of life and our physical and emotional interconnectedness to each other and all of nature. The crisis can teach us to open our hearts and minds, to overcome excessive greed and individualism, and to see the

common suffering across cultural and ideological boundaries. It offers an opportunity to overcome despair and powerlessness and to collectively challenge oppressive social structures.

Transition

Many groups around the world are already actively engaged in the systemic shift away from economic globalization towards localization, encouraging local renewal through education and community building. One inspiring movement with a plan for transitioning to smaller, local self-reliant economies and communities is [Transition Towns](#), a network that has spread to more than fifty countries since 2005. The strength of the Transition approach is its principles of respect for resource limits and resilience, inclusivity and social justice, sharing ideas and power, and positive visioning and creativity.

As human beings, we have the capacity to make the inner transition needed to move to a balanced path of environmental and social sustainability. We can do so from our diverse cultural, class, and other social and professional positions. We can do so in the here and now without waiting for others to take leadership in transitioning to a more harmonious post-pandemic world. The future lies in deepening and acting on our connectedness to each other as a species in nature and in applying our human ethical intelligence to policymaking and problem-solving.

About the Author



Asoka Bandarage is a Sri Lankan academic specializing in international development, political economy, women and gender studies, multiculturalism, conflict analysis and resolution, and ecology. She has served on the faculties of Brandeis University, Georgetown University, and Mount Holyoke College. She is the author of the *Colonialism in Sri Lanka, Women, Population and Global Crisis*, *The Separatist Conflict in Sri Lanka*, and *Sustainability and Well-Being: The Middle Path to Environment, Society and the Economy*, among other books. She has written columns in the *Huffington Post* and *Asia Times* and serves on the boards of *Critical Asian Studies* and Interfaith Moral Action on Climate. She holds a PhD from Yale University.

About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Asoka Bandarage, "From Domination to Partnership," a contribution to the forum *After the Pandemic: Which Future?*, *Great Transition Initiative* (September 2020), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/pandemic-scenario-bandarage>.

About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.