

Planet Diversity

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### Diversity and the right livelihood of future generations

The bad news is well-known. Locally adapted animal breeds are becoming extinct at the rate of one per month. “The striving for uniformity is the driving and destructive force of modern agriculture” – a quote from a recent editorial comment in the New York Times, headed “We are as rich as the diversity that surrounds us.” “German cows eat up biodiversity”, concluded a recent report in ‘Das Parlament’, the weekly paper of the German parliament, highlighting the damage done by changing land use patterns in the Global South required to feed them. One German company supplies the genetic stock for 68% of all the world’s white-egg layer hens, one Dutch company does the same for the brown-egg layer hens...The commodification of nature and life is increasing daily.

Yet, there are also growing signs of hope, as the current global economic order is rapidly losing credibility. The financial media increasingly remind me of the Soviet press in the last years of communism: they do not know what to believe anymore!

The 'Financial Times' recently noted that even the recent past is today a foreign country. Last month, an article headed "Why business may face a crisis of legitimacy" concluded that the "implicit compact between business and politics is breaking down".

Other recent FT articles have recognized the reality of limits to growth and dismissed the key argument of the supporters of economic globalisation, namely that it is an unstoppable natural process: "Globalisation was made possible by political change. But what politics made, politics can take away"(8.4.08).

"USA Today" is the mass circulation paper of the US middle classes, often derided as McPaper. Last month it published a cartoon on the editorial page showing two fat lions walking away from a field covered with the remains of animals they had devoured. One lion says to the other: "For the record, I still believe in unregulated markets!" When established belief systems are ridiculed like this, then there are openings for drastic change, if we are ready to grasp this window of opportunity.

My main concern is that we are not ready, and, like civil society in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism, will again be outmanoeuvred by special interests. Civil society organisations are often too divided ("mergers between NGOs are few and far between", as one critic put it), too problem-fixated, too dependent on government grants and on maintaining their charitable status to be able to grasp political opportunities. Unlike their opponents, they rarely plan strategically for the long-term, rarely fund careers and institutions. They are often anti-political, but expect politicians to implement their recommendations.

The World Future Council works primarily on “future-proof” best policies implementation, I have been told that many organisations do policy work, meaning developing recommendations. But very few, unfortunately, work directly – as the corporate lobbyists do – with parliamentarians to help implement policy changes – e.g. to protect biodiversity. Such work may be boring and long-term, but it is crucial! As Martin Luther King said, laws do not move the heart, but they restrain the heartless.

One challenge we face is the claim that there is a conflict between human development (“modernization”) and preserving biodiversity. Indeed, polls show that majorities in many poor countries favour continued globalisation, but they are also aware of its increasing costs and drawbacks. The Malaysian consumer rights pioneer Anwar Fazal says that many poor people still trust the “developed” countries’ propaganda that the final outcome will be good for them too. They want to believe that globalisation means what the word implies: a distillation of the interests of all the globe’s peoples. But that faith is now being shattered as its reality – the imposition of the interests of a rich minority on everyone else – becomes clear.

For the poor global majority, the costs of market rule are becoming unaffordable as exploding fuel and food costs, water shortages and environmental collapse rob them of any small gains they have made and throw them into greater debt.

I became aware of the manipulated cost-benefit analysis used to promote infrastructural megalomania at the expense of diversity, when I researched the history of large dams in India in the year we gave the Right Livelihood Award to Medha Patkar and the movement to stop the Narmada dam. I had

assumed that (as we had often been told) those who had been forced to give up their land for large dams, had been resettled elsewhere on similar land. There would then still be the huge cultural and spiritual cost of relocation. But the reality was even worse. Only in one single case since India's independence had those evacuated been resettled on equivalent land. All the others – a huge humanity of the dispossessed – had been tricked and cheated, living in camps, on much poorer land – or just dispersed.

This is unfortunately all too often the case when diversity is destroyed: the human and other costs are much larger than claimed, while the gains have almost invariably been exaggerated, if not invented.

The loss of traditional non-market skills and wealth is ignored when the GDP contributions of those forced into the market are counted as signs of growth and progress. The huge de-skilling involved in this process is covered up by inventing a new category of semi-skilled for those able to operate a machine, while traditional skills are devalued.

The narrow knowledge of those who regard themselves as entitled to manipulate even the blue-prints of life is truly frightening. Right Livelihood Award recipients Amory and Hunter Lovins, who often worked with corporations to promote energy efficiency, also tried to advise companies like Monsanto, but came away horrified by the narrow-mindedness and limited over-specialised knowledge of the “experts” involved. They think they are the spearhead of industrial modernity, concluded the Lovins', but they are in fact remainders of industrial primitivism, seeing living beings as machines and thus making wrong assumptions about how they work.

If you see yourself as part of a larger meaningful living whole, you approach it with extreme care, respectful of your unique place in it. But if you believe yourself to be the pinnacle of evolution in an ultimately meaningless universe, you assume you know better than “trial and error”, so nothing will stop you. If by chance you destroy a species, you or your successors can always clone it back...

We must disarm these scientific extremists who currently threaten humanity with more harm than any group of religious fundamentalists!

We all have at least one common value: our deeply felt obligation to hand over a better world to our children. This is a political and moral issue. Natural laws supercede economic laws because they determine the framework conditions of our existence. You can negotiate with creditors and enemies – but not with melting glaciers.

Climate chaos is not only a huge additional threat to biodiversity but will also make many other threats more difficult to cope with. For example, indigenous people reachable only by river have seen their world and worldview collapse as their rivers run dry. It is clear that we have not even begun to be serious about the costs, the effort and the scale of change that will be required on many levels to ensure climate security and justice as far as humanly possible.

Even the tallest building collapses if its foundation is allowed to disintegrate. Today the freedom, security and rights of all future generations are threatened by our actions and inactions. But solutions are everywhere. We can decide today to create an earth community built on sharing (e.g. of best technologies), reciprocity and co-operation. We can transform our

production and consumption, based on the circular loop “cradle-to-cradle” models developed by Prof. Michael Braungart.

We can push for enforceable basic human rights to water and food, as Right Livelihood Award recipients Maude Barlow and Frances Moore-Lappé are doing. We can expand and protect biodiversity and cultural diversity everywhere by challenging the monocultures of the mind of current decision-makers, as many of our other Award recipients are doing – several of whom are speaking at this conference.

We can transmit to future generations values, traditions and institutions that support instead of threaten the flourishing of all life.

As the British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has said, leadership defines reality. We face unprecedented challenges, but to quote the US anti-slavery pioneer Rev. William Ellery Channing: “There are times in history when to dare is the highest wisdom.”