

RADICAL WELL-BEING ALTERNATIVES TO DEVELOPMENT

Notes from a discussion at World Social Forum, Tunis, 27 March 2015

Organised by Kalpavriksh, Global Diversity Foundation, Centre for Environment and Development, Peoples' Sustainability Treaties, and SADED



OBJECTIVE: The search for alternatives to destructive development and globalisation is yielding diverse approaches to well-being, some ancient (like buen vivir and sumak kawsay in Latin America, ubuntu in southern Africa, and swaraj in South Asia), some very new (like degrowth in Europe, and radical ecological democracy in South Asia). This workshop brought together a few such approaches, to learn from each other, and build common ground.

PANELISTS & RESPONDENTS

Leah Temper, EJolt project, Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain

Uchita de Zoysa, CED & Peoples Sustainability Treaties (PST), Sri Lanka

Gary Martin, Global Diversity Foundation, Morocco

Patrick Bond, University of Kwa Zulu-Natal, South Africa

Ashish Kothari, Kalpavriksh and Radical Ecological Democracy PST, India

Jay Naidoo, Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, Switzerland

Ruby van der Wekken, Siemenpuu Foundation, Finland

Aseem Shrivastava, independent researcher, India

Leah Temper (leah.temper@gmail.com) described the resistance to a pipeline by the Unist'ot'en Clan of the First Wet'suwet'en Nation in Canada, which includes re-asserting a re-imagined Free Prior and Informed Consent process, with all visitors to its territory having

to explain their purpose of visit and how it will be of benefit to their people. The Unist'ot'en have been maintaining a living blockade on the direct route of a natural gas pipeline that aims to bring fracked gas from interior BC to the coast and Asian markets but may also open the door to a planned carbon corridor to later transport tar sands oil along the same route (<http://unistotencamp.com/?p=182>). The Wet'suwet'en people's claim to sovereign territory has established an important precedence when the courts accepted oral accounts as legitimate testimony as part of the Delga Muukw trial and whereby it was acknowledged that the territory had never been ceded to Canada (<http://www.web.uvic.ca/~bthom1/Media/pdfs/abrights/rights.htm>). Additionally many of these peoples are fighting not so much for their rights, as for the ability to continue fulfilling their responsibility to the land and all its creatures.

The Environmental Justice Atlas coordinated by ICTA-AUB has been useful in mapping and making accessible accounts of environmental conflicts and resistance movements. Increasingly it is also being oriented to looking at how these struggles can achieve systemic transformations towards alternatives.

Uchita de Zoysa (uchita@sltnet.lk) described how community and civil society efforts after the 2007 tsunami in Sri Lanka were successful in making the state accountable to its relief and reconstruction responsibilities, and in maintaining the coast as part of the commons in the face of tourism-related privatization threats by creating a Tsunami Peoples' Task Force and propagating the concept of GramaRajaya ('nation of villages'). The example of one particular village (Madampagama, Galle district) which came out of an internally conflictual and ecologically deteriorating situation, by unifying around the management of water and going on to secure livelihoods and jobs for all, with women taking the lead, shows the potential of what an organized community can do.

From these local initiatives to a global level was the move to forge 14 Peoples' Sustainability Treaties (<http://sustainabilitytreaties.org/>), coming together at the Rio+20 conference, signaling that it is not only governments that can enter into treaties. Some of these Treaties have continued to work at local-to-global action. People-to-people collaboration towards transformative actions at a global level is crucial.

Gary Martin (gmartingdf@gmail.com) pointed out that most well-being indices/approaches are based on *individual* well-being rather than that of the *collective*. The ancient concept and practice of *agdalin* Morocco encompasses "areas where access rights and uses of natural resources are governed by a local institution – usually the village, inter-village or inter-tribe assembly – which fixes rules concerning periods and modalities of differentiated natural resource exploitation" (<http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol16/iss4/art24/>). There is growing literature on, and concern for protecting, these diverse practices and the worldviews they represent, as a basis for socio-ecological resilience. Another example, very new, is culturally contextualized education opportunities for Amazigh (Berber) communities. *Dar Taliba* (literally 'Girls' homes'), are boarding facilities created by community-based organizations where girls from rural areas can live and study collectively. Although they attend government schools in which lessons are given in Arabic and French, they continue to speak their traditional language among themselves. In addition, they engage in non-formal projects such as cultivating ethnobotanical gardens and sharing knowledge about local useful plants. They return to their villages on weekends and school holidays, helping them avoid the alienation that has taken place in residential schools in other countries. From a single Dar Taliba in 1999, there are now hundreds throughout Morocco, and similar places (Dar Talib) for boys.

Patrick Bond(pbond@mail.ngo.za) mentioned the importance of feminist and ecosocialist commoning in many parts of the world. In South Africa, some recent transformations have occurred in the successful struggle to make generic AIDS medicines available to the affected population, defeating US pharmaceutical company attempts to retain their private IPR stranglehold (see Treatment Action Campaign, <http://tac.org.za/>). A dramatic increase in life expectancy is one outcome. Another struggle has been in Soweto with the commoning of water and electricity which were hardly accessible to the poor households earlier (http://revista-theo.mai.unq.edu.ar/NUMERO_27-28/Bond.pdf). All these also relate to the revival and use of the ancient worldview of *Ubuntu*, roughly translated as 'we are who we are through each other'. This is the southern African equivalent of *buenviviror sumac kawsay* worldviews in Latin America.

Ashish Kothari(chikikothari@gmail.com) spoke of Mendha-Lekha, an *adivasi* (indigenous) village in central India, which was mobilized three decades ago in a struggle against big dams. Subsequently it has practiced self-rule, consensus decision-making, conservation of its surrounding forests, sustainable harvesting of forest produce, and the use of resulting revenues for full livelihood, water, and energy security. It has also converted all its private agricultural land to the village commons. In southern India an organization of dalit women farmers, Deccan Development Society, has achieved food sovereignty by reviving traditional seed diversity and organic cultivation, linking this to a public distribution system for the poor and to urban consumers. The women have also become film-makers, run a community radio, and manage a school which integrates traditional and modern knowledge systems. These examples illustrate the concept of *swaraj* (self-rule, self-reliance). Based on such examples a global network of groups working on radical ecological democracy (or ecological *swaraj*) was initiated (<http://radicalecologicaldemocracy.wordpress.com>). In India the Vikalp Sangam or Alternatives Confluences is a process of converging such initiatives and social movements for mutual learning and collaboration, and building a framework or paradigm of a sustainable and just society (www.vikalpsangam.org).

Jay Naidoo(jnaidoo@gainhealth.org) gave a brief historical perspective of the anti-apartheid and workers' struggles in South Africa, with the major lesson that if revolutions are to happen, they will only be by and with 'common' people. Unfortunately NGOs have taken up the space of civil society; they must realize that their role is to facilitate communities, help 'ordinary' people to realize their potential as freedom fighters.

Ruby van der Wekken(ruby.vanderwekken@siemenpuu.org) described her involvement with the Helsinki timebank community exchange initiative in Finland, as part of a growing discussion internationally critically addressing our financial system, whether by ways of demonetisation, or the development of currency as a commons. The Commons.fi and Solidarity economy collective in Finland gathers these and other experiences, and wants to commence to map initiatives and organise discussions around solidarity economy building. One important question which comes up in these processes is 'what is an alternative', especially given the increasing greenwashing/community washing that a lot of corporates and state agencies are furthering. (some further contacts from Ruby: On Helsinki Timebank: <https://stadinaikapankki.wordpress.com/in-english/helsinki-timebanks-abc/>; On Commons.fi in English: <http://www.commonsvi/contact>; On Currency as a Commons: <http://www.commonsvi/currency-commons-currencies-work>; <http://www.commonsvi/community-currencies-under-loop>)

Aseem Shrivastava(maybeaseem@gmail.com) spoke of farmer mobilization against the powerful corporation Reliance, which wanted to make a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) on

thousands of hectares in western India. In a referendum, an overwhelming majority of farmers rejected the SEZ. Similar resistance in Jharkhand and other parts of India, with many innovative tactics (such as women refusing their husbands sex till they agreed not to sell off lands), have shown that the poor can find their own paths and out-of-the-box solutions. Villagers have also used a Supreme Court order giving land-owners rights to minerals under their land to do small-scale mining for generating power, challenging the state's plans for a super-thermal station.

In the discussion, **Claire Philippe** told the group about the Alternatiba initiative of mapping local solutions to climate crisis. **Omar Sbei** described an inspiring example from Tunisia, of workers at an oasis taking over control (its private owner being absent), democratically managing it, and putting back revenues from dates into a school, health clinic, and other community facilities.

As closing remarks, Patrick wondered if climate change could be used to 'connect the dots', bring various social movements together for a common struggle. Uchita said we need to 'occupy' the upcoming Sustainable Development Goals summit (September 2015) and the climate COP (December 2015), and find new versions of the South African Freedom Charters. The proposed Internet Social Forum was mentioned as a potential place for putting up inspiring stories from around the world, and continue connecting with each other. Ashish said it was important to draw lessons from these initiatives, draw out key principles and values that could perhaps be universal even as the alternative strategies and practices remain diverse. He offered to put all the participants on an e-list to circulate relevant information as follow-up to the session.

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