

# VIKALP SANGAM

## The Search for Alternatives



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# The Search for Alternatives: Key Aspects and Principles

## Towards Equity, Justice, Sustainability

The earth, the womb of all life, is in trouble. Humanity, ridden with its own crises of inequality and exploitation, has mistreated its only home to the extent that life as we know it is itself imperilled. Do we have the wisdom and foresight to save ourselves and the planet? Can we take the urgent, widespread and deep-rooted actions that are needed for this? A world which is built on respect, compassion, love, responsibility, freedom, diversity and humility ... not only in the relations amongst humans but also between humans and the rest of nature ... surely we can not only dream this but also forge paths towards it?

This would entail a collective search for pathways and visions that are fundamental alternatives to today's dominant economic and political system, taking us towards equity, justice, and ecological sustainability? How can such pathways and visions build on an existing heritage of ideas, values, worldviews and cultures, and on past or new grassroots practice? How can they help meet basic needs and aspirations of all, without trashing the earth or privileging some at the expense of others?

This note, evolving through the Vikalp Sangam process<sup>2</sup>, attempts to lay out some thoughts towards such a process, and is offered as one means to stimulate dialogue and visioning.

The note does not contain a critique of the currently dominant system, but assumes that we have some common understanding of this system, most importantly, that there are structural roots to the crises of ecological unsustainability, inequity and injustice, and loss of life and livelihoods. Centralised and hierarchical state systems, capitalist corporate control, crisis of development and democracy, patriarchy and masculinity, hegemony and other forms of social and cultural inequality (including caste), alienation from the rest of nature and from our own spiritual selves by forms of modernism and reductionist science, privatisation of property and means of production, individualisation leading to alienation between 'me' and 'them', cultural xenophobia leading to alienation between 'us' and 'them' (in terms of religion, ethnicity, 'race', clothes, food, and other attributes), and undemocratic control of knowledge and technology, are part of this structure.

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1. Vikalp Sangam is a platform for networking of groups and individuals working on alternatives to the currently dominant model of development and governance, in various spheres of life (see <http://kalpavriksh.org/index.php/alternatives/alternatives-knowledge-center/353-vikalpsangam-coverage>). Its major activity is the convening of regional and thematic Confluences across India, and documentation and dissemination of alternative initiatives ([www.vikalpsangam.org](http://www.vikalpsangam.org)).

Not everyone may agree with all of this, but it is proposed that we can discuss the specifics of the problem elsewhere, while here we move towards what we think the paths and visions forward could be, based on broadly shared sense of the crises. As part of this we also need a greater political understanding of and within local initiatives, and of resistance movements, and through these to create larger solidarity of struggles. And the ability to convey that a search for alternatives is not about everyone retreating into states of scarcity and deprivation, but of having real wealth<sup>3</sup> within the context of sustainability, justice and equity<sup>4</sup>. A society that embodies the ancient notion of swaraj: autonomy and freedom with responsibility, both individual and collective; respect for all life; and self-restraint that comes from the deepening of ethical or spiritual enquiry.



Participants at Madhya Pradesh Vikalp Sangam, September 2017.

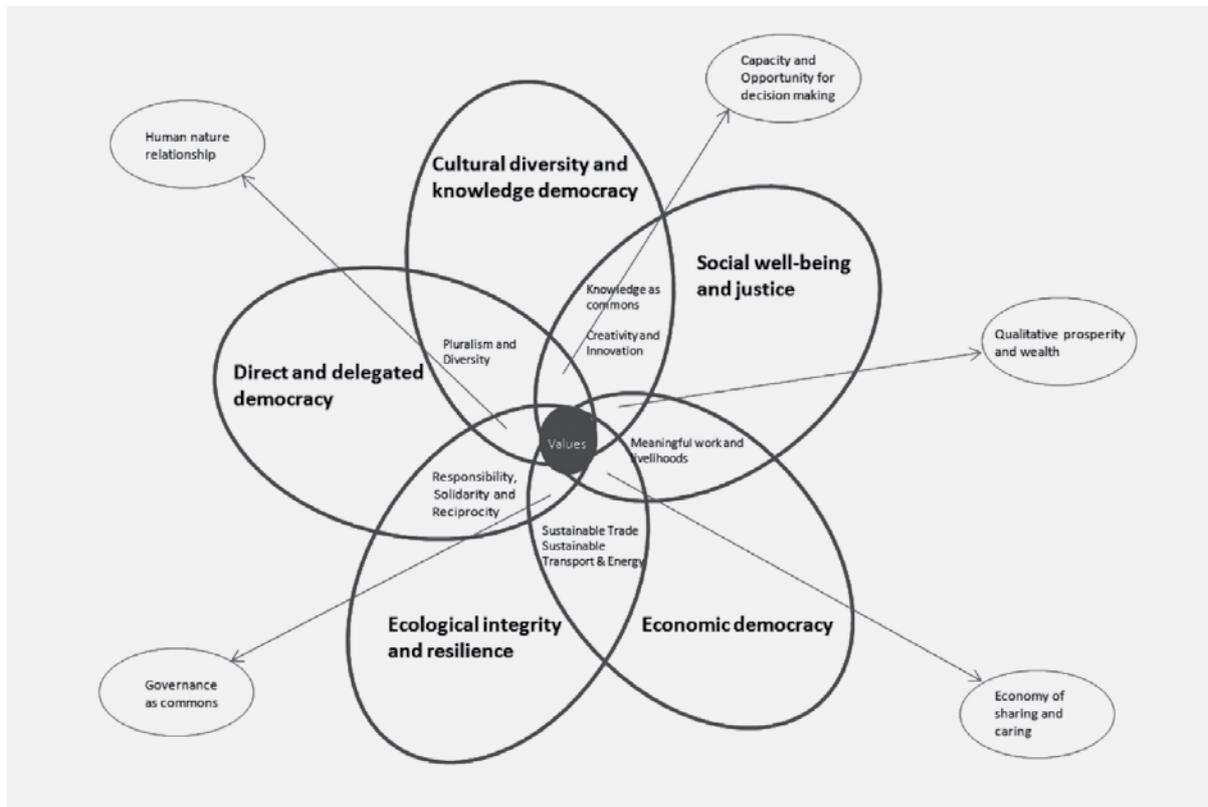
## What is an 'alternative'?

Alternatives can be practical activities, policies, processes, technologies, and concepts/frameworks, that lead us to equity, justice, sustainability. They can be practiced or proposed/propagated by communities, government, civil society organizations, individuals, and social enterprises, amongst others. They can simply be continuations from the past, re-asserted in or modified for current times, or new ones; it is important to note that the term does not imply these are always 'marginal' or new, but that they are in contrast to the mainstream or dominant system.

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3. Going back to the original meaning of wealth = well-being.
  4. We recognize that many terms in this note may have multiple meanings; they should be interpreted in the context of the full note, and in relation to the rest of the contents.

It is proposed that alternatives are built on the following spheres (or overlapping spheres) seen as an integrated whole; in this or other forms these have been expressed by many in the past, but are re-emerging in the new contexts of the 21st century:

**Digram 1 : Spheres of alternative transformation**



- **Ecological wisdom, integrity and resilience:** maintaining the eco-regenerative processes that conserve ecosystems, species, functions, cycles; respect for ecological limits at various levels, local to global; and the infusion of ecological wisdom and ethics in all human endeavour.
- **Social well-being and justice,** including lives that are fulfilling and satisfactory physically, socially, culturally, and spiritually; where there is equity between communities and individuals in socio-economic and political entitlements, benefits, rights and responsibilities; where there is communal and ethnic harmony; where hierarchies and divisions based on faith, gender, caste, class, ethnicity, ability, and other attributes are replaced by non-exploitative, non-oppressive, non-hierarchical, and non-discriminatory relations; and where collective and individual human rights are ensured.
- **Direct and delegated democracy,** where decision-making starts at the smallest unit of human settlement, in which every human has the right, capacity and opportunity to take part, and builds up from this unit to larger levels of governance by delegates that are downwardly accountable to the units of direct democracy; and where decision-making is not simply on a 'one-person one-vote' basis but rather consensual, while being respectful and supportive of the needs and rights of those currently marginalised, eg some minorities.

- **Economic democracy**, in which local communities and individuals (including producers and consumers, wherever possible combined into one as ‘prosumers’) have control over the means of production, distribution, exchange, markets; where localization is a key principle, and larger trade and exchange is built on it on the principle of equal exchange; where private property gives way to the commons, removing the distinction between owner and worker.
- **Cultural<sup>5</sup> diversity and knowledge democracy**, in which pluralism of ways of living, ideas and ideologies is respected, where creativity and innovation are encouraged, where the generation, transmission and use of knowledge (traditional/modern, including science and technology) are accessible to all, and where spiritual and/or ethical learning and deepening are central to social life.

A crucial outcome of such an approach is that the centre of human activity is neither the state nor the corporation, but the community, a self-defined collection of people with some strong common or cohesive social interest. The community could be of various forms, from the ancient village to the urban neighbourhood to the student body of an institution to even the more ‘virtual’ networks of common interest. It is of course critical to acknowledge that many such communities would have internal inequities and conflicts, necessitating initiatives to tackle these. Also, that at times the community can be overbearing on the individual, the reverse of the situation where the individual ignores or undermines the community. A balance between these is necessary, as are struggles for equity within communities.

Many or most current initiatives may not fulfil all the elements of the above five spheres. As a rough thumb-rule, perhaps we can consider something an alternative if it addresses at least two of the above spheres (i.e. is actually helping to achieve them, or is explicitly or implicitly oriented towards them), and is not violating but rather being open to and considering to adopt the other spheres.<sup>6</sup> This means, for instance, that a producer company that achieves economic democracy but is ecologically unsustainable (and does not care about this), and inequitable in governance and distribution of benefits (and does not care about this), may not be considered an alternative. Similarly a brilliant technology that cuts down power consumption, but is affordable only by the ultra-rich, would not qualify (though it may still be worth considering if it has potential to be transformed into a technology for the poor also).

It is important to stress that this is not a judgemental or moralistic process of exclusion, but a practical one to enable some kind of distinctions for the purpose of collaboration, visioning, and dialogue. One outcome of the Vikalp Sangam process, based on this Framework note, is the Alternatives Transformation Format, a tool to help initiatives and organisations to self-assess how holistic and integrated (or conversely, inconsistent and fragmented)\_their actions and transformations are, and where they may want to make changes.<sup>7</sup>

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5 ‘Culture’ here is used to mean ways of being and knowing, including language, rituals, norms, ethics and values, worldviews and cosmo-visions, lifestyles, links with the rest of nature, and knowledge.

6 Some participants feel that this is too lax a thumb-rule; others feel that we are drawing arbitrary lines between alternatives and non-alternatives when in real life any initiative may be going or be open to transitions towards greater justice, equity, sustainability. There is no clear resolution to these dilemmas.

7 [http://www.vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Resources/alternatives\\_transformation\\_framework\\_revised\\_20.2.2017.pdf](http://www.vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Resources/alternatives_transformation_framework_revised_20.2.2017.pdf) initiative may be going or be open to transitions towards greater justice, equity, sustainability. There is no clear resolution to these dilemmas.

We note that both the above spheres, and the principles/values described below, are subject to differences of scale (local to global, personal to community and species level, etc) and time (short and long-term, and even the different perceptions of time, linear, circular, spiral).

The above is offered only as a thumb-rule to the discussion on what could be considered fundamental alternatives to the current system.

## What principles are expressed in alternatives?

Practical and conceptual alternatives vary widely, and none are replicable in precise form from one place to the other, given the diversity of local situations. Search for such alternatives is perennial. New circumstances will demand new responses hence, alternatives will have to keep evolving and changing.

The way alternative transformations are attempted by the actors concerned, and observed by others, is based very much on their worldviews. These encompass spiritual and/or ethical positions on one's place in the universe, relations with other humans and the rest of nature, identity, and other aspects. Initiatives towards alternatives espouse or are based on many values and principles that emanate from or are encompassed in such worldviews, keeping in mind also that even within single communities there may be more than one worldview, with differences emanating from how members are placed regarding gender, class, caste, ethnicity, age, and other considerations.

It is possible to derive the crucial, commonly held principles underlying alternative initiatives. Given below is an initial list of such values/principles; these are not necessarily distinct from each other, but rather inter-related and overlapping.

We note here that there can be a list of even more fundamental human ethical values that should be the bedrock of the principles below, including compassion, empathy (samvedanshilita), honesty, integrity & truthfulness, tolerance, generosity, caring, and others. These are espoused by most spiritual traditions and secular ethics, and are worth keeping central to a discussion of the values/principles described below.

### Ecological integrity and the rights of nature

The functional integrity of the ecological and ecoregenerative processes (especially the global freshwater cycle), ecosystems, and biological diversity that is the basis of all life on earth.

The right of nature<sup>8</sup> and all species (wild and domesticated) to survive and thrive in the conditions in which they have evolved, and respect for and celebration of the 'community of life' as a whole (while keeping in mind natural evolutionary processes of extinction and replacement, and that human use of the rest of nature is not necessarily antithetical to its respect)

### Equity, justice, and inclusion (samavesh), access (samata)

Equitable access and inclusion of all human beings, in current and future generations (intergenerational) decision making and participation, to the conditions needed for human well-being (socio-cultural, economic, political, ecological, and psychological),

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8 As in footnote 6

without endangering any other person's access; and social, economic, and environmental justice for all regardless of gender, class, caste, ethnicity, race, and other attributes, (including a special focus on including those currently left out for reasons of physical/mental/social 'disability'). There is also a need to acknowledge unjust and unfair dynamics within families and try to address them.

### **Right to and responsibility of meaningful participation (sahabhagita)**

The right of each citizen and community to have agency, to meaningfully participate in crucial decisions affecting her/his/its life, and to the conditions that provide the ability for such participation, as part of a radical, participatory democracy.

Corresponding to such rights, the responsibility of each citizen and community to ensure meaningful decision-making that is based on the twin principles of ecological sustainability and socio-economic equity.

### **Diversity and pluralism (vividhata)**

Respect for the diversity of environments and ecologies, species and genes (wild and domesticated), cultures, ways of living, knowledge systems, values, livelihoods, perspectives and polities (including those of indigenous peoples and local communities, and of youth), in so far as they are in consonance with the principles of sustainability and equity.

### **Collective commons and solidarity, in balance with individual freedoms (samudayikta)**

Collective and co-operative thinking and working founded on the socio-cultural, economic, and ecological commons (moving away from private property), respecting both common custodianship and individual freedoms and choices (including the right to be 'different' such as in sexual orientation) and innovations within such collectivities, with inter-personal and inter-community solidarity, relationships of caring and sharing, and common responsibilities, as fulcrums.

### **Resilience and adaptability**

The ability of communities and humanity as a whole, to respond, adapt and sustain the resilience needed to maintain ecological sustainability and equity in the face of external and internal forces of change, including through respecting the conditions enabling the resilience of nature. Sustaining initiatives in midst of changing generational values/priorities, larger economic and political systems.

### **Subsidiarity, self-reliance and ecoregionalism (swavalamban/swayam-samruddhi/swadeshi<sup>9</sup>)**

Local rural and urban communities (small enough for all members to take part in decision-making) as the fundamental unit of governance, self-reliant for basic needs<sup>10</sup> including health and learning/education, linked with each other at bioregional and ecoregional levels into landscape, regional, national and international institutions that are answerable to these basic units. (The term 'self-reliant' here means self-sufficiency for basic needs as far as possible, and the right to access what is not possible to meet locally, from more centralised systems guaranteed by the state).

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9 Localised production that is part of self-reliance; not to be confused with the hyper-nationalistic and often xenophobic 'swadeshi' of right-wing forces.

10 Food, water, shelter, sanitation, clothing, personal security, learning/education, health, and livelihood.

### **Autonomy and sovereignty (swaraj/swashasan)**

Collective rights and capacities to self-govern or self-rule and be self-reliant, as peoples and communities, including custodianship of territories and elements of nature they live within or amidst; including mechanisms of direct or radical democracy.

### **Simplicity and/or sufficiency – need over greed**

The ethic of living on and being satisfied with what is adequate for life and livelihood, in tune with what is ecologically sustainable and equitable.(aparigraha)

There is a need to elaborate and distinguish between need and want...

### **Dignity and creativity of labour and work/innovation**

Respect for all kinds of labour, physical and intellectual, with no occupation or work being inherently superior to another; giving manual labour and family/women's 'unpaid' work and processes of sharing/caring their rightful place, but with no inherent attachment of any occupation with particular castes or genders; the need for all work to be dignified, safe, and free from exploitation (requiring toxic/hazardous processes to be stopped); reducing work hours; and moving towards removing the artificial dichotomy between 'work' and 'leisure' by enabling more creative and enjoyable engagement; encouraging a spirit of enquiry and inquisitiveness.

### **Non-violence, harmony, peace , co-existence and interdependence**

Attitudes and behaviour towards others that respect their physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being; the motivation not to harm others; conditions that engender harmony and peace amongst and between peoples. Wasting and irresponsible use of resources – food, water, energy is also a type of violence against the unprivileged.

### **Efficiency in production and consumption**

Efficiency in the use of elements of nature and natural (including human) resources, in terms of eliminating or minimising waste (and not in modern industrial terms of narrow productivity).

### **Dignity and trust**

Respect of every person's entitlement to be treated with dignity and trust, regardless of sexual, ethnic, class, caste, age, or other identity, and without being 'judged' as a person on moral grounds.

### **Fun**

Inculcating the spirit and practice of enjoyment, fun, and lightness of being in all aspects of life, without causing harm to others.

# What are the alternatives in various sectors/fields/ aspects of life?<sup>11</sup>

## Society, culture and peace

### Initiatives to enhance social and cultural aspects of human life, including:

- the safeguarding, revival and progressive use of visual, performing, and other arts, of the myriad crafts of the country, of threatened or submerged languages, and other such traits and processes that are part of cultural diversity and pluralism;
- struggles and constructive movements to resist ecologically and/or socially disruptive activities, to achieve social justice and peace, to remove inequalities and inequities of various kinds (from within families to larger society) including those based on caste, class, gender, ethnicity, literacy, race, religion, and location (rural-urban, near-remote), to create harmony amongst communities of different ethnicities, faiths and cultures, to respect diversity and pluralism, and to create dignity in living for those currently oppressed, exploited, or marginalised, including the 'disabled' or differently abled and sexual minorities;
- movements to generate ethical living and thinking, and spread values such as simplicity, honesty, frugality, and tolerance.

Initiatives that have casteist, communal, sexist, or other motives and biases that are related to social injustice and inequity, or those appealing to a parochial nationalism intolerant of other cultures and peoples, would not be considered alternatives.

## Alternative Economies & Technologies

### Initiatives that help to create alternatives to the dominant neo-liberal or state-dominated economy and the 'logic' of growth:

- localisation and decentralisation of economic activity with democratic control
- respect to and support of diverse livelihoods (including traditional ones in the 'primary' sector, see below) rather than priority to a few
- producer and consumer collectives
- local currencies and trade, non-monetised and equal exchange and the gift economy
- larger trade and economic relations built on the above, in line with ecological principles
- ecologically sensitive products and processes
- ecologically sustainable production and consumption
- innovative technologies, that respect ecological and cultural integrity
- macro-economic concepts that respect ecological limits, and approaches to human well-being that go beyond growth, GDP and other narrow measures and indicators
- ecologically and socially reflexive mechanisms for planning and investment in all sectors such as infrastructure

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11 This section is adapted from broad guidance used by the website [www.vikalpsangam.org](http://www.vikalpsangam.org). Other sectors and aspects could of course be added.

What may not constitute alternatives are superficial and false solutions, such as predominantly market and technological fixes for problems that are deeply social and political, or more generally, 'green growth'/ 'green capitalism' kind of approaches that only tinker around with the existing system.

## **Livelihoods**

**The search for dignified, ecologically sustainable and meaningful livelihoods and jobs, including:**

- continuation and enhancement of fulfilling traditional, ecoregenerative occupations that communities choose to continue, including in agriculture, pastoralism, nomadism, forestry, fisheries, crafts, and others in the primary economy;
- ecologically sustainable, dignified jobs in manufacturing and service sectors where producers and service-providers are in control of their destinies and revenues are equitably distributed.
- improved access to the critical conditions for meaningful livelihoods, including land, water, forests and other ecosystems, economic resources, and knowledge/information.

Possibly outside the purview of alternatives are livelihoods, traditional or modern, where non-workers are in control and profiting (monetarily or politically) from the exploitation of workers, even if the enterprise claims to be ecologically sustainable.

## **Settlements and Transportation**

**Featuring both rural and urban areas (and their inter-linkages across a continuum), and the search to make human settlements sustainable, equitable, and fulfilling places to live and work in:**

- sustainable architecture and accessible housing
- localized generation of basic infrastructural, water and energy needs to the extent possible
- biodiversity conservation through conservation of wildlife habitat including migration corridors
- waste/garbage minimisation, materials re-purposing, upcycling, recycling, efficiency and frugality in the use of resources
- avoidance of all toxic products (e.g. pesticides, plastics) and practices (e.g. waste incineration)
- defence and revival of common and open spaces
- decentralised, participatory budgeting and planning of settlements
- sustainable, equitable means of transport (especially mass, public, and non-motorised to replace current model of private and individualised transport) that can be accessed by all
- prioritisation of non-motorised transportation, and protection of safety and rights of users of such transport (e.g. pedestrian and bicycling right-of-way and dedicated paths)
- reclamation of areas given over to private vehicles, for common use, asserting the primacy and dignity of the public commons

- a cap on the speed of road traffic

Expensive, elitist models that may be ecologically sustainable but are not relevant for most people, may not fit into alternatives.

## Alternative Politics

**Initiatives and approaches towards people-centred governance and decision-making, with direct participation, and based on principles of social and environmental justice.**

- local non-hierarchical systems of decision-making (direct democracy or swaraj) in urban and rural areas, based predominantly on consensus rather than majoritarianism
- mechanisms to redistribute power equitably amongst various sections of society
- linkages of such direct democracy institutions to each other at bio-cultural or ecoregional levels
- re-imagining current political boundaries, including those of nation-states, to make them more compatible with ecological and cultural contiguities and connections
- collectives or communities that raise non-party political concerns at the local level and beyond
- activities enhancing accountability and transparency of political bodies containing delegates or representatives of direct democracy institutions, including parties and the state, and movements towards a truly democratic state (in so far as and till it is needed) that is accountable to its role of provisioning basic amenities, ensuring access to basic resources and justice especially to those who are otherwise marginalised and exploited
- policy frameworks that are based on or promote the alternatives discussed in other sections here
- providing due space to individuals in politics, within the umbrella of collective priorities necessitated by the need for sustainability and equity/justice
- internal democracy and transparency within organisations and institutions, ensuring dignity of life and equal participation (including within the family)

## Alternative Media

- alternative media initiatives that raise questions ignored or deliberately allowed to remain hidden in the mainstream media, innovative use of media to communicate enabling information, and processes that make media part of our life/work rather than an 'external' tool to use
- processes that make information access free, or easier in places usually neglected, considered 'remote' or disconnected
- participatory digital media
- reformed mainstream media
- regulating advertising to ensure it is not misleading, offensive, and invasive, especially that which is aimed at children

## Environment/conservation and ecology

### **Initiatives that promote the principles of ecological integrity and limits:**

- decentralized conservation of land, water and biodiversity, based on a respect for both local and modern knowledge, and considering environment as an integral part of life and work linking livelihoods to ecological regeneration and restoration at local and landscape level
- eliminating or minimising pollution and waste
- greater understanding of 'nature' which includes sociological, historical and geographical considerations, and aspects such as rights of other species and of nature<sup>12</sup>
- wildlife and domesticated biodiversity

Superficial solutions to ecological problems, such as planting trees to offset pollution, may not be considered alternatives.

## Energy

### **Initiatives that explore and encourage alternatives to the current centralized, environmentally damaging and unsustainable sources of energy, while continuing to advocate more equitable access to the national grid:**

- decentralized, community-run renewable sources and micro-grids
- equitable access to ecologically sustainable energy (replacing coal, oil, nuclear and large hydro), including to grids
- promoting non-electric energy options, including traditional technologies like watermills upgraded as necessary, and passive heating and cooling
- optimizing production and distribution, equitably distributing costs of such production/distribution, improving efficiency, making public institutions accountable, incorporating end-use orientation into planning, and regulating as also putting caps on demand (e.g. for luxury consumption)
- promoting energy-saving and efficient materials over wasteful ones (e.g. cement for construction)

What may not count are expensive, elitist technologies and processes that have no relevance to the majority of people.

## Learning and Education

### **Initiatives to create spaces and opportunities for learning and education that enable continued or renewed connection with the environment and nature, with communities, with one's inner voice, and with humanity as a whole:**

- nurturing a fuller range of collective and individual potentials and relationships
- unlearning the alienating, fragmenting, individualizing 'education' that mainstream institutions have been giving and promoting social inclusion

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12 One participant of the Maharashtra Vikalp Sangam felt that the 'rights of species/nature' are not congruent with the fact that most people have been non-vegetarian; others argue that one can still respect other species and nature while consuming what needs to be consumed.

- synergies between the formal and the informal community based learning, the traditional and modern, the local and global, and head-heart-hands, theory and practical
- ensuring accountability of public institutions including the state towards facilitating such learning and education, and prioritising these over private institutions
- nurturing critical thinking and holistic learning
- use of different communication and teaching modes – arts, crafts, theatre, dance, and others.

## Knowledge

### **Initiatives using knowledge as an empowering and enabling tool for a more equitable and ecologically sustainable world:**

- encouraging cross-fertilisation between ideas, and promoting information exchange and transcending boundaries between modern and traditional, scientific and non-scientific, formal and informal, and urban and rural spheres of knowledge
- making (or reclaiming) knowledge as part of the 'commons' rather than a privately owned or controlled commodity various forms of transmitting knowledge and approaches/values could be valid, including traditional forms such as oral traditions, storytelling provided they are in non-exploitative ways and do encourage free, open, challenging thinking and continuous learning (which is simply not degree based)

## Health and Hygiene

### **Initiatives ensuring good health and healthcare for all:**

- preventing ill-health in the first place, by improving social determinants of health such as nutritional food, water, sanitation, a clean environment, safe transport, avoidance of health-damaging habits and addictions, and so on
- ensuring access to curative/symptomatic facilities to those who have conventionally not had such access, including through accountability of the state's responsibility towards citizens
- avoiding an over-interventionist framework, accepting limits to medical interventions
- pluralism and integration of various health systems, traditional and modern, bringing back into popular use the diverse systems from India and outside including indigenous/folk medicine, nature cure, Ayurvedic, Unani and other holistic or integrative approaches
- community-based management and control of healthcare and hygiene, with individual responsibility towards maintaining healthy surrounds, and elimination of caste-based management of human and other wastes

## Food

### **Initiatives towards food security and sovereignty:**

- producing and making accessible safe and nutritious food
- sustaining the diversity of Indian cuisine, and promoting slow food over junk fast food

- ensuring community control over processes of food production and distribution, and commons from where uncultivated foods are obtained
- promoting uncultivated and 'wild' food
- land rights
- organic farming
- agro-biodiversity – different varieties of rice, millets, etc
- producer -consumer links

Purely elitist food fads even if they pertain to healthy or organic food, are unlikely to be considered as alternatives.



A cultural event connecting food with folk music, Food Vikalp Sangam, Bajju, Rajasthan, October 2017.

## Water

### Initiatives towards water security and sovereignty:

- making water use and distribution ecologically sustainable, efficient and equitable
- decentralised conservation
- retaining water as part of the commons
- democratic governance of water and wetlands

Expensive technological water solutions that have no relevance for the majority of people, are unlikely to be considered as alternatives.

## Global Relations

**State, civil society, citizen or multi-lateral initiated activities that target and explicitly seek to offer an alternative to the prevalent state of dog-eat-dog, belligerent and hyper-competitive international relations fuelled by geopolitical rivalries, including**

- collective well-being and not just narrow national priorities as the mandate of diplomacy
- dealing with historical grievances and developing relationships of trust and respect through cross-national dialogues among citizens and diplomats
- global moratoriums on increases in military, surveillance and police spending, and progressive reduction in spending on these, eventually eliminating weapons of all types by all states
- global bans on 'harms' trading (e.g. arms, toxic chemicals, waste)
- recognition of a multi-polar world as imperative to collective survival.
- erasure of notions such as national exceptionalism (such as the US holds) or inherent superiority (such as the Chinese self-image of "middle kingdom")
- re-examining notions of 'nation-state' and emphasising relations amongst 'peoples' of the world including through restructuring the United Nations to provide central say to non-state collectives (e.g. indigenous peoples)
- encouraging and fostering a universal citizenship based on the principle of one humanity

### Law/Custom

- Social norms that become informal customs and/or formal or statutory rules and laws, through processes that are fully democratic and equitable, including
- Broad concepts of what actions and behaviour could be considered undesirable because they harm others, taking note of the values and principles of equity, diversity, and dignity stated above
- Ways of dealing with actions and behaviour that harm others or violate the values and principles stated above, with an emphasis on empathetic ways of changing behaviour, redressal, and rehabilitation rather than on punishment
- Increasing attempts to broadbase norms as ways of life, rather than as rules and laws that need to be imposed from above

What other sectors and aspects should be listed here?



Participants at the National Sangam, Udaipur, Rajasthan, November 2017.

# What strategies/pathways could lead us to such alternative futures?

A number of strategies and actions are needed to forge the pathways towards a sustainable and equitable future. These include:

Resistance, civil disobedience, and non-cooperation (both collective and individual) towards the forces of unsustainability, inequality and injustice

Decolonisation of mind-sets and attitudes and institutions, to remove hierarchies and dichotomies, e.g. between science and other forms of knowledge, modern and traditional, intellectual and physical labour

Initiatives in re-commoning including of previously 'enclosed' or privatised commons

Facilitation of voices of the disempowered/disprivileged (dalits, adivasis, women, landless, disabled, minorities, nomads, 'denotified' tribes, workers, etc) in forums of decision-making

Encouragement of public innovation and experimentation in solutions in various sectors; networking of alternative initiatives at regional and thematic levels

Counter-shaming of those who display gender, sexual, or other stereotypical prejudices and biases

Alternative ways of learning and socialization based on the listed principles and values. introducing this in schools, colleges, and other platforms.

Assessing individual and work lifestyles, and modifying where they are unsustainable or unjust

Facilitation for non-violent communication and resolution of disputes; methods of healing trauma (individual and community)

Fostering public understanding of diversity and non-antagonistic differences in culture, ideologies, lifestyles, and faiths

Promoting traditions, festivals, practices that are related to nature's regenerative and productive capacity, and spiritual/religious pluralism and syncretism

Responsibility in one's personal lives ('walking the talk') regarding sustainability and equity, and honesty when this is not possible; listening to one's conscience and intuition in directing actions and behaviour

Public ('commons') sharing of knowledge, experiences, resources, and skills, especially through non-monetary means

Continuous and multi-level dialogue, including amongst those who disagree on ideological and strategic grounds

Use of all available democratic means of redressal and transformation, including policy forums and the judiciary

Consumer awareness of the consequences of different consumption choices, and options for change, eventually evolving into a system where responsibility to provide safe and healthy goods lies with the producer

Engagement with all political formations, including in both party and non-party processes

Use of both mainstream and alternative media to carry forward the message of transformation

Use technology creatively to get access and to reach others

Fostering public understanding of historical and structural roots of the contemporary crises, and collective search for solutions

Learning from both 'classical' and 'folk' traditions including humanitarian ones (eventually removing the dichotomy between them); from both prominent ideologists and thinkers (Gandhi, Marx, Phule, Ambedkar, Aurobindo, Tagore ... others), feminists, environmentalists, and adivasi/indigenous/tribal/dalit worldviews

Mutual learning with other peoples and civilisations across the world

Integrating art into everyday lives, fostering the creative in every individual and collective, bringing work and pleasure together

Trying to change attitude of government especially related to issues to which they cannot say no.

Creating/using spaces available for example: common consent for projects (direct democracy within the current system)

## **Could all this converge into holistic alternative worldview(s)?**

Can some holistic worldviews and frameworks emerge in the above exploration, which can be a strong challenge to the currently dominant systems? For this, we need to address the following (amongst many) questions:

How strongly can we posit the community/collective as the fulcrum of power, rather than either the state or corporations?

How much are ancient or early practices and concepts, that have emerged over the last few thousand years in India, still relevant; how much are they susceptible to being co-opted by communal or capitalist/corporate forces, and how can they be rescued from such misuse to further causes inclusive of all?

How do we learn from worldviews usually submerged under the more dominant articulations? The same, with other special perspectives, such as feminist?

How do we make all this relevant to today's India, including its youth? Some issues like corruption, or gay/lesbian rights, seem to bring young people out on the streets ... how can 'alternatives' also be made relevant like these, how do we tap people's need to see positive messages?

How can these issues reach across to a wider (non-converted) public, what languages and forms of communication (oral, written, printed, visual, audio) would work more effectively while not dumbing down the message? How to combine reason and emotion in the messaging?

What kind of transitions would work for those already fully caught in today's dominant systems, including the urban middle classes; conversely, how to ensure that those already living relatively sustainable lives are enabled to continue and enhance them?

Who would be the main political agents of change? How can mass movements that are resisting currently dominant systems, be engaged with for an orientation towards alternative futures?

And last, but not the least, what processes can bring together the dispersed, fragmented, and diverse struggles working towards alternatives across India, on some common grounds and visions? How does this become a force for political change?

How much are we as individuals or organisations living these values and principles? Are our organisations and our work based on solidarity, simplicity ... are there alternative economic options for our own work?

Is there consensus on the issue of private property?

How would different sectors work together where there may be potential or actual contradictions, e.g. providing access to the 'disabled' or livelihood options to the poor or settlement rights to refugees that necessitate some ecological damage?

# Vikalp Sangam

## Alternatives Confluences across India

The severe negative impacts of the current model of 'development' and 'globalisation' include ecological destruction, displacement of communities, disruption of livelihoods on a mass scale, and growing socio-economic inequities. Various parts of India are already facing tension and conflicts caused by a mindless pursuit of economic growth, along with continued patriarchy, capitalist exploitation, state-centred power domination, casteism, and other sources of inequity and unsustainability. All sectors of the economy and society are being oriented towards feeding into the 'developmentalism' pursuit, whether it is education, R&D, markets and trade, or health.

In the midst of this dismal scenario, there are many alternatives that challenge the dominant 'development' paradigm and other structural forces mentioned above. These alternatives also provide viable pathways for human wellbeing that are ecologically sustainable and socio-economically equitable. These include sustainable farming/pastoralism/ fisheries/ forestry, democratic markets and worker-controlled production, community education and health approaches, cross-cultural peace initiatives, initiatives to further class, caste, religious, racial, and gender equity, urban and rural sustainability and wellbeing, community-centred arts and crafts, youth empowerment, inclusiveness of diverse sexualities and abilities, alternative media, and so on. There is also a momentum within some of these initiatives to direct or radical democracy and political approaches where citizens are part of decision making (rather than have the decisions taken by 'representatives' alone), and/or to ensure greater transparency and accountability in governance.

These initiatives show that there are indeed viable alternatives at local and landscape levels. However, a number of factors severely limit their effect:

1. There is little documentation and public awareness on most of them;
2. They are mostly scattered and unlinked, often very small;
3. They are not threaded together into comprehensive frameworks or visions of an alternative society.

As a consequence, these alternative initiatives do not yet form a 'critical mass' capable of changing the dominant paradigm or even providing it a formidable challenge.

The word alternative or vikalp is being used here for simplicity, while accepting that no single word can fully encompass the complexity of ground realities, concepts and worldviews. We understand that in many cases, these may not have emerged as a challenge to the dominant paradigm or pose an alternative as such, but simply as a way of life grounded in certain basic principles. Also many of these ideas, concepts and ways of life may have existed for a long time, while others may be new.

### **The idea of Vikal Sangams / Alternatives Confluences**

It is against this backdrop that regional and thematic gatherings of people practicing or conceiving alternatives have been initiated. These are being called Vikalp Sangams or

Alternatives Confluences, and provide a platform to constructively challenge and learn from each other, build alliances, and collectively evolve alternative futures.

We are aware that there are many networks and initiatives that have brought together movements and groups on various platforms related to this theme. But most of these are limited to individual themes or kinds of movements, e.g. struggles against destructive 'development' projects, alternative health initiatives, sustainable farming work, etc. There are limited opportunities and attempts to cut across thematic areas, bringing ecological, education, health, justice, livelihood, market/trade, governance and other alternatives together to learn from each other. The Vikalp Sangams aim to be such cross-cutting gatherings, and to build on rather than replicate the existing/ ongoing initiatives.

Minimum time is spent at the Vikalp Sangams on the ills of the current economic/ political/ social system. There are plenty of other occasions available for this; the Sangams are predominantly focused on alternatives. But we also do not want to fall into the trap of romanticizing these alternatives; both the pros and cons of such initiatives are shared.

### **Structure of the Vikalp Sangams**

The Vikalp Sangams are not intended to be academic conferences, but rather a more free-flowing meeting of minds and hearts and hands and feet. Over 3-4 days, there could be small group or plenary sessions focused on individual themes, to enable in-depth exchange and learning, with substantial time devoted to learning across themes and movements. Opportunities to showcase the initiatives include exhibitions, films/A-Vs, theatre and other arts / media. Spontaneous joint activities like art and theatre, or learning some craft, are also attempted. If easily accessible, trips to one or more alternative initiatives in the area are included. The Sangams are a combination of fun, learning & unlearning, and bonding.

### **Participants and Venues**

The Sangams bring together practitioners, thinkers, researchers and theorists (these are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories!) working on the broad theme of alternatives to destructive and inequitable development. The participation ranges from a few dozen to over a hundred people, depending on local situations. Each of the Sangams is organized and hosted by one or more regional organizations/institutions that have the capacity; expenses are shared by these organizations and participants.

The Sangam process started in 2014. As of mid-2018, the following Sangams have been held: at a regional level, Andhra Pradesh / Telengana, Tamil Nadu, Ladakh, West Himalaya (a mini-Sangam), Kachchh, Maharashtra, Kerala; at thematic level, Energy, Food, Youth, Peace in Central India, and Health. A National level Sangam in late 2017 reviewed 3 years of the process, and planned the next phase. Reports on all the Sangams in English and relevant local language are available (see <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/vikalp-sangam-reports#.WxjYtC2B1E6>).

### **Related Processes**

Apart from the physical confluences, the Vikalp Sangam process also includes extensive documentation and outreach of alternative initiatives. A website, [www.vikalpsangam.org](http://www.vikalpsangam.org).

org, collates stories, case studies, perspectives and resources on alternatives in India. An e-list connects several hundred people including those who have participated in the Sangams. Poster exhibitions, booklets, films, and other resources for outreach have been produced (see <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/vikalp-sangam-outputs/#.WoLHzvmux1s>).

### **National Core Group**

An evolving core group has been set up to coordinate the planning of the Sangams, with the following members (as of early 2018): Kalpavriksh, Deccan Development Society (DDS), Bhoomi College, Shikshantar, Timbaktu Collective, Development Alternatives (DA), SOPPECOM, Gene Campaign, BHASHA, Kriti Team, Centre for Equity Studies (CES), URMUL, National Alliance of Peoples' Movements (NAPM), Peoples' Science Institute (PSI), Maati, Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture (ASHA), Ekta Parishad, South Asian Dialogue on Ecological Democracy (SADED), Knowledge in Civil Society (KICS), North East Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity Society (NESFAS), ACCORD, Centre for Education and Documentation (CED), Centre for Environment Education (CEE), reStore, ComMutiny: The Youth Collective (CYC), Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), Ektha, Students' Environmental and Cultural Movement of Ladakh (SECMOL), Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust (SLC-IT), Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation (LAMO), Local Futures, Sahjeevan, Samvedana, Dharamitra, Video Volunteers, Ideosync, Greenpeace India, MAKAAAM, Sambhaavnaa, Jagori Rural, Deer Park, Blue Ribbon Movement, EQUATIONS, Chalakudypuzha Samrakshana Samithi / River Research Centre, CGNetSwara, and Tribal Health Initiative; and Sushma Iyengar, Dinesh Abrol, Sangeetha Sriram, Ovais Sultan Khan. The Core Group will keep evolving with the process.

From 2014, Kalpavriksh has been coordinating the Vikalp Sangam process; it is proposed that this coordination will shift to another of the above organisations by 2020.

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Across India and the rest of the world, there are thousands of initiatives at meeting human needs and aspirations without destroying the earth and its species, or leaving half of humanity behind. Based on these, can there be a collective search for paradigms and pathways towards a world that is sustainable, equitable and just? How can such frameworks and visions build on an existing heritage of ideas and worldviews and cultures, and on past or new grassroots practice? How can they be fundamentally different from the dominant economic and political system, which has brought the world to the brink of ecological collapse and the depths of socio-economic (including gender and caste) inequalities and despair? Can they provide rays of hope in what currently seems to be a worsening situation of social tension and conflicts, the resurgence of regressive right-wing forces, and suffering caused by environmental damage?

This publication brings together the background note on the Vikalp Sangam process ('Alternatives Confluences') and the Alternatives Framework note.

The two documents have emerged out of the Vikalp Sangam, a space for networking of groups and individuals working on alternatives to the currently dominant model of development and governance, in various spheres of life ([www.vikalpsangam.org](http://www.vikalpsangam.org)).

