

Social Well-being in Community Development: Challenges in Creating Justice Objectives¹

Introduction

The viability of rural communities and methods of food production is central to the health of the environment as well as humanity. So mounting evidence of the destructive and unsustainable ways more and more food is produced today is especially alarming. The prevailing model of economic development, widely referred to as globalization or neoliberalism, includes massive export-oriented agriculture as a major component, and creates structures of concentrated power and wealth that generate far-reaching problems on a global scale (Cavanaugh; Porritt; Robbins). Industrial agriculture can be directly or indirectly linked to widespread contamination of rivers, soil erosion (currently estimated at 1% annual loss worldwide), depletion of fresh water supplies, growing chemical imbalances of oceans, loss of seed varieties, and acceleration of global climate change. Whether rationalized or unintended, the cumulative impact of such deleterious trends brings to mind the experience of Green Revolution technologies several decades ago, which raised productive potential but often at high social and environmental costs.

Recent growth and shifts of human population figure prominently in the expansion justification, and ultimately also the implications of global economic integration. The new millennium commenced with world population exceeding six billion people, and, for first time in human history, a majority being urban dwellers (UN). Growing numbers are concentrated in burgeoning cities, many comprised of millions of inhabitants. The corresponding pressures to produce needed food and other resources are tremendous. Promising efficiencies and volume, large-scale corporate agribusiness does so at great cost – simultaneously undermining the viability of smaller-scale food production, dramatically reducing biodiversity, and dislocating millions from the countryside. Few regions in the world today have been spared the devastating combinations of rural exodus, declines in both local and national food security, and ever widening gaps in wealth and access to resources (Berry; ISEC; Norberg-Hodge).

As the problems inherent in the conventional way of exploiting natural and human resources become ever more magnified, politicians, producers of goods, and the public alike face a profound challenge: the impossibility of simply continuing to grow all economies. The high price of materialism and widening stratification negates the complacent assumption that the market will, in time, rectify everything. The end of cheap oil and the alarming reduction of Arctic sea ice are perhaps the clearest signals of an inevitable transition ahead, voluntary or not.

There is, however, an “upside to down” (Homer-Dixon) – fortunately so, given the seeming acceleration of the world into multiple, deepening crises, with limited time to change course. Growing awareness of the ominous trends in planetary health and social problems has spurred a range of adaptive responses in communities and countries the world over. The multitude of voices of concern being raised and the myriad actions taken together comprise the arena of sustainability (Hawken; Korten; McKibben; Raven).

Sustainability and education for sustainability have become the heart of a transformation in thinking about development. These new approaches are plural, with different strategies allowed to thrive. They also extend beyond simply defending the natural environment, endeavoring as well to reverse the current widespread erosion of possibilities for equitable growth and satisfaction of human needs.

Fundamentally, sustainability efforts are grounded in social justice. They reaffirm and strengthen the social as well as economic capabilities of people. In light of today’s growing inequality and undermining of rural communities, this pairing is critical. Building on principles of creative use of local resources, a diversified productive base, and participatory planning and operations, emergent sustainable alternatives promote greater autonomy in the provision of material bases for a good standard of living. Greater equity and capacity in turn enables better stewardship of human and natural resources.

This paper suggests that issues of sustainability may be usefully engaged by considering distinctive productive strategies and associated social relations that have ensured the long-term viability of rural communities, often for centuries, if not millennia. Drawing on the experience of rural communities in Latin America, as well as wider cross-cultural evidence, several key questions emerge:

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1. Can we identify a set of principles and practices that promote community wellbeing and overall social justice?
2. Is it possible and useful to relearn or re-create such principles and institutions – including in contemporary urban and industrialized settings – in order to help restore communities and their natural environments?
3. How might we meet the major challenges for more measured and equitable integration into the global marketplace, rather than reinforcing current imbalances?
4. Can fair trade and related cross-border cooperative frameworks most effectively foster mutual community wellbeing?

Lives and Livelihoods

For most of human history, and continuing in many indigenous and traditional societies today, concepts of inviolable common resources and shared community use have been understood and respected as basic, endemic truths. More than a matter of community commons, the teachings of the natural world are closely intertwined with social, political and spiritual values. Peoples living in direct relationship with the earth generally share similar worldviews, grounded – as they are to the land – in relatively communal, nonhierarchical relationships.

One would hardly expect peoples living across such vast ecological diversity as exists on earth to hold to universal ethics. Yet living in particular ecosystems, for generations and even millennia, engenders not only intricate place-based knowledge but also an overall conservation ethic. That ethic, whatever its variations, tends to emphasize cooperation, cross-generational communication and learning, concern for well-being of future generations, primary reliance on locally available resources, collective and inalienable rights to land and resources, and respect for and restraint in exploiting them (Posey). The shared wealth of knowledge, resourcefulness, and adaptive strategies within communities also provide them with their generally effective capacity to respond to difficult circumstances or emergencies.

Such primary relationships have not always been politically favored, as states grew larger and elite sectors more dominant. Not surprisingly, they have also been central targets of colonialism and capitalist expansion (Wolf; Robbins). Subsequently, even well intentioned development efforts were also often misdirected. Focus on poverty and needs, related interventions directed to single issues, and arrogance of experts and outsiders, frequently resulted in disregard for the intricate livelihood systems that represent the true wealth of seemingly impoverished communities. As a result, such efforts have usually had mixed outcomes at best.

Increasingly, the complex multi-dimensionality of even small communities has come to be understood as key to their resilience as well as potentiality. The sustainable livelihoods approach is particularly noteworthy for shifting focus from needs to assets and empowerment. For livelihoods to be sustainable, they must be economically efficient, reflect precepts of social equity, adhere to principles of ecological integrity, and maintain flexibility (Helmore and Singh). Ultimately, the human right to a sustainable livelihood is also asserted. The collective responsibility of all, across strata and including governments, is to uphold the dignity of others, which includes creating and sustaining the social and natural environments in which people can use their abilities, fulfill their potential, and flourish.

With traditional agriculture as our focus, we now consider evidence of how people seek to assure their consumption needs in accord with local resources. In doing so they also participate in and reaffirm diversity, and in turn they find benefits through integration of appropriate scales of operation and product mix.

Small-Scale Producers

Rural food producers play a critical role in sustaining urban regions as well as themselves. Their significance is strangely incongruous with how frequently they have been denigrated and targeted for dislocation or persecution. Their designation in much of the literature – peasants – has come to have mainly negative connotations, as people who are largely backward, stubborn, and not very intelligent. Even their popular connotation as “traditional” may be equated with something romantic or quaint, but hardly competitive or worthy of investment.

Extensive ethnographic and empirical evidence reveals that small-scale producers are anything but anachronistic (Gonzales; Norberg-Hodge, et al.; Shiva; Wilken). In fact, they are remarkably resilient. Tasks may require considerable time and effort, but hard work, tenacity, and sacrifice do not equate with inefficiency. Common concern for maximizing security generally provides broader overall resilience than occurs when emphasis is on maximal output or unitary products and processes. Even so, productivity is often higher than the low or non-existent yields that would come through mechanized production. Furthermore, in a local economy, skills and resources (including money) remain circulating locally over and over, rather than being siphoned off and often lost to the community forever as characterizes the amalgamation of global food production.

Being part of, and living within, the ecosystem, local food producers both survive and thrive by accommodating social systems to ecological circumstances within which they exist, rather than by altering those environments simply to accommodate to their particular desires. Together they build synergies, holistic arrangements (the organizational whole being more than the sum of component parts), and resilience in the face of adverse developments.

Interdependent relationships are critical to their reliance on sustainable economic endeavors. Interdependence is vital to quality of life, across its physical, social, emotional, and moral dimensions. Work in functioning rural communities, even tiring physical labor, is often associated with sociability. Especially when tasks are performed together, they may be done at a moderate pace, with shared sense of purpose or even celebration. Tangible connectedness through work in turn extends into meaning and purpose, encouraging pursuit of happiness rather than singular pursuit of self-interest.

The multifaceted lives as well as productive systems of small-scale producers have, unfortunately, often been ignored in top-down thinking. Rural residents are not “just” farmers, nor are they simply duplications. Tremendous diversity persists across the spectrum of rural and small-scale societies. Each is grounded, physically and mentally, in a unique and complex combination of place-based experiences and knowledge. This diversity is witnessed in the ways people refer to themselves, frequently with names that mean “we the people.”

Nonetheless, rural peoples share commonalities in basic values that are concomitant with their means of production. Social concerns revolve around complementary responsibility and responsiveness. When interactions and lives remain on a human scale, people are able to enjoy social relations and nurture them by taking time and practicing reciprocity. This does not presume blind compliance or automatic harmony, however. Disputes are, after all, a human universal, including in villages and towns. While not wholly democratic, people within smaller-scale economies nonetheless generally remain deeply engaged in decisions that affect the whole. They value each other within socially embedded relationships. This encourages a sense of shared identity through modes of enculturation and inculcation. They also share a common concern with children as their future.

In contemporary parlance, rural peoples demonstrate intelligent localism as well as social responsibility. They are conservationists

more than conservatives. They adopt and adapt when relative advantage and compatibility is evident and when measured changes can be tried. Nor are their communitarian values simply sentimentalist romanticism. Essentially they are advocates and practitioners of common sense, and their values constitute pragmatism more than fatalism.

While relative self-reliance is fundamental, this is not synonymous with self-sufficiency.

Small-scale producers are, in fact, almost always intricately connected to the state and urban centers, usually to considerable disadvantage as a result of having relatively less power. Tribute, taxation, conscription, and expropriation mark the histories of many rural peoples at the hands of city and state authorities. Dependency theory help reveal how “underdevelopment” of the rural periphery is the underbelly of more powerful cores. But it is also essential to move beyond thinking simply in dualisms and a rural-urban continuum. These complex relations are more usefully reconceptualized with respect to how they are articulated or bound into circuits of exchange that fuel their differentiation (Kearney; Wolf).

Everywhere today we can observe how rural peoples and the social identities are being simultaneously undermined and often destroyed by modern capitalist agriculture. Family farms in the United States reveal similar social and economic benefits as pertain in small-scale farming worldwide. Studies dating to the 1940s find both social vitality and economic advantages to be much better in communities surrounded by family farms, compared to where corporate-owned industrial agriculture was the norm (Goldschmidt). When the webs of interdependence are strong, relationships personal, and economic transactions blur with social interactions, a sense of community is clearly strengthened as well. So while efficiency and anonymity may result in impressive volumes, they often come at the cost of psychological as well as physical dislocations.

Central America: Corn, Coffee and Community Development

In Latin America, locally based food producers, or *campesinos*, have a lengthy history of resilience amid uncertainties, resistance to injustice, and realism paired with retrospection when confronting change. For thirty-five years, I have been following developments in highland Guatemalan communities that lacked electricity and road access when I first visited during college. In the face of pervasive and accelerating changes associated with a globalizing economy, residents of San Juan are attempting to

retain as much control as possible over their lives and livelihoods. Rainfall-dependent corn cultivation continues, but coffee has become a major cash crop in recent decades. Increasingly, coffee is produced through careful hand cultivation and natural inputs, with growing proportions achieving organic certification, including through communal efforts in a sizeable cooperative. When asked, people say they are interested in getting ahead, by which they include greater material comforts as well as access to new information and opportunities. But they are also deliberate in their promotion of reforestation, restoration of degraded lakeshore, systematic litter collection, and environmental education. Through deeds as well as words, then, people acknowledge that their future hinges on the health of both natural and social environment.

The San Juan experience is also grounded in participatory democracy. "With everyone (*con todos*) we work out a community diagnostic, and through community dialog everyone participates and understands our development plan," says the young mayor, a bilingual teacher committed to fully involving youth in community planning and projects. They are now working on a regional plan regarding potentials. They increasingly speak of opportunities rather than needs, recognizing this as a significant change from being passively buffeted by wider events, while focusing on shared possibilities and benefits. Traditional communal landholdings and use rights have eroded over the years, but through such community efforts they continue to uphold a basic Mesoamerican principle – that of mutual support (*apoyo mutuo*).

This case reveals the benefits of an innovative process that encompasses cultural and environmental activities as interrelated parts of one process. The early involvement of women has proven to be crucial. Capacity building extends existing strengths while building on unique niche-advantages. This includes soliciting a variety of views locally, as well as adjusting direction to what is valued by visitors as well as abroad. People's self-definition increasingly emphasizes present and future as well as past. Community members speak of "adaptive resilience," rather than sustainability, development, or progress, when describing the direction they are creating – a syncretism of elements that have worked well, with what lends themselves to new definitions and use.

The experience of fair trade coffee production is another example of redistribution of both political and economic power. Recent years have seen rapid growth of organically produced and fairly traded coffee operations, often within cooperative organizations, in highland communities from southern Mexico to Costa Rica. This

growth speaks to how people recognize that inequalities, such as those inherent in plantation-based export agriculture (Cambranes), lead to environmental degradation. Their self-definition has increasingly come to emphasize present and future as well as past. They welcome opportunity to demonstrate and deepen understanding of the dynamics of their natural systems, while actively participating in redesigned productive systems that enable them to be productive by conserving environmental integrity.

Two organic coffee cooperatives in southern Mexico provide further evidence for how social wellbeing is intrinsic to local responses to globalization. As they considered whether and how to participate the increasingly competitive global market for coffee, small producers in a poor Maya hamlet in Chiapas drew on indigenous general assembly and other community structures (Burkhart). Their transition from conventional to organic production was continuously guided by concern for improving social and economic conditions, and implicit recognition that this was predicated on environmental health. Despite major impediments associated with unfavorable and disarticulating terms of trade, they gauged their growing effectiveness in addressing and meeting social needs in terms of decreasing need to migrate and expansion of more sustainable land use practices.

Just Coffee is another example of how innovation can be effectively blended with social justice. Taking advantage of the possibility for completing all stages of coffee production within the same country, the coffee cooperative ships beans that are organically grown through a cooperative in the southern tip of Mexico to roasting and shipping facilities along the northern border with the United States. The worker owned company builds on direct and internet marketing and socially conscious education, as well as geographic niche. In addition to providing incentives for both young and old to remain on family lands, Just Coffee provides higher returns, health care, and even retirement benefits to participants – benefits that are almost unheard of in the region, and befitting their motto, "caffeine with a conscience."

The Reframing Imperative

The preceding examples reveal how small, mainly rural communities manage the complex interplay between production and reproduction, distribution and consumption, and individuality and the collective. Those dynamics stand in sharp contrast to the paradigm that dominates today. Global market expansion has proceeded with such rapidity and lack of monitoring that increasing numbers of people even foresee impending life system collapse. The more the global market system produces and

consumes, the better. Damage to others is masked through sophisticated advertising, media myopia, and political manipulation of terms and parameters of debate. Even mammoth impacts of overall global predation are conveniently externalized. Denial becomes convenient. Rarely does public authority remain to protect common life interest; even protection, such as it is, is routinely transferred to the private sector.

In Latin America, neoliberal market mantras are especially coming under question, as externalities are found to have real and often damaging impacts (Barkin; Escobar). Privatization – of land, subsurface resources, and water – is prominent in this recent rethinking. In Bolivia during 1999-2000, for example, an attempt to criminalize even collection of rainwater provoked mass protests and worldwide condemnation. As the myths of privatization are aligned alongside purported benefits, both the wisdom and the morality of wholesale dismantling of public enterprises is increasingly coming under question.

Globalization definitions trumpet growing interconnectedness, and even creation of a “global community.” In fact, linkages are often highly specific (goods and media images) and tenuous. Global reach is pervasive, encompassing almost all peoples, countries, and resources in a convergence of technologies, production systems, and mechanisms of political control. But global reality is something quite different. Large, urban, face-paced directions proceed at the expense of small, human, and socially responsive interrelatedness. While the nature and implications of the contemporary global economic structure have been subject to growing critique, the social values and practices that have long sustained human societies require equally substantial attention.

Emulating Small Communities

Not everyone can, nor should, return to farming or village life. Cities, nation-states, and corporations will likely persist for some time. However, supporting self-determination and distributive economic models – in rural areas as well as in more urban and industrialized contexts – encourages healthier balance between trade and local production, concomitantly with the deep social and psychological benefits of living in community.

In farming and small communities, we can perceive key elements that make them sustainable (McKibben; Norberg-Hodge). First, their development is fundamentally local, incorporating what the community knows with any introduced technological or externally derived knowledge. It is participatory, encouraging critical thinking and ultimately transformation through asserting

community strengths and strategies, rather than deficits and needs. It is also deeply empowering, influencing attitudes and behaviors so people are better able to be responsible for, or reject, aspects of and changes in their situation. Finally, their sustainability is about the long term, working within limits, in line with an ethos that promotes equilibrium. Contemporary capitalism, by contrast, tends to reduce the natural world to resources and places to dispose byproducts of production, while promoting excess, eschewing the idea of limits, and responding to the shortest of terms.

Ironically, while capitalism and sustainability seem diametrically opposed, converging imperatives may be drawing both into the work ahead. For this to happen, certain aspects of small communities merit simulation.

In the first place, there is immeasurable value to regarding society as an ecosystem. Communities are similar to living organisms, with each member playing a crucial role, living in interdependent relationship with other parts, functioning together to help sustain the whole, and collectively ensuring responsiveness to threats as well as opportunities. Community life and wellbeing are paramount. Seen in this light, economics are part of living systems, characterized by patterns and processes as well as capability for being regenerative (Ikerd; Porritt).

Community rights are equally fundamental. Putting an “s” on peoples and communities is more than symbolic; it affirms uniqueness and gives value to diverse experience and expertise. We should again speak of peoples and cultures as nations. Doing so gives them a standing and status in international law, along with individuals and nation-states. At the least, declarations that support social and cultural rights provide moral and symbolic force, and become part of customary law as accepted standard, until and unless sanctionable laws are agreed to.

Readjustment of material consumption as well as expectations to a sensible level is also required. Today we are seeing a movement of movements, helping to reclaim real needs from the mounds of desires (Hawken; Pollan). Appropriate technology and localization efforts reflect commitment to reducing the stages, and the problems, in processing and distribution. The experience of small groups and local communities is also providing much to encourage. Evidence is irrefutable that innumerable local impacts add up to ominous global consequences, but this also reminds us that global betterment can and must also be based on manifold small actions and cumulative synergies.

Reaffirming Human and Social Capital

The drift of large-scale capitalism has been toward promoting material wellbeing rather than enhancing quality of life. This may have been reasonable during times when lives entailed hard labor and deprivation. But as gains in productivity through industrial development engendered systematic degradation of social values and relationships, along with ecosystems, priorities must be re-examined. In practice, this requires shift to the social and ethical as part of systemic redesign.

In the “five capitals” framework, outlined by the UK-based Forum for the Future (Porritt), the benefits generated through human and social capital must be valued just as much as the more familiar natural, manufactured, and financial stocks. The physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual capacities of individuals, as well as the “social glue” that binds people together, both have immeasurable worth.

Social capital, in particular, is critical to development efforts. Reflected in the ability and commitment of people to relate to each other, social capital is evident in cultural affiliation and the formation of families, communities, and countries. Anthropological studies demonstrate how culture has enabled human beings to become both pervasive and powerful, for good and for ill. Through a shared culture, people both conserve their funds of knowledge and stocks of social capital, and adapt and direct them towards forming new relationships that are more effective and satisfying. Shared initiatives, trust, and networks may be difficult to quantify. But they are also so encompassing and reinforcing as to be essential in the development of any concrete proposals.

A moral consensus for sustainability underlies the social continuity of traditional cultures and communities. Individual have rights to pursue and collaborate in economic pursuits, to the extent that such activities and associations do not exceed limits of and reinvestments in society as well as natural surroundings. This is routinely codified in laws, embedded in child socialization, and implicit in proverbs and mythology. Contributing to social and ecological wellbeing is paramount.

Essentially, culture is a reflection of the pursuit of the common good – for society as a whole, not just a collection of disparate individuals. This need not imply equal rights of everyone to everything, nor equal allocations. But it does mean right to adequate services and access to resources to which they have inherent rights as community members. Clearly these rights extend equally to protection from economic exploitation, as well as

to means for facilitating harmonious relationships among people, and between them and their natural environment. Stewardship – protecting and preserving the commons, and the good of the commons – is critical for assuring the wellbeing of future generations. Unmistakably one of the most fundamental cultural values, and perhaps the most widely shared moral virtue, ultimately it is also intimately linked to both interpersonal and intergenerational equity.

Changing the Metrics

More sophisticated understanding of traditional agriculture and integration of new technologies are, as we have seen, among the changes that are both necessary and already underway. New mental models of the possible also call for a return to common sense – oddly, something that is not always customary in the formulation of economic and political policies. But practical steps and clear measures make good sense, for business as well as applied research.

How might we best articulate the social criteria conducive to nurturing a sustainable way of life? Identifying valid benchmarks should draw on the cross-cultural record of societies that have lived in ongoing accord with each other and with their surroundings. Commonalities are also likely to be found within the multiplicity of visionary frameworks for a better world that are so energetically proposed today.

A set of generic values and related practices that reflect fundamental social and environmental justice might include the following (cf, Porritt; Cavanaugh, et al.; Bopp and Bopp):

- recognition of interdependence (holism; “it takes a village”)
- affirmation of diversity (beyond tolerance; building from its emergent qualities)
- individuality (encouraging different aptitudes, passions, site-specific opportunities)
- compassion for others (hurt of one is hurt of all; honor of one, the honor of all)
- commitment to equity (expressed through sharing and reciprocity)
- respect for non-human interests and rights (biocentrism)
- intergenerational justice (respect for future generations, as well as elders)
- creative participatory procedures (living democracy)
- interactive learning (with nature and each other)
- cultural significance (development must be rooted in culture)

- local control/subsidiarity (authority from below, effectiveness of small groups)

The creation of indicators of social wellbeing must also proceed from the bottom up. What are the realities and expression of needs of the people? What health, housing, and sociability opportunities exist? Does greater local production have measurable contributions to nutritional status and improved health indices, as has been established elsewhere? How much autonomy is optimal in the provision of the material basis for a satisfactory standard of living? What is the best way to consider potential trade-offs in valuing quality of life?

Social impact assessment and enumeration of social indicators through surveys could also prove useful, especially when combined with qualitative methods based on long-term participation and partnerships within and between communities. Scoping out circumstances around the problem in question, and profiling possible implications such as social costs, are requisite steps before one can formulate scenarios if different things are prioritized, technological inputs included, or complications experienced. Comparison provides additional advantages, with evidence elsewhere contributing to more precise projections. Through such means, successful management and accurate monitoring of developments become more likely.

Socially Responsible Consumers

The movement toward sustainability involves a dual strategy. On the one hand, it entails creating opportunities for alternative and relatively autonomous resolution of problems. It also enables formation of new social pacts, in which promotion of economic wellbeing is established through democratic incorporation within more diverse productive and distributive structures. Formalization of such autonomous production systems is immeasurably strengthened as well through collaborative arrangements with more distant, yet equally committed, partners.

As the broad implications of contemporary agricultural methods, trade policies, and political structures have become ever clearer, more and more people are seeking out ecologically sound and equitable alternatives (Suzuki and Dressel). Concern for both healthy foods and healthy environments, along with growing understanding of their interconnections, is evident in remarkable growth in organic farming, demand for less refined and chemical-free foods by consumers, and desire for more direct links to local communities and economies. Recent years have seen a proliferation of farmers' markets, spread of local food-share

(subscription farming) systems and community supported agriculture (CSA), and public insistence on accurate source and ingredient labeling.

These trends reveal that far from being just a single global market, consumers express varied and increasingly ecologically mindful choices. A host of new concepts reflecting ecological health and agricultural ethics – such as the “slow foods” movement and terms like “locovores” and “edible lawns” – have found their way into public discourse in a very short period of time (Pollan).

In the United States, concerns about healthy foods are increasingly tied to promotion of sustainable modes of production. In the Pacific Northwest, for example, students and researchers have collaborated with community members to initiate the Whatcom County Community Food Assessment (WCCFA) project. Its goals are to accumulate data on economic and physical access to healthy food, distances to retail food outlets, options for procuring food through gleaning and urban-gardening projects, and incentives for expanding organically produced foods.

Informed people make better decisions. Awareness and reduction of food miles has become an essential component of smarter consumption. Yet many goods, including a variety of foods, are not and cannot be produced locally. Alternative trade arrangements are helping consumers make more intelligent choices about what and from whom to buy. The challenge lies in creating a support structure, including through education that is inclusive of producers as well as consumers.

One hopeful scenario is the emergence of a network of cross-border relationships built on more direct exchange, as well as collaboration and reciprocity that characterize many small communities. As with the Just Coffee model described above, we can extend such strengths through efforts such as community supported agriculture spanning borders. As markets and technical resources are provided to traditional societies, they in turn provide valuable goods such as healthy foods. In the process, people who have become fairly disconnected from the natural world are reminded that humans depend on it, as do all forms of life. In that sense, geographically dispersed local producers have become educational leaders, helping the more affluent moderate their consumption.

Shifting Direction

In present conditions, where accumulation of wealth simultaneously creates insecurity and impoverishment, the

challenges ahead are enormous: how to respond promptly and most effectively to a series of prospective catastrophes. Our collective sustained effort to make wise decisions now as well as the long term must make the most of the expertise of local communities as well as myriad international development groups. Both can guide us, for example, in building on the known synergistic effects between biological utilization and food production on the one hand, and education and health programs to raise living standards on the other.

Ultimately, putting physical, social, and spiritual wellbeing of people at the heart of political and economic systems may come through non-negotiable necessity, in the face of profound environmental crisis or collapse. But it can also be volitional and transformative. Such reconfiguring may be born of awareness of interdependence and desirability of working together to meet real needs for human security, connectedness, and fulfillment. To local communities we can look for clues to social justice, and in turn how rather than being impoverished, the human spirit can be enriched.

The imperative for shifting direction is therefore becoming ever more collaborative as well as insistent. Local systems and the communities in which they are embedded can not only survive but also thrive, especially through the international links possible today. Some of the redirection that is required may be difficult, even impossible, without adopting certain insights, tools, and drivers of capitalism itself (Ikerd; Kitching; Porritt). It is a matter of selectivity and reform. Rediscovering, personalizing, and investing in interdependent localized alternatives is critical to breaking out of today's centralized and destabilizing juggernaut. Such innovative courses of action are also central to trade based on common sense and mutual benefits, and ultimately also to broader understanding and peace.

Opinions vary on the prospects for successfully averting what seems to many to be a looming Malthusian disaster. But perhaps implicitly cognizant that "pessimism wouldn't do any good anyhow," people everywhere and together are increasingly debating the range of prognoses, deliberating the efficacy of alternative models, and engaging in an array of new practices. Taken together, we may be witnessing something unprecedented – a rise of an instinctive, species-level adaptive response, perhaps even a fundamental awakening of collective consciousness (Hawken; Korten).

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