

On Earth Day, an Economics for People and Planet

By Helena Norberg-Hodge

Much has changed since the first Earth Day in 1970. Not only have our ecological crises come into sharper focus, it has also become obvious that we need to rescue not just the Earth, but also its people from the clutches of an economy gone mad.



Worldwide, more and more people are recognizing that fundamental changes to that economy are urgently needed if our most pressing problems – ecological, social, economic, and even spiritual – are to be solved. Instead of trying to tackle a seemingly endless list of separate problems, strategic shifts in economic policy would put us on a path that is good for both people and the planet.

Over the past decades, globalization, or the continued deregulation of trade and finance, has created a world dominated by giant banks and corporations. Because governments almost everywhere have catered to their demands, we are now faced not only with global warming, extinction of species and dramatic increases in pollution, but also with financial instability, endemic unemployment, increased conflict, and epidemics of ill health and depression.

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We need to move in exactly the opposite direction – away from economic globalization and towards the local. This doesn't mean eliminating all trade or adopting an isolationist attitude – it simply means shortening the distances between consumers and producers wherever possible.

It is an inherent feature of the global economy that these distances are forever increasing, with larger and larger middlemen positioning themselves between people and their needs. A familiar example is the way food miles have risen in the global food economy – and along with them carbon emissions, farmer bankruptcies, use of pesticides, GMOs and other damaging agro-technologies, and soil erosion, as well as profits for agribusiness corporations. When food systems are localized, on the other hand, CO2 emissions are minimized, farmers get a better price for their produce, production becomes more environmentally-friendly, local economies and communities are strengthened, and, in the end, consumers get fresher food, healthier food.

Local food is the most successful and visible aspect of an emerging localization movement that is bringing the same principles to other parts of the economy. All over the world initiatives are underway to localize building techniques, healthcare, energy production, transportation, education, banking, and more. For this grassroots movement to spread, however, fundamental policy change at the national and international levels is urgently required. How, for example, can small farmers and locally-owned shops flourish if governments continue to champion 'free trade' and subsidize multinational corporations? How can small-scale renewable

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energy projects compete against massive subsidies for huge dams, fossil fuels, and nuclear power plants? How can participatory democracy be strengthened if corporations are allowed to shape government policy and manipulate public opinion?

In the mainstream media, there is a tendency to blame innate human greed for our problems. The fact is, billions of dollars are spent by marketers targeting children as young as two, with a goal of instilling insecurity and the belief that material possessions will ensure them the love and appreciation they crave. In this way, the fundamental human need for love is twisted into insatiable greed. Similar messages are now bombarding entire populations in the global South, undermining diverse cultural traditions and enlisting billions more people into an unsustainable and psychologically damaging consumer culture. The result is even more rapid resource depletion, worsening pollution, and heightened competition and conflict.

Recognizing that the fundamental problem lies with policy choices rather than innate human greed is deeply empowering – even more so, when one recognizes that the policy changes needed to address climate change, wealth inequality, and social breakdown are the same as those that will increase our personal sense of wellbeing, our happiness.

The localization movement is beginning to bridge the divides between groups that are working to make the world a better place: environmental activists, small business owners, community leaders, educators, social

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justice campaigners, farmers, workers' rights advocates, religious and spiritual groups. An exciting, once-in-a-generation coalition is emerging: a coalition that offers real hope for broad-based and lasting renewal.

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