

**ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT ON CONNECTING
ECOLOGY AND ECONOMICS
NATIONAL CHENG KUNG UNIVERSITY – TAIWAN
JUNE 6-7, 2009**

CATASTROPHE, DEVELOPMENT AND A NEW WORLD

M.P. Parameswaran, Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad, India

The current path of human development is leading the species to near certain extinction or at least to barbarism. Global capitalism is on a rampage of the resources of the earth. Resources, especially oil, are getting depleted. The pollution load is increasing. Global warming is not scare mongering. It is a reality. The present prognosis is that, this trajectory will continue for decades. As early as 1972 the Club of Rome report '*Limits to Growth*'⁽¹⁾ had warned that *if* we do not change our development trajectory a catastrophe is certain. That *if* continues. No real change in trajectory has taken place. It is almost certain that whatever we may do today, the catastrophe can no longer be avoided. The existing over all growth pattern can (and will) continue for another 2 to 3 decades. That is the way planning is done. However by that time the resources would have become quite scarce, the pollution load quite large and the climate highly erratic. The food grains production would come down. Food shortages, disease and mutual strife for scarce resources would lead to a catastrophic fall in population, in life expectation and in production of industrial goods. Under such conditions of stress, the behaviour of humans will be quite different. The animal or reptilian instincts in humans which are today kept suppressed by social or collective instincts can come out violently. Indications of this are visible even today. Competition is idolized. Each for himself is the slogan of the day.

It is argued that selfishness and greed are basic human characters, inherited genetically, and cannot be changed. This is wrong. Had there not been collectivity the species would not have survived, or even evolved. Those individuals in the 'pack' with a preponderance of reptilian instinct and poor social instincts have failed to survive because the odds were so much against them and only collective action would have saved them. Collectivity or social instinct is as much an evolutionary character as animal level of selfishness.

Similarly the 'greed to amass wealth' too is not an immutable law of biology. By and large people amass wealth for security reasons – of self and children. Bulk of the wealth amassed is not for self but for children. Here we are speaking of ordinary citizens and not sick capitalists. In the Soviet Union of fifties and sixties the citizens in general used to feel secure – they were not worried about their own or their children's future. They never felt the necessity to amass wealth to be passed on to children to ensure their future. One of the reasons for the collapse of the system was that the importance of this feeling of security was not realized. The leadership systematically educated the people with the desirability and possibility of catching up with and surpassing USA in consumption. 'Greed', namely desire for goods which don't add to their physical or spiritual quality of life, was given more importance than security, sustainability and leisure. Here we are talking about society in general and not isolated men afflicted with avarice. This societal greed is a manufactured one and camouflaged as need. Martha Harnecker says in her book *Rebuilding the Left* writes:⁽¹⁾

“.....the US business community set out to *radically change* the psychology that had built the nation. In the 1920's US manufacturers were faced with a situation of over production.... The dramatic drop in sales could only be met head on if the US people's psychology could be changed by persuading people to consume more goods. So a huge crusade was launched to turn US workers into a herd of consumers..... it was necessary to transform goods that had previously been luxuries for higher income groups into the needs of the lower income groups the common man and woman were invited to emulate the rich.... In less than a decade a nation of hard working frugal Americans were

made over into a hedonistic culture in search of ever new avenues of instant gratification”

It is argued here that ‘greed’ is not a basic character of humans, that it is a socially engineered one. Greed as a universal social character is a product of capitalism. In earlier times it was simply a disease afflicting a few. And as Gandhi has aptly remarked. “This world has enough to satisfy everyone’s need, but not even one’s greed.” A new society, a new world can be built only on the basis of wisdom to differentiate need from greed. Here, a simple criterion can be used to categorise need and greed: whether it contributes to increasing the Quality of Life of the society - both physical and spiritual.

My argument is that a new society, a new world can be built only on the foundation of a new understanding of development or progress, a wisdom to differentiate need from greed. Just as greed was introduced into the society through a planned campaign, its removal too requires such a campaign. Ambivalence in this is not acceptable. The traditional left is still under the illusion of ‘abundance’ as the basis of communism and not wisdom. They think that greed is simply a need, which you cannot satisfy today, but can be satisfied tomorrow. This demands a great degree of de-schooling. The untenability of greed emerges out of the simple arithmetic that we cannot maintain a geometric progression in *development for ever* under conditions of *finite resources*. This leads us to the necessity of redefining the concept of *development* itself.

DEVELOPMENT

Inseparably connected with the concept of development is the concept of Quality of Life. We can start the discussion with a few statements:

Every living being has to resist death and has to procreate.

Humans go beyond this. They want to be consciously happy.

So they consciously strive to improve the quality of life.

The concept of *improvement* involves measures. Even 'quality' of life has to have a measure. Quality of life of human beings can be expressed in two terms Physical (or material) Quality of Life-PQL and Spiritual (or non material) Quality of Life- SQL.

Statements about quality of life are valid only for aggregate collectives and not for individuals. Today Human Development Indices are quoted country wise. To apply such statistical parameters to very small groups is meaning less. A population of 20000-30000 could be the minimum size. Upto groups of about a million it makes sense. For very large groups, it glosses over regional and cross-sectional imbalances. An average quality of life for India does not have meaning. Further, if we want to compare the quality of life of the poorest 20% of Kerala population with the poorest 20% of Bihar, or of Gujrat we have to estimate them separately.

With these understandings we develop the parameters defining quality of life in the following way.

Physical Quality of Life – PQL – is broken down into three constituent elements: Longevity, Emancipation and Sustainability. Spiritual Quality of Life (SQL) too is broken down into three elements: Social, Cultural and Participatory.

Longevity

The two relevant parameters are: (i) average life expectation at birth, and (ii) expected average total duration of morbidity in the life time. We define a quantity called effective life span or disability adjusted life years (DALY) as:

Effective life expectation = Biological life expectation minus life time integrated morbidity period.

For developmental planning what is important, are temporal values: how it has improved over a period of time, what has been the impact of specific measures taken. On the other hand same time spatial figures can help us to compare the efficiency of use of natural resources by various people as well as to intervene to correct imbalances.

The life expectancy of most of the nations have increased over the 12 year period, from 1990 to 2002, but in some African countries it has remained stagnant or even come down. In many countries the increase is only marginal.

One can, if necessary, convert longevity from years into a numerical index, combine it with different other indices and generate composite indices. However it will not help us to plan future activities and hence is not attempted.

Emancipation

Humans are required – forced – to earn a lively hood. Nobody likes to be forced. They should enjoy working. Work should not be alienating. Eight hours work, eight hours rest, eight hours sleep: this was the May Day slogan of the workers, a century and half ago. They have not changed it. Actually the 'hours' of work should include the hours of travel to and from the work place, overtime hours, recess-hours-all. The average working day for most of the urbanites especially in metropolitan towns is 10 to 11 hours. They do not get, virtually any time to enjoy culture. Even the rest time is tense. Morning time busy with preparation for departure to work place. In the evening they may get, at most about a couple of hours for truly human occupations. Assuming that 8 hours are to be set apart for sleep and rest and assuming that all unavoidable work i.e. from morning 6 A.M. to 6 or 7 P.M. – as alienated time, one can calculate the genuinely free time at the disposal of the individual which he/she can spend as he/she wish. This calculated as a fraction of wakeful hours – here 16 hours-can be termed as 'emancipation index'. This can be fine tuned by giving greater than unity weightages for heavy and unpleasant work. The weightages can be collectively agreed upon. For example:

Highly creative and enjoyable work	=	0.80
Light office work	=	1.00
Heavy manual work	=	1.20

Today an average Bombay factory worker hardly gets two hours for himself. An average New Yorker gets 3 to 4 hours. One can calculate the average for an entire population. Here too one can make country wise – spatial – comparisons or temporal comparisons. Here one tendency can be noted: as urbanization and modernization advances, the availability of free time or own time tends to fall down.

Advancement of productive forces, instead of emancipating us from forced labour is in fact increasing it, binding us more and more to work place.

Sustainability

As Marx has often repeated we are only temporary possessors of this earth and that we have to pass it on to future generations in an improved condition. If we deplete

the minerals and ores, if we consume all the fuels, if we pollute the environment and create irreversible climatic changes- then we are breaking our mandate. We will pass on to succeeding generations an increasingly impoverished earth. The only way of escape is to achieve cent percent recyclability and, sequester the polluting gases from the environment. Further, for energy source we have to shift over to the only inexhaustible source- the sun. All these are known. The degree of sustainability achieved by a society can be measured in terms of the degree of success in this.

Social Quality

There are certain things, which every society considers to be desirable and certain others undesirable. Through the concept of social quality we are trying to indicate some way to quantify them. Every society wants maximum reduction in murders, suicides, in theft and robbery, in violence against women, in abuse of children, in child labour, in bribe and nepotism, in work evasion, in sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS, in consumption of narcotics and intoxicants, in caste-religion-politics based enmities and violence, in the necessity of increased investment on internal and external security..... etc.

A society in which all these are coming down continuously is increasing its social quality of life. Reduction in one does not, fortunately, demand increase in another. One can measure the reduction in each. Combining them into a composite index does not offer any better guide to action. The steps to be taken to reduce most of them may be common. For example, USA is the richest and the most advanced nation in the world. However, in all the above parameters it is very backward. It has got maximum number of persons in jails per 1000 population, its per capita expenditure on police, jails, weapons and defense is the highest in the world, it has got one of the highest crime rates amongst all countries. It lives in constant fear of terrorism and attack, it feels that the entire world is against it. Compare this with the situation in erstwhile USSR forty-fifty years ago. The ordinary people had no anxiety, about self, about children, present or future. Every body had employment, food, cloth and a place to live in. Crime rates were minimum. True jails, were full but not from crimes against ordinary people. They were mostly political prisoners – an undesirable situation. The rulers lived in constant fear. And this lead to its

downfall. One can surmise that democracy with full-fledged social security and wisdom to differentiate need from greed can bring down most of the social evils.

Culture

Humans distinguish themselves from animals in that it has got articulate speech, languages, ability to read and write, it has got songs, dance, painting and all other fine arts. It has sports of various types. When Marx hoped that human kind is on the threshold of liberation, what he meant was that with the advancement of science, technology and productive forces, humans are becoming increasingly free from animal limitations of keeping alive and getting emancipated to enjoy the truly human avocations mentioned above. Thus the cultural enjoyment of a society is one of the indications of its high quality, spiritual quality, of life. This can be quantified, crudely though, in the following terms.

- High literacy rate
- Longer years of education
- Longer hours of reading
- Increasing participation, passive or active, in arts like singing, dancing, acting, including viewing T.V. or theatre.
- Increasing participation in sports

The first two are to be ensured directly by the society. The rest requires, to begin with increasing free time – a high level of emancipation. But that alone will not be sufficient. This time should be used for reading, for listening music, for viewing sports and the like and not for simply sleeping or drinking.

Participation

Humans have to produce goods and services to exist. For this they have to interact with each other, organize themselves into a system and engage in productive activities. Children, invalids and elders are exempted. Rest have to participate. No self-respecting adult would like live permanently on charity. Participation in economic activity is not only a material necessity for them. True, it is a material necessity of course and this

participation should give them a just share of the social product, increasing economic equity. But participation is, also, a spiritual necessity, especially in social – political affairs. Economic participation can be measured, though inadequately, through the ratio of the average income of the poorest pentile (20%) and the richest pentile or through Gini coefficient. Participation in socio-political life is more difficult to quantify. One way is to assess the average time spend by each citizen in activities which are not directly related to self or family – for example in arts and sports clubs, in organizing library-reading rooms, in gramasabha and panchayat, in class and mass organizations etc. etc. Reduction of full timers' in such activities and increase in the quantum of voluntary work is a good measure of social participation.

FROM DESIRABILITY TO REALITY

All these are desirable. But today the global society is systematically pulled into the abyss of destruction and extinction. How can we change the present trajectory? It is not possible to have a global shift in the trajectory at one go. The world consists of hundreds and thousands of distinct socio-geographical entities. Today they are all bound up, linked together, into one global economy. The first step is to de-bond or de-link. Actually, each country should have freedom and autonomy to chart its own trajectory of progress. Today they don't have it. Further, most of the countries are ruled by segments of, what one can call, the global elite or the global ruling class. It is un realistic to imagine that they will take initiative for de-linking. They are the people who forced the current linking or binding. It is to be understood that de-linking from global economy does not mean total isolation. We will later re-link with kindred economies in a mutually beneficial manner. One can think of hundreds of bilateral and multilateral linkages amongst the developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Essentially it means shutting the doors to industrialized countries, especially USA- *a third world sanction against first world.*

Even this is a dream today. The third world governments will not do this. Here in comes the importance of de-linking or de-bonding within the country within a country, within a state. One can think of developing local communities and local economies developing, increasingly more autonomously, or in other words increasingly de-linking

from the national and global economies. A variety of such experiments are going on in different parts of the world. Local Exchange and Trade Systems, Local Currencies, Fair Trade, People to People Trade etc. all are attempts to free the local economy and community from the clutches of global economy. The productive capital can be de-linked from the global casino capital, at least locally. Capitalistic formations developed within the feudal system at isolated points and later coalesced into a new system. Similarly, the new society, the new world cannot come into existence at one stroke globally or even nationally. It cannot be built up after destroying the existing world. It has to germinate and grow up at discreet locations within the existing world. The only difference is that, now it will not be a spontaneous process, but a planned and guided one. For this to be so we should have a shared understanding of the essential features of the new global society and the new world. The cardinal features of the new or alternative world should, according to me, be the following

- Gradual abolition of private property in land and other means of production and bringing them under social ownership. No exploitation.
- Increasing abundance of the *means of subsistence*.
- Increasing equality
- Decreasing difference between town and country, between industry and agriculture and restore nature's metabolism – rurbanization.
- Emancipation from all forms of alienation.
- Continuous improvement in the health of the land which is to be passed on to the next generation – sustainability.

These objectives can be achieved only at national-state level and that too only partially. Ultimately they will become stable only at global levels. There will have to be a transition period which could be quite long, zig zag with ups and downs. There have to be certain indicators which reassure us that we are moving in the proper direction. They could be

- Increase in life expectation, decrease in morbidity and infant mortality rate.
- Continuous reduction in income inequities, reduction in Gini co-efficient.

- Increased democratic participation of the people in running the affairs of the society.
- Improved status of women.
- Security for children and the marginalized, for all.
- Reduced use of energy for achieving the above.
- Reduction in the rate of emission of greenhouse gases and ultimately reduction in concentration of the same in the atmosphere.
- Continuous reduction in the unnecessary transport of goods and travel of humans.
- Increasing local self sufficiency.
- Continuous reduction in the relative spending on armaments, police, judiciary, prison etc.
- Continuous reduction in the production of goods and services with low, zero or negative welfare values.
- In short, continuous increase in Physical and Spiritual Qualities of Life.

The general structure of the new, alternative world will be different from the present one. Nation states will lose their importance. The human society will become a global network of associated producers. In this, each association will be at the centre surrounded by a number of federating circles, which are not hierarchical, but horizontally related. To make such localization possible, the Research and Development work in Science and Technology will be so oriented as.

- to extract solar energy cheaply and abundantly.
- to convert anything into a resource, to do away with the concept of waste.'
- to sequester green house gases from the atmosphere.
- to make small scale production both efficient and economic.

Local economies have to be built up, based on the above. Local production of increasing number of goods and services, local marketing, local pride, local alternative currency, local and inter-connected security measures All will have to be

encouraged. Such economies are to be experimentally built up wherever possible. They will form the base on which future society can be built. They will also function as forts of resistance against the onslaught of globalised neo-liberalism. The left and the progressives are engaged in a struggle against neo liberal globalization, throughout the world. Large number of them come together every year at the World Social Forum. Many among the left, including the communists believe that, currently there is no other option than to enter into the world market and fight it out there. Many even theorize that without going through fullfledged capitalism, which alone is capable of developing productive forces, it is not possible to think about socialism, that the failure of the 20th century experiments was due to attempts of short circuiting capitalism. This is a dangerous situation –the communists clamouring for capitalist path. This path will eventually lead humanity to barbarism or extinction not to socialism. Building up small islands of the socialistic societies is possible and this should be a major task of the left and progressive movements. Local economy movement is, also, a counter attack on globalization.

The battle ground for such a counter attack has to be the place where the enemy is situated - the Market. That is his forte. We have to attack him at the local market- the village and the town market. We can use price, quality, education, localism, patriotism etc to oust the neoliberals from our markets. Yes, boycott is a powerful weapon. The left and progressive forces have to realize the great potential of boycott and local movement. Kerala is an ideal ground on which such a counterattack on neo-liberalism can be initiated.

WHO AND HOW?

The question arises: who is the subject for change? Obviously it cannot be limited to the traditional working class – from modern industries. It has to be a broad coalition of classes. The experience of Latin American Left is important in this. The New Left in Latin America is characterized by

- i) **Plurality of struggles** and articulation of decentralized forms of organization.
- ii) **Multiplicity of social bases** and political agendas.

- iii) Prominence of **Civil Society**
- iv) **Reformism** as against revolution
- v) Deepening **Democracy**

Perhaps, the most important new-left experiment is that of Venezuela. Hugo Chavez with Fidel Castro constitute the most resolute and consistent opposition to neo-liberalism and US hegemony. Neither of them came from communist movements. Castro took the armed route to revolution. Later he became a Marxist and a Communist. Chavez has an army background and after failing in revolution through armed action took the democratic route and succeeded in it. All the Latin American left and centre-left governments have come to power through popular elections. Chavez declares that he is not a Marxist and hastens to add that he is not an anti-Marxist either. His trusted lieutenants being ex-army colleagues, he seems to be aware of possible aberrations and to resist such aberrations he had started building up neighbourhood groups called Bolivarian circles. This is an experiment similar to what was undertaken in Kerala, from the early nineties. These NHG's (Neighbourhood Groups) in Kerala were conceived as schools of direct democracy.

Countries like Guatemala, El Salvador, Haiti, Dominican Republic etc. have strong left – centre – left movements. The overall perspective of new left in Latin America and elsewhere can be expressed as *democracy* and *plurality*.

However plurality and multiplicity should, ultimately, result in a coherent, directed force capable of changing the global, capitalistic trajectory of development. This focusing requires an ideological lens, an ideology which accepts plurality and multiplicity. This ideological lens can be provided by,

- (i) A concept of development based on satisfaction of needs, rejection of greed and constant improvement in the Quality of Life.
- (ii) The realization that revolution is the endpoint of a long period of evolution or reform. The essential elements of the new society must be developed and extended within the existing society itself, that today the agenda is one of creation and not of destruction.

- (iii) 'Democracy' is meaningful only if it is participatory, that is only when the distinction between civil society and political parties become irrelevant. This is possible only in small scale.
- (iv) So, change gets initiated at 'local society' level and not at national or global level. The starting point is the strengthening of local economy through a process of global knowledge and skill sharing and through R and D efforts in making small powerful, on the one hand and on the other hand being able to boycott foreign goods which have only vanity value or destructive value.
- (v) The vision of the change world will be: a network of network of..... horizontally linked local economies, with increasing local self-sufficiency, with decreasing necessity of travel and transport and ever increasing sharing of knowledge and culture.

Reference:

1. *Limits to Growth* (1972), *Beyond Limits* (1992), *Limits to Growth – The 30 year update* (2002) – Donella Meadows, Jorgan Randers, Dennis Meadows, Earth Scan
2. *Rebuilding The Left*, Martha Hernekar, Zed Books, 2007