

Cooperative Community Economics

The following material is taken from a pamphlet entitled "Cooperative Community Economics," published by the Coalition for Cooperative Community Economics, a project of TRANET.

Sustainability has become the keyword of the decade. The Brundtland Report and The Earth Summit introduced thousands to the words "sustainable development." The President's Council on Sustainable Development has made it an official issue in the Federal government. And "sustainable communities" projects are underway from Seattle, WA to Farmington, ME. But, for all the attention to the word "sustainable," there is little attention to its meaning and the social innovations needed to make it a reality.

The fundamental flaw that requires this new focus comes from the fact that the whole earth is currently controlled by the *competitive global economic system* based on "self-interest," reductionism, "survival of the fittest," and materialism. This system contains the seeds of its own, and society's, destruction in its inherent promotion of waste, inequity, violence, domination, crime, war, and ecological destruction.

But there is a counter-balancing system developing, a *cooperative community economics*, which could create sustainability. It has been implied by authors such as Herman Daly and John Cobb in *For the Common Good*, by Richard Douthwaite in *The Growth Illusion*, by Andrew Bard Schmookler in *The Illusion of Choice*, by Hazel Henderson in *Creating Alternative Futures*, and by other writers on economics. It is also inherent in Jacob von Uexkull's "Right Livelihood Awards," in Frances Moore Lappé and Paul DuBois' concept of "Living Democracy," in Bob Theobald's "parallel system," in Brundtland's "sustainable development," in David Korten's "people-centered development," and other actions. A core concept of many of these is that people can meet most of their own needs without relying on government or big industry.

Cooperative economics is not new. In fact it has been practiced for 99% of the time that humans have been on Earth, and is still practiced by the Earth-centered cultures which make up some 80% of existing peoples. Economic concepts we take for truisms in our Western culture are unknown in many other cultures. Before the colonialism of the white man, Tahitians did not know the concept of ownership; anything on the islands was free for the taking by anyone in need. The Australian aborigines, like the Native Americans, consider themselves to be not owners, of the land; they act as integral parts of as well as protectors of the land. African veterinarian Nskeyuye Bizmana writes in *White Paradise, Hell for Africa* of his cultural shock in discovering, during his schooling in Europe, that Europeans lived in constant conflict, fear, and loneliness—unlike

the cooperative, open, friendly relationships of African cultures. Ethno-economist Hassan Zaoual contrasts his view of African cultures nested within cultures, with the stifling Western

monoculture in which the profit motive crowds out the concept of reciprocity which values you for what you do for society, not for what you possess. And in traditional Japan, the idea of service to others is still preserved at meals where no one asks "please pass the ...," for each person is expected to look out for his neighbors. It would be an insult to suggest that your needs had not been met. The West is blind to many cultural concepts that have been retained by people's elsewhere.

Chellis Glendinning in *Recovery from Western Civilization* holds that our "original trauma" was a result of man's adopting agriculture and separating himself from nature 5000 years ago; Riane Eisler in *The Chalice and the Blade* contends that human connectedness through the Earth Goddess was swept away when marauding hordes invaded from Asia 2000 years ago; French anthropologist Dominique Temple shows that before

Columbus, 500 years ago, native peoples lived in harmony through the distribution of goods by "reciprocity," which was based on creating goodwill rather than getting the most for your skill or product; in *The Promise of Humanistic Economics*, economist Mark Lutz and psychologist Kenneth Lux explain how the economic theories that have guided our civilization for the past 200 years are based on the false premises of "self-interest," the "unseen hand," "survival of the fittest," and "comparative advantage," which are contrary to the real world; James Robertson in *The Sane Alternative* worries that since World War II our Western Culture has reached a critical point of breakdown because we are caught in an economic trap of our own making; and economist Paul Ekins in *The Living Economy* lays out an alternative which can create a less destructive future.

None of these progressive thinkers, or others in the network, believe that there is only one cause for the current economic, social, and ecological crises. All recognize that it is the sum of the trends, and the basic errors in our Euro-American culture which has brought civilization so close to the breaking point.

But social criticism does not stop with anthropologic, ecological, economic, and historical analysis. In the new sciences of relativity, quantum mechanics, and chaos theory; in the new-found spirituality of Christian mystics and Buddhist scholars; in the gradual awakening of feminists and groups of



sadvantaged people; and in many other wellsprings of the young age, we are discovering new potentials for the human race. Theologian Thomas Berry and physicist Brian Swimme in *The Universe Story* trace cosmic creation from the Big Bang to the mind of humans, revealing a genesis more wondrous and awe-inspiring than any of the other tales of creation told by humans of the past. Duane Elgin in *Awakening Earth* opens our minds to the gradual emergence of human consciousness from its prehuman status of recognizing only the moment and the immediate world of our senses, to the amazing consciousness of our own consciousness, and of the ineffable world of infinite time and space. Like de Chardin in *The Future of Man*, and Peter Russell in *The White Hole in Time*, he challenges our minds to envision the next step of cosmic evolution to a stage where we are no longer bound by the petty goals of materialism, consumerism, and economism.

The visions of these Gaian philosophers and progressive thinkers are not left in a sea of fantasy. Social critics closer to the everyday problems of everyday humans are emboldened to challenge the status quo and move out of the lethargy brought on by viewing only the short term global problematic. Willis Harmon comes out of his Noetic science background to portray with John Hormann in *Creative Work*, the "constructive role of business in a transforming society." In every issue of *In Context* magazine, Robert and Diane Gilman, coming from a pragmatic viewpoint missed by both mainstream and alternative writers, challenge us with concepts of interdependence, sustainability, and cooperative society. Frances Moore Lappé moves on from her studies of world hunger and of American values to the concept of "Living Democracy" in which citizens create for themselves, without need of government, problem-solving techniques for a better life. And Robert Theobald brings together church groups, senior citizens, Rotary Clubs, students, and nearly every facet of society to express their fears of the present, and their forlorn hopes for the future; and in his books *The Rapids of Change* and *Turning the Century*, he provides us real-time political and social steps to take to head off the march toward oblivion.

Meanwhile, at the family and community levels, social activists and social innovators in many parts of the world have been slowly and steadily developing, testing, and proofing techniques and lifestyles that can let the vision break through. In England, Rochdale Cooperatives have been operating since the late 1800s; LETS systems originating in Canada are now headline news items from Europe to Australia; Grameen Banks (peer lending), which originated in Bangladesh, have been adopted in even the most developed countries; Community Land Trusts, an idea of Gandhi's in India, is now better known in the USA; and Community Supported Agriculture, started in Switzerland in the 70s, is making local food available in almost every country. All these and other social innovations are building-blocks for an alternative economics.

A major obstacle to the development of this alternative economic system is that the many options available to neighborhood groups are not brought together in one center or publication and they are unknown by the mainstream media and academia. In fact, it is hard to find clear information on many of them; and many experts involved in promoting one social innovation know little about any others. *Co-op America* covers a narrow definition of cooperatives; *AERO* networks alternative community schools; *Communities Magazine* promotes intentional communities as harbingers of the future; *GEO* promotes worker ownership and ESOPs (Employee Stock

Ownership Plans); the *Co-op News Network* promotes food co-ops; a few pamphlets from the E.F. Schumacher Society explain local credit systems; Tom Greco's book *New Money for Healthy Communities* explains LETS (local exchange trading systems); *Countryside Magazine* includes occasional articles on home-steading as an economic model; Jerry Mintz links alternative community schools in *Aerogram*; homeschoolers network through John Holt's *Growing Without Schooling*; David Morris and Neil Seldman of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance have spent two decades leading self-reliant community actions; and a scattering of other resources are available for the intrepid searcher. But too often the practical hands-on information is disjoint, and embedded in a lot of in-news, rhetoric about the failures of the current system and the social paradigm, or the future.

The Coalition for Cooperative Community Economics has compiled a comprehensive inventory of social innovations created by and for the people. We hope that it can be a service for communities wanting to solve the real problems of real people.

The time has finally come when the mainstream is ready for a real change—a move toward sustainability.

The Coalition of Cooperative Community Economics is a network of social entrepreneurs and organizations helping to balance the current competitive global economics system with social innovations which allow people to provide for their own needs. For a complete list of pamphlets on relevant topics, contact the general coordinator at TRANET, PO Box 567, Rangeley, ME 04970; phone: 207-864-2252; email: tranet@igc.apc.org

An Agenda for Corporate Responsibility

We can and should liberate ourselves from the corporate takeover of educational, civic, community, legal, military, and recreational institutions. This, from the Program on Corporations, Law and Democracy, sets a few guidelines:

- Recharter corporations to make them subordinate to the sovereign people by limiting the time period of the charter; make continued existence depend on community and worker approval; make managers and directors liable for corporate harms; require them to pay the full social and environmental costs of operation.
- Reduce corporations to smaller units with less power to undermine elections, lawmaking, judicial proceedings, and education; restrict their size; prohibit them from owning other corporations; prohibit them from owning property not essential to accomplishing their authorized charter.
- Prohibit hiring of replacement workers during strikes, require independent health and safety audits by experts chosen by workers and affected communities.
- Strip from corporations the constitutional rights intended for natural persons, such as personhood.
- Guarantee workers free speech, assembly, protection from arbitrary search and seizure, etc., when on corporate property.
- Prohibit corporations from making campaign contributions to candidates in any elections, and from lobbying any local, state, or federal government bodies.
- Cap salaries of corporate officials and limit them to not more than 5-10 times more than production workers.
- Encourage worker and community-owned and -controlled cooperatives.

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