

## Breaking Up the Monoculture

by Helena Norberg-Hodge,

Director, ISEC

The president of Nabisco once defined the goal of economic globalization as “a world of homogeneous consumption”, in which people everywhere eat the same food, wear the same clothing and live in houses built from the same materials. It is a world in which every society employs the same technologies, depends on the same centrally managed economy, offers the same Western education for its children, speaks the same language, consumes the same media images, holds the same values, and even thinks the same thoughts: *monoculture*.

Through conquest, colonialism and western ‘development’, much of the world’s diversity has already been destroyed. Economic globalization accelerates this process. Wherever you go in today’s ‘global village’ you’ll find multi-lane highways, concrete cities, and a cultural landscape featuring grey business suits, fast food chains, Hollywood films, and cellular phones. In every corner of the planet, Barbie and Madonna are familiar icons, and the Marlboro Man and Rambo define the male ideal. From Cleveland to Cairo to Caracas, *Baywatch* is entertainment and CNN is news.

Although this sameness suits the needs of TNCs — which benefit from the efficiencies of standardized production and standardized consumption — in the long term a homogenized planet is disastrous for all of us. It is leading to a breakdown of both biological and cultural diversity, erosion of our food security, an increase in conflict and violence, and devastation for the global

biosphere.

The myth of globalization is that we no longer need to be connected to a place on the earth. Our every need can be supplied by distant institutions and machines. Our desires can be satisfied by maximizing our choice of commodities from across the world. Our contact with other people can be through electronic media. It is as though we could live afloat in space, unconnected to a locale or community. Globalization is creating a way of life that denies our natural instincts by severing our connection to others and to nature. And — because it is erasing both biological and cultural diversity — it is destined to fail.

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Every place on the Earth is unique. Each has its own particular soils, the product of eons of geological and biological activity, and its own micro-climate, the result of complex interactions among wind regimes, ocean currents, latitude, altitude, shelter and slope. This geological and climatic diversity provides a generous range of environmental niches for an even greater diversity of plants, animals, and microorganisms. Over time, these all adapt to their local ecosystem, and in turn change their surroundings by their presence. Living organisms and the places they occupy are thus engaged in a continuous, interdependent evolutionary dance, each step of which more tightly links biodiversity to the diversity of place.

Human societies, too, have always been embedded in their local ecosystems, modifying and being modified by them. Cultural diversity has come to mirror the biological and geographic

diversity of the planet. In arid environments, for example, pastoral or nomadic societies are entirely logical, since they enable people to use more of the sparse resources of their region than would a settled way of life. In tropical rainforests abundant resources are nearer to hand, and so different adaptations — often based on hunting, gathering, and swidden agriculture — have been the solution. Cultures near coastlines evolved sophisticated sailing and boat-building abilities, offering a means of transport and the ability to gather resources from the sea. In mountainous regions, cultures have adapted by growing hardy cereal grains and raising animals — like the yak and the llama — that can survive high altitudes and cold winters.

Through such local adaptations, people have met their needs generation after generation, often altering their ecosystem without compromising its stability. In many cases human cultures enhanced both food security and ecosystemic stability by consciously increasing local biodiversity. Farmers in the Peruvian Andes, for example, cultivate over 40 different varieties of potato in an acre plot, far more than would be found naturally. As recently as a generation ago, farmers on Chiloë Island off the coast of Chile grew so many different strains of potato they could eat a different kind each day of the year. And through centuries of cultivation by traditional farmers in varied ecosystems, more than 17,000 different varieties of wheat have been created. The agricultural biodiversity that exists today is the product of many generations of such farmers selecting seeds for success in a particular place.

Globalization, which attempts to amalgamate every local, regional and national economy into a single world system, requires

homogenizing these locally-adapted forms of agriculture, replacing them with an industrial system — centrally managed, pesticide-intensive, one-crop production for export — designed to deliver a narrow range of transportable foods to the world market. In the process, farmers are replaced by energy- and capital-intensive machinery, and diversified food production for local communities is replaced by an export monoculture. Thousands of local plant varieties disappear. In the US today, for example, 96% of the acreage devoted to peas is planted in just two varieties; for other vegetables — like potatoes and snap beans — as much as three quarters of production comes from just three or four closely-related strains. This trend is occurring worldwide. The same Chiloëan farmers that once grew several hundred varieties of potato now grow just three, primarily for export. Biotechnology is accelerating this trend, as natural genetic diversity is replaced by clones created and grown in laboratories.

There is increasing awareness of the folly of destroying wilderness areas, the wellspring of the earth's biodiversity. And it is clearly the case that reductions in the planet's gene pool — well underway — may eventually have catastrophic results in planetary pandemics among vulnerable plants, animals and humans. But just as foolish is the way in which global economic development is destroying traditional cultures and the farmers whose seeds contain most of the planet's *agricultural biodiversity*. The loss of agricultural biodiversity is of crucial importance, among other reasons, because the pests that attack farm products are continuing to expand their genetic diversity, even while the diversity of our food supply narrows.

When a new food variety is first introduced its resistance to pests

and diseases may be high, but the natural genetic diversity of pests enables them to adapt quickly. As a result, a new cereal variety generally lasts only five or six years before pest problems become so great that it can no longer be grown — even using massive amounts of pesticides. When this stage is reached, farmers must turn to the seed companies for a new variety with an even stronger resistance. The bizarre result is that the farmers who developed the original seeds often find they must now pay to buy back a genetically altered version from W.R. Grace and others. This was the cause for a demonstration by 500,000 farmers in India two years ago. But neither Cargill nor W.R. Grace nor any other seed company can constantly create new resistances out of thin air, even with the help of genetic engineering. Ultimately they depend on the natural genetic diversity that exists in the wild or in the strains originally cultivated by traditional farmers.

Before long the credits built up in the gene banks by traditional, location-specific farming will be exhausted. It will no longer be possible to find sources of natural resistance to overcome the genetic adaptation of pests. It could then become impossible to grow major crops like wheat, rice and maize, and since so many people are now dependent on these staples, starvation on a massive scale would follow.

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Much of the cultural diversity that remains in the world today exists in the South, where the majority still live in villages, partly connected through a *diversified*, local economy to *diverse*, local resources. Because of pressures from globalization, those economies are being destroyed, and villagers are rapidly being

urbanized and homogenized. The Chinese government, for example, is planning for the urban population to increase by 440 million people in the next twenty years — an explosion that is several times the rate of overall population growth. This urbanization is largely the result of industrial development, which replaces farmers with agribusiness and large-scale machinery, and pushes whole communities off the land. Development also centralizes job opportunities and political power in cities, intensifying the economic pull of urban centers. Advertising and media images, meanwhile, exert powerful *psychological* pressure to seek a better, more ‘civilized’ life, one based on increased consumption. But since jobs are scarce, only a few succeed. The majority end up dispossessed and angry, living in shantytowns in the shadow of advertisements for the American Dream. Despite the disastrous consequences, it is the effective policy of every government to promote these trends.

Once in the cities, people have little choice but to rely on the same scarce resources that people thousands of miles away depend upon. For global corporations, these newly-urbanized millions represent a highly lucrative and efficient market, easy to speak to through advertising. *Time* magazine quotes an ad executive in Beijing as saying that the message being drummed into Third World populations is: “imported equals *good*, local equals *crap*”. Corporations and government agencies promoting globalization are conscious of this relationship between urbanization and profit: U.S. grain exporters publicly boast that the rapid urbanization of the Asia-Pacific Rim will lead to a \$14 billion increase in profits in the next five years as urban populations increasingly depend on *global*, rather than *local* resources.

But what happens when rural life collapses, and people who once relied on nearby resources become tied to the global economy? Consider traditional architecture, in which structures were built from local resources: stone in France, clay in West Africa, sun dried bricks in Tibet, bamboo and thatch in the Philippines, felt in Mongolia, and so on. When these building traditions give way to 'modern' methods, those plentiful local materials are left unused — while competition skyrockets for the monoculture's narrow range of structural materials, such as concrete, steel, and sawn lumber. The same thing happens when everyone begins eating identical staple foods, wearing clothes made from the same fibers, and relying on the same finite energy sources. Because it makes everyone dependent on the same resources, globalization creates efficiency for corporations, but it also creates artificial scarcity for consumers, thus heightening competitive pressures.

In this situation those on the bottom rungs of the economic ladder are at a great disadvantage. The gap between rich and poor widens, and anger, resentment, and conflict increase. This is particularly true in the South, where people from many differing ethnic backgrounds are being pulled into cities where they are cut off from their communities and cultural moorings, and face ruthless competition for jobs and the basic necessities of life. Individual and cultural self-esteem are eroded by the pressure to live up to media and advertising stereotypes, whose images are invariably based on an urban, Western consumer model: blonde, blue-eyed and clean. If you are a farmer or are dark-skinned, you are made to feel primitive, backward, inferior. As a consequence, women around the world use dangerous chemicals to lighten their skin and hair, and the market for blue contact lenses is growing in markets from Bangkok to Nairobi and Mexico

City. Many Asian women even have operations to make their eyes look more Western.

Uprooting people from rural communities by selling them an unattainable urban white dream is responsible for a dramatic increase in anger and hostility — particularly among young men. In the intensely demoralizing and competitive situation they face, differences of any kind become increasingly significant, and ethnic and racial violence are the all but inevitable results.

I have witnessed the impact of economic development over several decades in the Himalayas, in both Ladakh and Bhutan. In Ladakh a Buddhist majority and a Muslim minority lived together for 600 years without a single recorded instance of group conflict. In Bhutan, a Hindu minority had coexisted peacefully with a slightly larger number of Buddhists for an equally long period. In both cultures, just fifteen years' exposure to outside economic pressures has resulted in violence that left many people dead.

In the industrialized world the assumption is that violent conflict is mainly the result of *differences* between people. By implication, the notion is that *homogenization is civilizing*. This attitude is even quite prevalent in the South, where the West's homogenized, secular society is held up as the ideal. On the other hand, when groups of people manage to maintain their *own* cultural identity, the result is called 'tribalism', with its underlying connotations of savagery and violence. The basis for these beliefs often comes from comparing the 'civilized' colonies of the Third World with the chaos after the colonial powers departed. This Western analysis doesn't take into account the way colonialism universally destroyed the indigenous economic and cultural bases

and their systems of governance, as well as the diversified economies that allowed people to produce for their own needs. It may well be that the authoritarian hand of the colonial powers held in check the conflict, violence and resistance that would naturally accompany such upheaval, but the roots of the violence are in the suppression of successful cultures and economies. It has little to do with any innate intolerance of differences.

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Most Western planners have come to believe that the best way to provide for people's needs in the future is to draw them into urban centers. Even the United Nations Development Program promotes urbanization, claiming that urban populations can be supplied more efficiently with food, water, jobs and other necessities of life; and that urbanized populations require fewer resources per capita. But when the real costs of urbanization in the global economy are accounted for, however, it becomes obvious that urban centers are extremely resource intensive. Food and water, building materials and energy must all be brought in from great distances via vast energy-consuming infrastructures; their concentrated wastes must be hauled away again or incinerated at great environmental cost. From the most affluent sections of Paris to the slums of Calcutta, urban populations depend on long-distance transport for food, so that every pound of food consumed is accompanied by several pounds of petroleum consumption, pollution, and waste. The urbanized economy is not a product of efficiency, but of massive subsidies — tax breaks and direct payments to global corporations and public financing of long-distance transport and communications infrastructures, huge energy installations, facilities for specialized

education, and the massive military power to keep recalcitrant communities in line.

How “efficient” is the global economy when it means transporting staple foods around the world that could just as well be produced locally? In Mongolia, a country where there are some 25 million milk-producing animals, the butter in the markets today is primarily German; the water, meanwhile, is bottled in Hong Kong. In the marketplaces of France — an apple-producing country — one can find as many New Zealand apples as local ones. Even a child can see that it can’t be efficient to transport these foods thousands of miles around the planet, using up fossil fuels, polluting the air and adding to global warming. In fact, if “efficiency” is the yardstick, the goal should be to promote economies which are diversified enough to meet people’s needs within the shortest distance possible, depending on long-distance transport only for goods that cannot be produced locally.

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The economic steamroller that is levelling diversity and diversified production in the South is also wreaking havoc in the North, where structural unemployment and the erosion of democracy are the most obvious effects. A system that so threatens the interests of virtually every sector of society obviously contains the seeds of its own destruction. However, the systemic impact of this economic centralization is so destabilizing and life-threatening that only the most hardened cynic would sit by and wait for it to destroy itself.

There is still time to shift direction, restore diversity and begin

moving towards sustainable, healthy societies and ecosystems. How to begin? In principle, the answer is straightforward: we need to convince our governments to shift support and subsidies away from globalization towards economic diversification and *localization*. This does not mean an end to all trade or intercultural communication, as some have unfairly charged. Nor does it mean that industrialized society must change from a culture of cities to villages.

However, the idea of localization runs counter to today's general belief that fast-paced urban areas are the locus of "real" culture, while small, local communities are isolated backwaters, relics of a past when small-mindedness and prejudice were the norm. The past is assumed to have been 'brutish', a time when exploitation was fierce, intolerance rampant, violence commonplace — a situation that the modern world has largely risen above. These assumptions about what constitutes progress are so deeply embedded that they often operate at a subconscious level. Disturbingly, they echo the elitist and often racist belief that modernized people are superior — more highly evolved — than their underdeveloped rural counterparts. Such beliefs are widespread even among rural populations themselves. This is not surprising: the whole process of industrialization has meant a systematic removal of political and economic power from rural areas, and a concomitant loss of self-respect. In small communities today people are often living on the periphery, while power—and even what we call 'culture'—is centralized somewhere else.

Among people in the industrialized world, rural life has been thought inferior for many generations, but most Westerners have

a highly distorted notion of what life in small communities can be. And even though much of the Third World is made up of villages, colonialism and development have left an indelible mark. Modern interpretations of such places inevitably stem from an industrial worldview. There is only the briefest mention of cultures and economies that existed before the colonial invaders, nor are there statistics to compare pre-industrial and pre-colonial times with what followed. Recently, however, Southern scholars have begun to unearth this information — finding, for example, evidence about the remarkably high yields in agriculture before the colonial invasions. As for the localized oppression and exploitation experienced in yesterday's smaller-scale societies, people in many parts of the South know very well that being under the boot of today's distant faceless oppressors is far worse.

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Making the shift from globalization to relocalization would benefit from two complementary but very different sorts of strategies: those that *counter* further globalization, as well as those that can bring real and lasting *solutions*. Because of the urgent need to halt the runaway global economy, efforts to counter globalization need to be implemented as rapidly as possible; they would best be broad-based and highly internationalized, linking North and South as well as social and environmental movements in order to pressure governments to take back the power that has been handed over to corporations.

But such efforts would not in themselves restore health to economies and communities: long-term solutions to today's social and environmental problems would also require small, local

initiatives that are as diverse as the cultures and environments in which they take place. Many such efforts are already underway — from community banks and local currencies to community-supported agriculture projects, localized education systems, rediscovered traditional knowledge, and more. Unlike halting the global economic steamroller, these small-scale steps require a slow pace and a deep and intimate understanding of local contexts, and would best be designed and implemented by local people themselves. If given the support they need to flourish, these location-specific initiatives would inevitably foster a return to cultural and biological diversity and long-term sustainability.

*For further information about the issues this article raises, please contact ISEC.*

ISEC

Foxhole, Dartington, Devon TQ9 6EB, UK

tel: 01803 868650

fax: 01803 868651

email: [isecuk@gn.apc.org](mailto:isecuk@gn.apc.org)

or

ISEC

PO Box 9475, Berkeley, CA 94709, USA

tel: 510-548-4915

fax: 510-549-4916

email: [isecca@igc.org](mailto:isecca@igc.org)

Website: [www.isec.org.uk](http://www.isec.org.uk)

