

Corona can't save the planet, but we can, if we learn from ordinary people

Ashish Kothari (16 April 2020)

It is fascinating that the only people who know nothing of the COVID-19 pandemic are also those completely unaffected by it: uncontacted or isolated forest peoples in the Amazon and Papua New Guinea, a couple of adivasi communities in the Nicobar Islands, perhaps some groups in the Arctic circle. How I wish I was amongst them, as much to escape the virus as to be mercifully far from the incessant chatter about it!

But then there are so many silver linings to this astonishing knockout punch humanity has been delivered, that I'm going to add to the chatter. Note that I say 'silver lining', for at the centre of this is a massive humanitarian crisis, not only of the suffering of the sick and the loved ones of those who are dying, but also of the working classes who cannot switch to 'online' work, whose daily wage labour is imperiled, whose vegetables and fruits are not selling, whose industries are shut and who unlike their capitalist or government bosses do not have wealth to fall back on. One cannot talk positively about a crisis in which 100,000 people have already died, and, according to the International Labour Office, 195 million people may lose their jobs ¹.

The corona pandemic has grabbed global attention like no previous disease, generating historically unprecedented actions by nations, partly because it has hit the rich and brought the global economy to its knees. But we must not forget that like always, the 'poor' are paying a higher price. This is true of other ongoing global crises, including of climate, biodiversity loss, and conflict. Everything else I write, in this article, has to be tempered by this very sobering reality.

We have been handed an incredible opportunity to right many historic wrongs. One is with regard to how we have treated our earthly home. And the other is regarding how our economies and politics have marginalized vast sections of humanity, the ones disproportionately suffering the consequences of multiple global crises - and these factors are connected.

What is the crisis telling us?

Images of how clean the air of cities like Beijing and New Delhi has been since the virus took over and halted vehicular traffic, industries and other sources of pollution, have been flashed worldwide² must have significantly reduced carbon

¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061322>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/apr/11/positively-alpine-disbelief-air-pollution-falls-lockdown-coronavirus>; <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-51944780>). The cessation of much of the world's air traffic

emissions. Likewise many populations of fish and other aquatic life, and of terrestrial wildlife, must be breathing a bit easier as industrial scale fishing and hunting, and pollution, would have significantly declined.

In *The Swarm* by Frank Schätzing (2004)³, deep sea micro-organisms form a collective intelligence, and wreak mass scale revenge on a rampaging humanity for its complete disregard of planetary ecological limits. I am not superstitious, but who knows if viruses are not doing precisely the same thing? Why should we think only human beings have agency, and the rest of nature is only a mute bystander?

But even if the message of the viruses is not consciously generated, we should be heeding it. Industrial forms of natural resource use (including hunting for the global market rather than only for local subsistence use and markets, and monocultural commercial agriculture) have disrupted natural systems irreversibly, with fatal consequences for millions of species and for ourselves⁴. Amongst many consequences, we are frequently unleashing micro-organisms that were not earlier affecting human beings but now are latching on to us as new hosts. And this is only one kind of impact; others include the rapid and widespread collapse of ecosystems that sustain the livelihoods of or provide security to billions of people ... and eventually of the planet's ability to sustain life as we know it.

All this is a consequence of the triple forces of capitalism, statism (domination of the state in our lives), and patriarchy running amok. It is not only with the earth, but vast sections of humanity that are suffering. The growing chasm between the have-lots and the have-nots has grown so much that even those benefiting from it are worried, if nothing else because of the backlash they fear. The lack of accessible healthcare for millions in so-called 'developed' countries like USA, where the pharmaceutical and medical industry has been profiting shamelessly, has also been horribly exposed. The central role of the fossil fuel and military-industrial complex in the earth's destruction and the exacerbation of inequalities, is clearer than ever before.

What is the opportunity?

With the whole world listening, we have possibly history's biggest chance of changing course. We can refashion the economy and polity, local to global, to be respectful and sensitive to ecological limits, and to work for all of humanity. But

<https://www.economist.com/business/2020/03/15/coronavirus-is-grounding-the-worlds-airlines>

³ Schätzing, F. 2004. *The Swarm*. NY: Regan Books.

⁴ <https://theecologist.org/2020/feb/04/eating-animals-will-be-death-us>;
https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/mar/18/tip-of-the-iceberg-is-our-destruction-of-nature-responsible-for-covid-19-aoe?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Gmail;
<https://climateandcapitalism.com/2020/03/11/capitalist-agriculture-and-covid-19-a-deadly-combination/>

this requires not simply some cosmetic managerial fixes of the kind that governments hastily applied after the 2008 economic collapse. Such fixes (such as bank bailouts) in fact made things worse by privileging the elite; even now, bailouts of the airline industry are being considered, rather than using such resources for rebuilding the livelihoods of the poor⁵. Nor is the solution the kind of technological fixes that those destroying the earth's climate and biodiversity are promoting, such as giant screens ('geoengineering') that will supposedly reduce global warming.

We need transformations that are systemic, replacing the currently dominant structures of injustice and unsustainability with more equal political, economic, and social relations. We need a dramatic transformation towards genuine democracy, a *swaraj* ('self-rule' in Sanskrit) that encompasses not only all humans, but the planet as a whole, based on an ethics of life.

What course changes are required?

What does this mean? It means reversing economic globalization, a process that was supposed to bring prosperity to all peoples but has actually brought enormous distress, growing inequality and ecological devastation. This process has entailed the integration of production, consumption and trade into complex global structures and relations in such a way that no community or country is able to strive for self-reliance, or to protect livelihoods and environment from damage by multinational corporations and unfair trade. A system whose fragile economic interdependencies have been rudely exposed by the virus crisis; for instance, when the components of a single consumer product are made in a dozen countries, mostly by informal labour with little economic or legal security, the collapse of even one of these links in the chain can cause a domino effect across the entire production chain. This is one main reason why this crisis may result in the loss of millions of jobs.

It is also a system that has also meant the domination of one way of being and knowing ('western') over all others. Entire libraries of knowledge, embedded in thousands of languages and worldviews and ways of knowing around the world, have been wiped out or are in the process of being erased due to epistemological colonization.

To be clear, in pointing to globalization as one major factor in the current crisis, I am not talking of global social relations that help exchange ideas, principles, cultures, and knowledges on an equal plane, which has been a valuable component of human existence for millennia.

But what will economic globalization be replaced with? Open localization, a process of striving for self-reliance in meeting basic needs (food, water, shelter, learning, health, governance, dignity, livelihoods) from within a certain human-

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/apr/14/us-government-coronavirus-bailout-airlines-industry>; <https://stay-grounded.org/savepeoplenotplanes/>

scale local region. In such a system, each of us in our local communities has a level of control over decision-making, and localized feedback loops mean that we can't easily overlook ecological and social damage, unlike in a globalized economy in which the damage of my over-consumption is borne by someone a thousand kilometres away. Most important, such a system will significantly reduce (not eliminate) the necessity of global movement of products and people, with much less chances of pathogens spreading quickly across the world. It will also reduce, in many cases even reverse, the mass migration of people from rural areas into cities, which has resulted in densely packed populations where disease can spread so easily. The need to reduce global trade and travel, and densities of human habitation, must surely be amongst the biggest lessons from the corona virus disaster.

Communities show the way

Thousands of initiatives at food, energy, water, and other forms of community sovereignty across the world show that localized but interconnected solutions can work (such as India⁶, and from other parts of the world⁷). And many of them are showing how resilient they can be during a global pandemic.

In India, several thousand Dalit women farmers (severely marginalized in India's patriarchal, casteist society, and facing hunger and malnutrition, three decades back), organised themselves as *sanghas* (associations) of the Deccan Development Society in a few dozen villages of Telangana state⁸. Using their own traditional seeds, organic methods, local knowledge, and cooperation, they have achieved food sovereignty, completely eradicating hunger and malnutrition. They are currently donating about 20,000 kilograms of foodgrains for COVID-19 related relief work, and feeding thousand bowls of millet porridge every day to municipality and health workers and police personnel who have to be on duty despite India's ongoing lockdown.

In the Ecuadorian Amazon, the Sapara nation have fought hard to gain collective territorial rights over their rainforest home. They are now defending it against oil and mining interests, and trying to demonstrate a localized economic well-being model that blends their traditional cosmo-vision and new activities like community-led ecotourism⁹. In COVID times, their income from the latter would have dropped, but their forests and community spirit give them all the food, water, energy, housing, medicines, enjoyment, health, and learning that they need. Across vast areas of Abya Yala and Turtle Island (native indigenous

⁶ www.vikalpsangam.org

⁷ www.radicalecologicaldemocracy.org

<https://www.localfutures.org>

<https://solutions.thischangeseverything.org>

⁸ <http://www.ddsindia.com/>

⁹ <https://theecologist.org/2019/sep/17/resistance-and-rebuilding-amazon>

names for the Americas), Australia, and South-east Asia, indigenous peoples have fought for and in many cases obtained collective title for self-determination.

In central India, *adivasi* (indigenous) people over 90 villages have formed a Mahagrame Sabha (federation of village assemblies) to move towards self-rule, resist mining, conserve and sustainably use forests by getting community rights recognized, and empower women and youth in decision-making¹⁰. Some of their members who had migrated out to work have returned during the COVID lockdown, and have no income; the village assemblies are using funds collected by sustainable harvest and sale of forest produce, to help them tide over the crisis period.

Across the world, 'territories of life' conserved by indigenous peoples and other local communities have proven to harbor some of the most important areas of biodiversity and ecosystem functions, providing millions of people with basic needs and with critical back-up sources of food, water, energy, during times of disasters and crisis (<https://www.iccaconsortium.org>). On a recent webinar organised by the ICCA Consortium, a global network of over 100 indigenous, community, and civil society organisations, Giovanni Reyes of the Kankanaey tribe of northern Philippines described how indigenous peoples there have traditional systems of grain storages specifically for disease outbreaks and other such disasters.

Also globally, the movement for the commons is reclaiming privatised or state-owned spaces for the public good, such as parking lots and disused governmental lands into collectively governed urban agricultural plots, unused private buildings into housing for the poor and for refugees, and so on¹¹. As David Bollier, who with Silke Helfrich has compiled several books of commoning examples and the principles that underlie them, notes: "Throughout history commoning has always been an essential survival strategy, and so it is in this crisis. When the state, market, or monarchy fail to provide for basic needs, commoners themselves usually step up to devise their own mutual-aid systems¹²."

Most such examples have had to struggle against adverse macro-economic and political contexts, so imagine how much more they could spread if there were positive policy environments. For instance in India, if the billions of rupees of subsidy for chemical fertilisers was to be given to small farmers to generate organic inputs, there would be a rapid transition to ecologically sustainable farming. But they have also had to confront entrenched socio-cultural inequities and discrimination, especially related to gender, ethnicity, caste, ability and age.

¹⁰ <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/transformative-alternatives-at-korchi/#.XpdWty2B2V4>

¹¹ <https://commonstransition.org>

¹² <https://www.freefairandalive.org/commoning-as-a-pandemic-survival-strategy/>

Towards Eco-swaraj: a radical ecological democracy

Crucially, such a transformation would mean a shift back to the *real economy*, focused on actual products and services, and not the crazy roller-coaster virtual economy of shares and bonds and derivatives on which a tiny minority of people have become immensely rich. It will bring back the importance of biocultural regions, defined by close, tangible social and ecological relationships. It will emphasize once again that instead of the privatization of nature and natural resources (including land, water, forests, and even knowledge and ideas), we need to place these in the public domain, with democratic custodianship. It will also have to press for a significant reduction in overall material and energy use, and especially that of the world's elite, as argued convincingly by Europe's degrowth movement¹³.

It is important that all this is accompanied by radical democracy, i.e. where people take political control in collectives where they are (rather than putting all their faith in elected parties); and by the struggles for social justice and equity (on gender, caste, ethnicity and other fronts). This means also that the xenophobic 'shut the borders' call of racist and religiously bigoted right-wing elements is not what I am supporting. Civil society initiatives in Greece and many other European countries have shown the possibility of open localization, in which attempts at self-determination and self-reliance are combined with the welcoming of refugees from war-torn areas¹⁴. And it works both ways, as migrants show how they can give back; as part of the Barikama cooperative, African migrants who were once exploited as labour in Italy's plantations, are working extra hard to produce and deliver food to the country's locked down population¹⁵.

In the long run, of course, conflict zones from where people have to flee, need to themselves become areas of peaceful localization, as for instance has been attempted in the incredibly brave autonomy movement of Kurdish people (especially its women) in Syria-Iran-Iraq-Turkey border area. Both this and the Zapatista autonomy movement in Mexico show how communities can address multiple issues through local radical democracy, informed by principles of ecofeminism. The worker-led 'one million climate jobs' campaign in South Africa¹⁶, and the Green New Deal of Bernie Sanders in USA¹⁷ and the Labour

¹³ <https://www.degrowth.info/en/2020/03/a-degrowth-perspective-on-the-coronavirus-crisis/>

¹⁴ <https://www.radicalecologicaldemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Alternatives-in-a-world-of-crisis-2019-2nd-ed1.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/01/a-beautiful-thing-the-african-migrants-getting-healthy-food-to-italians>

¹⁶ <http://aidc.org.za/programmes/million-climate-jobs-campaign/about/>

¹⁷ <https://berniesanders.com/issues/green-new-deal/>

Party in UK¹⁸, despite some serious flaws¹⁹, demonstrate in earthy details how society can move towards justice and ecological sustainability.

The transformation also needs to encompass a spiritual or ethical reconnection with the earth, and each other. Indigenous peoples have long warned of the consequences of our alienation from the rest of nature, the penchant of modernity to think of human beings as outside of nature, somehow not bound by the limits and norms of the planet around us. In their movements they have brought back a diversity of ways of being and knowing ... buen vivir, ubuntu, sumac kawsay, kyosei, country, minobimaatasiiwin, swaraj, and many others ... that speak of living with the earth and each other in harmony²⁰. 'Ordinary' people have shown extraordinary innovation in forging eminently practical socially and ecologically sensitive solutions to everyday needs, across the world. Now its up to the rest of us to heed the warnings, resist injustice, undermine the systems of oppression, and learn from the pluriverse of alternatives already available.

Am I hopeful we will take this opportunity? We did not when the 2008 financial collapse shone a blazing torch on the ills of economic globalization and the capitalist-statist-patriarchal forces underlying it. But this crisis is much bigger, it is different, it is showing much more vividly the dangers of economic hyperconnectivity even as it highlights the crucial ecological connections our lives are dependent on. It is bringing out humanitarian and community spirit in wonderfully diverse ways, including singing along with neighbours, distributing leaflets offering help to the elderly, volunteering for health care, learning to live slower, less consumerist lifestyles. It is pushing or encouraging young people to go back to their communities, learn from their elders how to live off the land, such as amongst indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, Canada²¹. It is showing how communities that have regained governance over the natural ecosystems around them (such as some in India using the Forest Rights Act), have built up economic reserves that can be used to support members who no longer have a job because of the COVID-related economic collapse.

Movements of the youth and women and indigenous people and other marginalized populations, already vocal for many years on many issues, must use these opportunities to push for radical transformation, personal to global. There lies the hope.

¹⁸ <https://www.labourgnd.uk/gnd-explained>

¹⁹ <https://wsimag.com/economy-and-politics/61905-the-green-new-deal>

²⁰ <https://www.radicalecologicaldemocracy.org/pluriverse/>

²¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/indigenous-canada-turn-land-survive-coronavirus-200401073446077.html>

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Ashish is with Kalpavriksh, Vikalp Sangam, and Global Tapestry of Alternatives. A shorter and earlier version of this article was published in *The Wire*, 31.3.2020: <https://thewire.in/environment/we-will-survive-the-coronavirus-we-need-to-make-sure-we-survive-ourselves>