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Earth Vikalp Sangam: proposal for a Global Tapestry of Alternatives*

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ABSTRACT

Globally there is a visible counter-trend to the destructive process of 'development' that the forces of capitalism, statism, patriarchy have imposed. Though still marginal and not yet able to make significant macro-level transformations, the resistance is growing. As is, often emerging from such resistance, there is a re-assertion of ways of life that respect, nature (including humans), co-existence, and justice. Such radical alternatives can be from ancient cultures, or be very new, but all have a core of ethical values that put life at the centre. One crucial barrier to these becoming a force for macro-level change is that they remain scattered, only sporadically learning from each other and becoming a greater critical mass. With this background, a Global Tapestry of Alternatives has been initiated in mid-2019, a kind of confluence of ideas and practices towards further collaboration and visioning. The idea has emerged from the Vikalp Sangam (Alternatives Confluence) process running since 2014 in India.

KEYWORDS

Alternatives Confluence;
Global Tapestry; capitalism;
statism; patriarchy

Background and concept

Across the world, there is resistance to the dominant, ecologically destructive and socially inequitable model of 'development' that has been imposed by capitalist, statist, and patriarchal forces. Simultaneously there is a search for radical, systemic alternatives to this model. Such alternatives may be re-assertions of ancient ways of being that remain very relevant, in old or new forms, such as the worldviews and lifestyles of many indigenous peoples or the recommoning of spaces. Or, at the other end of the spectrum, they may be more recent emergences and articulations such as eco-feminism, degrowth, and the digital commons.¹ They range from initiatives in specific sectors such as sustainable and holistic agriculture, community-led water/energy/food sovereignty, solidarity and sharing economy, worker take-over of production facilities, resource/knowledge commons, local governance, community health and alternative learning, inter-community peace-building, and gender equality, to more holistic or rounded transformations such as those being attempted by the Zapatista in the Chiapas of Mexico, and the Kurds in Rojava and other parts of their territory in the trijunction of Syria, Turkey, and Iraq.

Even as these initiatives and movements challenge the structural roots of injustice, many also seek to construct (or reconstruct) a fundamentally different world; one based on, amongst other features, radical or direct democracy and people-centred politics, democratic control of the economy based on

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*The Vikalp Sangam ('Alternatives Confluence') is a process carried out in India, bringing together initiatives on alternatives across the full range of human interests and arenas; see <http://www.kalpavriksh.org/index.php/alternatives/alternatives-knowledge-center/353-vikalp-sangam-coverage> and <http://www.kalpavriksh.org/images/alternatives/VikalpSangamshandoutnoteOct2016.pdf>.

caring, sharing, and inclusive localization, social equity and equality, cultural diversity and pluralism, all of these mindful also of ecological wisdom and resilience. Such movements are extremely diverse, with many a difference between them, but they also share many common threads of ethical or spiritual values, including autonomy, interconnectedness, responsibility, dignity, diversity, equality, inclusiveness, simplicity, peace, respect for all life, love and empathy, human rights, and others.²

There is a great deal that such initiatives can learn from each other and apply in their own contexts, if not the specifics of how transformation was brought about then at least the lessons, values, principles emerging from them. Even more important, there is a need for networking and critical solidarity amongst them to withstand the threats they face from the dominant system, as also to create a greater critical mass for macro-economic and political change.

The upsurge of popular protest and resistance around the world has resulted in a number of attempts at bringing people's power together at a global level, whether in the various mobilizations at the WTO, Climate COPs, World Economic Forum and other such gatherings of the rich and the mighty, or on platforms like the World Social Forum (WSF). However, post-resistance visions and strategies for building a saner, equitable, wiser world have received less attention than needed, at such global mobilizations. There is also no systematic, ongoing process linking the various levels of alternative initiatives, from local to global.

In this context a proposal for a global confluence of alternatives was proposed by this author at the International Degrowth seminar in Budapest in 2016. This has now emerged as, the Global Tapestry of Alternatives or GTA (one can use multiple other names as culturally relevant, such as Earth Vikalp Sangam (EVS) to borrow the terminology used for a process going on in India since 2014). The GTA (www.globaltapestryofalternatives.org) would enable the following:

- Mutual sharing of alternative initiatives along the full range of human endeavour, to learn from each other, strengthen meaningful hope and inspiration;
- Building collaborations amongst networks or platforms of these initiatives to expand their scope, increase their depth, and spread them into new areas;
- Providing strategic support in times of need, e.g. when any of these initiatives is threatened by state, corporate, or other backlash;
- Strategizing for advocacy and actions towards changing the macro-situation, enabling further spread and deepening of such initiatives;
- Dialoguing amongst diverse worldviews, ontologies and epistemologies;
- Stimulating similar networks and platforms in regions/ countries they do not yet exist in; and
- Collective envisioning of alternative futures.

Clearly work on alternatives will not be successful without also being, or aligning with, work on resistance (indeed, in many or most circumstances the two should not be seen as a binary but rather inextricably enmeshed with each other).

A natural question that has arisen in this context is, why not simply use processes like the World Social Forum to do the above? Through its various global and regional forums WSF has brought together a very large section of the resistance movements, and many of the alternative initiatives (with often the two being the same or overlapping). And yet it does not perhaps provide a sharp focus needed on alternatives, and like any single forum cannot encompass the entire diversity of movements and networks. The GTA is not proposed as a competitor to the WSF or other such processes, but as complementary. It would certainly be worth organizing sessions of the GTA as part of WSF gatherings (there is already a formal link with the WSF on Transformative Economies, to be

held in mid-2020), but also at other forums and in its own independent ways. Importantly, the major focus need not even be physical gatherings at a global level (especially given their enormous ecological footprint as also the difficulty of many from the global south to get to them), which could happen once in a while; equally or more important could be the linking of local/national/regional processes already underway (such as the Vikalp Sangam in India, the Cruenza Mutua in Mexico, the Social and Solidarity Economy or Degrowth meetings in Europe), and establishment of new ones where necessary, with continuous networking amongst them.

It is important that the GTA does not become institutionalized in ways that create bureaucratic, centralized structures of decision-making; it needs to remain a process, and an open platform, an identity that many can ‘own’ and run with.

Also important, this should be a forum for those seeking fundamental, systemic, radical transformation, not succumbing to the superficial, often ‘false’ solutions that are emerging in the form of predominantly market measures, technofixes and so on. The kinds of initiatives / movements that would hopefully be involved include those who are asserting, practicing and/or advocating.³

- *food, energy, water, and land sovereignty*, i.e. full collective governance control over the conditions and knowledge required for securing these basic needs.
- peoples’/community (especially indigenous) *autonomy and self-determination*, asserting that only they can decide on their present and future.
- revival of concepts and practices of *indigenous & traditional community well-being* (buen vivir and sumac kawsay in Latin America, ubuntu and others in Africa, and many others around the world).
- *radical or participatory or direct democracy*, with power being located in people at large rather than in representatives; including swaraj in India, self-rule in many parts of the world, radical notions of ecosocialism, and forms of anarchy as examples.
- unlearning and dismantling of the globalized, colonial or neo-colonial, neoliberal economy, including *degrowth, decolonization, and alter-globalization*.
- replacing the currently dominant capitalist or state-dominated economy with *social / solidarity / gift / cooperative / community economies*, including the appropriate valuation of invisibilized and hidden economies of caring and sharing, and the creation of community /complementary currencies and timebanking.
- sustainance or revival of the *commons and commoning*.
- taking steps towards *peace and demilitarization*.
- struggling for *worker control* over the means of production and democracy in the workplace.
- dismantling of patriarchy and masculinity, and assertion of *feminist principles and approaches*, and respect of multiple *genders, sexualities*.
- striving towards *socio-cultural justice and equity*, including amongst genders, castes, ethnicities, classes, generations, and other such arenas in which traditional and new inequities are rampant.
- demanding *climate and environmental justice*, i.e. the fair and equitable share of the planet, reparations by those who have caused the most damage, and action for facilitating ‘victims’ of the climate and environmental crises to adapt and become (or sustain existing) resilience.
- innovating on *spiritual and religious faiths* to bring out their radical edge and enable social engagement.
- initiating alternative *media and arts* (as also fundamental changes in mainstream forms) as a counter to their corporate, elite and state capture.
- recognizing *rights or respect of nature* as an ethical and spiritual need, re-inserting humans within nature, and reviving respect for the rest of life.

- movements towards *sustainable settlements*, including transitioning towns into being climate-neutral or positive, and ecovillages to create examples of just, harmonious living.

Preliminary discussions in 2018–19

The idea for such a global confluence was discussed at the 6th International Degrowth Conference at Malmo (Sweden), in August 2018, and at the South–North Degrowth Conference at Mexico City in September 2018. Apart from an enthusiastic welcoming of the idea, these sessions in which over 200 people from across the world and various backgrounds and movements participated, came up with a number of pointers for the process. The need for a fully democratic, non-hierarchical, decentralized process was strongly stated. Mindful of how some global processes can get alienated from the ground and exclusionary, participants asserted the crucial importance of remaining rooted to and respectful of grassroots initiatives, and inclusive of community-level actors. This would also require working in various languages, not one or two dominant ones. Necessarily, this can only happen if the process is not located only at the global level, but starts from the local, builds up to wider levels, and feeds back into the local. Participants also recognized that this would be enormously challenging, perhaps over-ambitious, but that the sheer necessity of providing such forums of interaction and exchange had to overcome any resulting hesitation about getting into it.

A small core team of volunteers spread across the world has taken the GTA idea forward since the above meetings. This has involved generating endorsements from over 50 key global or regional networks and prominent individuals from around the world (see list at www.globaltapestryofalternatives.org). The GTA was then formally launched in May 2019. Prior to and subsequently, it has been discussed, or specific sessions on it have been organised at, several global gatherings, including the preparatory meeting of the Systemic Alternatives Symposium (Rio, April 2019), the WSF on Transformative Economies (Barcelona, April 2019), the Defend the Sacred Alliance (Tamera, Portugal, August 2019), and the DemocraticConfederalism.Earth gathering (Reykjavik, Iceland, September 2019).

If we want to forge pathways towards a pluriverse world, a world in which many worlds can be embraced (as recognized by the Zapatistas), living in harmony with each other, there is no option but to try to confluence the movements for radical, emancipatory transformation.

Notes

1. For more on these and several other terms, concepts and movements referred to in this essay, please see Kothari et al. (2019). This publication contains essays on 15-plus ‘mainstream solutions’ that do not challenge the status quo, and 90-plus ‘radical alternatives’ from around the world that do.
2. A framework of such transformation emerging from the Indian Vikalp Sangam process, containing five spheres of life and a set of ethical values, is available at <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/about/the-search-for-alternatives-key-aspects-and-principles/>; see also Demaria and Kothari (2017).
3. See Kothari et al. (2019). This publication contains essays on 15-plus ‘mainstream solutions’ that do not challenge the status quo, and 90-plus ‘radical alternatives’ from around the world that do.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Ashish Kothari, based in Pune, India has helped found or coordinate a number of organizations, movements, and processes, including Kalpavriksh, Vikalp Sangam, ICCA Consortium, ACKnowl-EJ, Radical Ecological Democracy, and the Global Tapestry of Alternatives. He is co-editor of *Alternative Futures: India Unshackled*, and *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*.

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