

FOUNDATION SUPPORT TO SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION

MARCH 23-25, 2013
LA BERGERIE DE VILLARCEAUX

A convening organised by
Fondation Charles Léopold Mayer pour le Progrès de l'Homme
and EDGE Funders Alliance



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Preface – A note from our friends at FPH

At the time we decided to become member of EDGE Funders Alliance, we couldn't imagine that we were about to be adopted by a new family. That's indeed what happened with this meeting. Despite our cultural differences, our different languages and sometimes areas of activities, it took us merely an evening to feel part of a community, sharing experiences and reflections in an absolute climate of trust and complicity. And it was not only because of the good local food and French wine! This feeling of community between European and North-American Funders is rooted in a common vision of the challenges the world is facing, and in a joint ethical understanding of our foundations' responsibilities to tackle them.

Now we want to use this brief report as a concrete example showing that it's possible to develop valuable cooperation between like-minded funders both on the strategic and operational level. It's maybe one attempt amongst many others but we feel deeply committed to promoting it for the coming years and to engage other foundations in this process which could lead to the creation of an EDGE Funders Europe, linked with EDGE Funders in the US. Together we'll be stronger to fight against the current trends that jeopardize people and the planet. Together we'll bring more resources and support to the movements and organizations that make another world possible.

Progressive funders united will never be defeated!

Summary: Three days in three paragraphs...

Throughout the three-day convening of European and US foundations and funders, there was a feeling that something interesting and new was being planted amongst us. The scope of the discussion was wide, touching on everything from new forms of activism, mapping tensions and dynamics in the World Social Forum process, buen vivir, eco-feminism, commoning, the Rights of Nature, taboos and the sacred work of gardeners through to ensuring that foundations have mission coherence, the importance of prefigurative projects, the relationship between traditional NGOs and new social movements such as Occupy, community resilience and trans-local activism, and the possibilities of building an affinity group European foundations.

We heard of dozens of projects and initiatives that, individually and collectively, are challenging the sources of social and ecological injustice *and* building new practices and tools for social and ecological transformation. The range of work was tremendously rich but what was most interesting and encouraging is that nearly all are “propositional” or “prefigurative” rather than merely defensive. They include agro-ecology initiatives, credit unions and cooperatives, investing “common good” capital in local economies, local currencies and transition regions, strengthening democratic processes and political education, digital empowerment and enriching internet content, making visible struggles that fall off the radar screen and supporting those at the margins.

In the closing session, we tried to find a way to summarise or view our collective work: what is it that we are doing together? Perhaps it was the French countryside or the good homegrown food, but there was something in the air at La Bergerie that brought out the inner gardener in us all. We talked about seeds and nurturing and harvesting, but it was the analogy of permaculture that seemed to pull together our discussions and point us towards next steps. We speculated that the twelve permaculture principles offer insights and approaches that could also be applied by funders and foundations interested in nurturing long-term social and ecological transformation: these include observing and taking time, valuing what is happening at the margins, accepting feedback, developing relations and working together, valuing diversity, and responding creatively to change.

Maybe at La Bergerie we planted the seeds for a new style of philanthropy: “permafunding.”

23 March: Opening session

We received a warm welcome from Matthieu Calame, director of the Foundation pour le Progrès de l'Homme (FPH), after which Mark Randazzo from EDGE explained the background to the meeting.

Following dinner, Alnoor Ladha from The Rules (<http://www.therules.org/>) gave a presentation describing seven characteristics or typologies of new forms of activism:

1. Scale and legitimacy (Get Up! Australia: <http://www.getup.org.au/>)
2. Speed (All Out, example of action against anti-gay legislation in Uganda: <https://www.allout.org/en/about>)
3. Mass participation (Anna Hazare anti-corruption movement, India)
4. Transnational solidarity (City of London Tax Justice Campaign)
5. Network effects (memes)
6. Democratisation of cultural production
7. Funding to disrupt (Kickstarter now raising more than the National Endowment of the Arts).

The Rules builds on-line activism to support local campaigns by helping them to link globally, using tools that may not be in the “traditional” arsenal of social movements. Several issues were raised in discussion. First was the tension between short-term engagement and impact versus long-term movement building. Alnoor explained that “low threshold” engagement encourages involvement and that action precedes engagement: that is, people often act first and then become politically engaged, not the other way around. Following from this, we discussed the link between grassroots community organising and the tools that can engage people as “shallow” activists and how, in turn, these people can long term activists.

The tension between the local and the global was also discussed, in particular the perhaps unintended effects that “outside” activism can have on local dynamics. The case of Uganda was mentioned where apparently some local activist groups felt that the intervention of All Out was not positive. Alnoor argued that we need to be “recombinatory” and should not be biased against things that work simply because of where they come from.

There was also a discussion about the speed and size of funding for different forms of activism. Alnoor gave the example of the Anna Hazare anti-corruption movement where they used a simple and cheap technique of “missed call” to capture the phone numbers of people who wanted to be on the sms mailing list. The list grew so huge that every sms cost ten of thousands of dollars to deliver and this is where the funding was needed: to pay the cost of the sms bill. But this was completely unpredictable and the funds were needed immediately not as part of a long-term programme.

Several participants highlighted that the majority of funding is reformist/transactional compounded by a selective process of “defunding” some movements, yet there is an even greater need to find ways to be more nimble and effective with funding movements and activities that are transformational.

24 March 2013

9am: Introductions: How does your institutions approach movement building?

This session was introduced with the observation that there are highly funded efforts to keep

the system in place and that movement building is an effort to build countervailing forces.

There were diverse responses from the participants indicating that funding organisations are at very different stages of thinking about movement building. For some, the “prefigurative” work – that is, supporting experiments and activities that are filling gaps, building alternatives or prefiguring new ways of living/working – are the most interesting spaces. In the same spirit, there is interest to fund those on the “margins” not only because of vulnerability but also because change and experimentation often happens at the edges.

FPH itself is in a moment of transition, reshaping its guidelines for the next ten years with the objective of supporting the construction of a “global community” building on existing initiatives. However the general situation for funding in Europe is quite conservative and there is interest amongst those present to build some kind of “affinity” group in the European Foundations Centre (EFC) of funders interested in more transformative or movement based support. The EFC is trying to revive its international programme and is surveying its members to see what sort of work they are supporting. In addition, the EFC is working on scenarios, asking members “what kind of future do we want to support?”

Others asked how social movements are affecting “traditional” NGOs – especially in the context of major social movements/moments such as the Arab Spring, Occupy and [Indignados](#) – and how can “traditional” funders show solidarity with these groups.

“Strengthening community resilience” was suggested as the most important work for the next 50 years, in the light of current global governance, new technologies and economic trends.

There was deeper reflection in small groups on the strategies and risks of funding social movements. On the one hand, social movements need support but there is a risk that they will be instrumentalised to support funder’s priorities and campaigns, especially considering the trend, at least in Europe, towards more conservative funding choices and fewer resources. On the other hand, there is no need to “fetishize” social movements, as they do not last forever. However, continuity and structure are important and institutionalisation does not always mean bureaucratisation. The new “horizontal” movements pose new challenges in terms of decision-making processes and we need to reflect on how to work together. Clearly, funders can help to build movements, support new initiatives, facilitate dialogues between new and old movements and so on, but resources always affect dynamics.

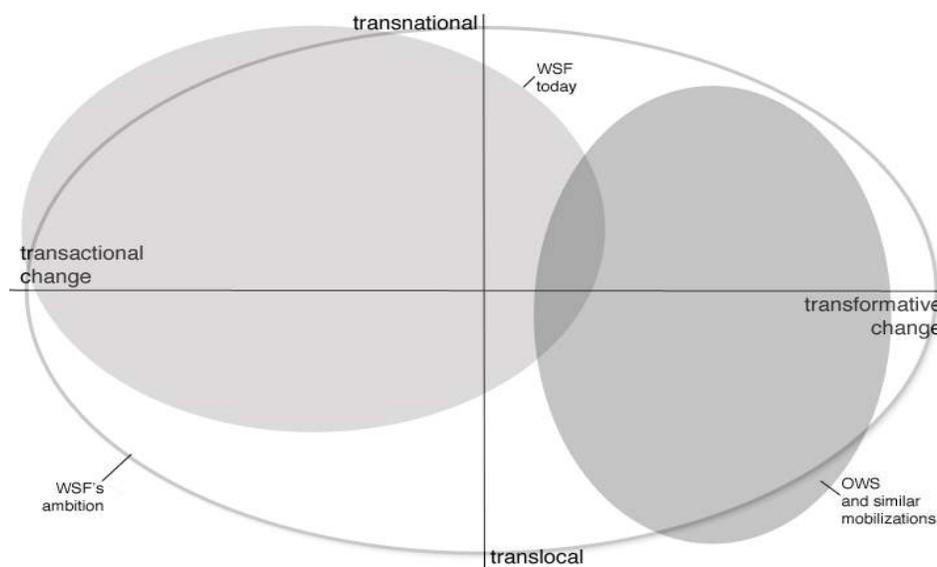
The question of language was also raised. Terms that are commonly used in US philanthropy such as “grassroots”, “community organizing” and “movement-building” are not very familiar concepts in the European context. It will be interesting and challenging to see how a common language can be built, even through the traditions are quite different.

11am: Ten years of the WSF – Nicolas Haeringer

In his review of 10 years of the WSF, Nico has observed a set of tensions and paradoxes that both give momentum to the WSF but also pose serious challenges for future directions. First, he reminded us that the WSF was a result of the global justice/alter-mondialist movement, not the other way around. In his paper, he identified four main paradoxes: that of the process, the event and the context; between open space and centralising tendencies; between promises and practices; and of cosmopolitanism without universalism, leaving us, as he concludes

“between hope and frustration.”

Reflecting on the diversity of actors contained within the WSF, Nico proposed two axes: transnational-translocal and transactional-transformational. The WSF is meant to embrace actors engaged in transactional change as much as those who favour transformative change and it aims to gather and discuss struggles and alternatives at all scales, from the local to the transnational. But, over the years, most of the WSF participants seem to opt for transactional strategies (even if they might seek for transformative change) at the transnational level. Local *transformative* experimentations have lost visibility within the WSF processes.



The following discussion revolved around the future of the WSF and how the WSF itself (both the process and events) relate to the question of movement building. Some found it difficult to measure what the WSF has achieved, while others believed that the WSF was, and may still be, an important space to create momentum and convening spaces.

There has always been a lot of tension between action and space. Perhaps the question now is how to “organise the chaos” so as to create background noise leading to cultural change. The WSF may be a space for building “political trajectories” rather than specific actions, but we must remember that the WSF is not the only global space and maybe we should give up on the idea that there *should* be one single global space.

If we look at the history of global convergences, space, methodology and ideology have changed in the past 40 years. Now we need a space and an ideology that can generate commonality of action. But can the WSF do that? What might be lacking is the narrative/frame that draws together all the actions of the WSF? We have learned from the women’s movement that here is no hierarchy of struggles, but at the same time we cannot leave the global ambitions to the elites.

Reflecting on Nico’s matrix, we need to problematise who is in the bottom right hand corner. Are these groups *really* the engine for social transformation? How do we see the contradiction between the slow evolution of societies and the (possibilities of) speedy action? One specific question is whether “new movements” such as Occupy should join the WSF or should the WSF flow into the new movements?

4.30pm: Frameworks for social and ecological transformation – Nicola Bullard

Nicola posed the problem of how to overcome the current model of sustainable development based on three separate pillars of economy, society and environment. In her view, this separation and the assumed equality between the three is the fatal flaw in our thinking about sustainability and explains why the so few countries are able to achieve human development within nature's limits (indeed, it raises the question of what we mean by human development). Instead we need holistic frameworks where ecological and social justice are inseparable and interconnected: they are the same thing.

Four frames were proposed: *buen vivir* as the overarching frame, supported by Rights of Nature; reclaiming the commons and practices of commoning; overcoming patriarchy and relations of domination; and realigning production, reproduction and consumption. (add link to paper)

The discussion kicked off with the observation that funders generally see things in a fragmented way, asking questions like: How can we fix this? How can we make that better? But what if we start with the question "what kind of society do we want to live in?"

The discussion revolved around the question of where human rights fit into this frame. How do we build on/relate to the movement for economic and social rights and how can we use the entitlements, norms and accountability provisions contained in human rights law to further our work for justice? For example, there are many community struggles against environmental destruction and corporate power that use human rights law.

Buen vivir might be one way to connect social and ecological transformation with human rights but there is a risk that we lose the claim of accountability contained in human rights. We were also reminded that human rights was a revolutionary framework but the intellectual left has done a poor job of integrating sustainability into human rights. However some felt that *human* rights are not enough as they tend to put individuals at the centre and, even when extended to collective rights, are still anthropocentric. In addition, private property is still sacrosanct in international law and human rights law.

Talking about the Rights of Nature is a powerful conceptual, political and tactical tool: it reframes the relationship between society and Nature while using the language of rights which is very familiar and has the capacity to mobilise and engage people. Perhaps combining rights for nature and rights for people are the tools to achieve maximum harmony.

The language of rights has a specific history that is tied to regulating relation between individuals overseen by the state. However, before the state, society was regulated through taboos. What would it mean to have a holistic regulation of the system? We accept rights and duties but not taboos. Would we be ready to accept taboos, to accept limits? The problem with the scientific vision is that everything is possible because there are no limits. We need limits within which to regulate power.

Monday 25 March

Session 1: what people are funding and excited about? What is transformational? How does

it relate to the themes and framework discussed yesterday?

To help us think about this, a gardening analogy was proposed where we can see different parts of our work as seeding, fertilising, harvesting, resting...

FPH: participatory research on appropriate technology; local currency; agro-ecology; transition areas and Agenda 21 local governments; popular education; Commons Strategies Group and the “Economics and the Commons Conference” in Berlin with the Heinrich Böll Foundation; European Charter on the Commons; working with Smart CSO to mainstream the narrative of “the great transition”; 2015 agenda (SDGs, UNFCCC); dialogue between Europe, China and Latin America to share a new vision of development.

Right Livelihood: found the discussions very helpful to rethink criteria for what is transformational and identify candidates with the highest potential to change. Maybe we need to start putting a stronger emphasis on movements.

Mama Cash: looking at disproportionate impact to women; bringing struggles onto the radar that may not be visible even to radical movements; the themes “body”, “voice”, “money” are translated into programmes on land, labour rights and inheritance. Supporting groups at the margin so they can influence the broader movement

ETC: participatory evaluation of technology with the aim to build capacity at the national and regional level; working with Via Campesina and Grain on agro-ecology; technology observation platforms; governance mechanisms for food; noted that funding is waning in all areas except that agro-ecology is getting a bit more traction, technology is more difficult as people don't know what is in the pipeline.

Christensen Fund: large-scale collaborations for agro-ecology solutions; land rights/land grabs, linking community based work, re-imagining borders beyond national, encompassing food, people, rights, trade, businesses; IP rights and representation. The global work is a “light layer” that supports the richness of what's happening on the ground.

Arab Digital Expression Foundation: freedom of expression, open culture, revolution. Digital empowerment – mapping and naming streets, discussion forums; learning and education – open school, tool kits for non-traditional education; alternative media and arts & culture – there is a gap in support for the continuing work of established artists; knowledge management and production – enriching internet content, especially in Arabic, helping establish open archives, etc.

Sister Fund: framework is “occupy, resist, produce” (originally from MST): “occupy” -- Post-Occupy Tendency and seeding some small initiatives and political education; “resist” - direct action (National Peoples Action); “produce” -- alternative finance, social movement enterprises, organisational sustainability, credit unions, co-ops, solidarity work, alternative frameworks for economic activity.

Foundation for Future Generations: highlighting “local heroes” who are showing new ways of doing things day by day, using the frame “People, Planet, Prosperity, Participatory Democracy” to help people see what sustainability can look like. Launching of a “new bank” with the idea that people must “take the power”.

(after) FACT: exposing French foundations to some new ideas and movement thinking, including exposing funders to the WSF. Interested to be part of building a sub-group in the EFC.

Common Counsel: priorities are grassroots and movement building; grassroots exchange fund; climate – resilience and resisting false solutions, international solidarity; native organising and advocacy; only 3% of grants go to communities in the US to strengthen organisations and environmental justice organising; healthy, clean, green communities and jobs; movement building through funding alliances, bringing movements together;

Urgent Action Fund for Women: protection of women and transgender activists; sharing strategies on how women and minorities can have their voices heard; rapid response to any request in any language in 72 hours.

Wallace Global: using all the tools of the Foundation (convening, investments, grants, etc). Corporate power is at the centre of the work, trying to support more developed and robust activities that aim to transform corporate power, such as taxes, FTT, trade rules, holding corporations accountable for environmental and social impacts; small funding on Right to Nature, Right to Water, free prior and informed consent (FPIC); democratic participation in relation to money and politics, reclaiming democracy; climate work supporting fossil fuel divestment campaign and reinvesting in renewable energy and conservation; socially responsible investment. The Foundation has modelled itself on divesting and reinvesting to ensure mission coherence.

Grassroots International: resource rights especially for peasants, indigenous peoples and women. Land grabs/rights, agro-ecology, water/mega dams, climate, food sovereignty; supporting capacities of small groups on advocacy at UN, FAO etc; learning exchange; Millet Network of India; direct response to Gates Rockefeller Green Agriculture funding; working with women farmers in Africa; with US Food Sovereignty Alliance to bring in more frontline and affected communities into this alliance; Climate Justice Alignment, focusing on extreme energy and Rights of Mother Earth; would like to get involved in linking food, climate, finance campaigns.

Solidago: focussed on “global rules of the game” -- old labour/new labour/workers rights, where are the innovations in labour organising; democratising capital; aligning grants and asset management to build local agriculture in Massachusetts; “common good” capital to invest in local economy; dirty energy/ corporate power/money politics; working with communities of colour, youth, women to build new democratic and political infrastructure with a long term view to have independent political organising. These are not environmental organisations but they see the interconnectedness between issues.

FES: executive compensation; social effects of macro-economic policy; focussing on inequality and social impacts; publishing reports.

European Foundation Centre: international programme; building knowledge of what foundations are doing internationally, building relations with international institutions, advocacy to create an enabling international environment for philanthropy; Tunisia Fund, tools for accountability, etc. There is a discussion now about how to get more impact with climate

funding and the suggestion that funders maybe need to take more risks. Climate resilient cities are on the agenda, as well as the commons and changing narrative. Not enough to only work with environmentalists need to work with finance, social justice, and communications experts. In Copenhagen there will be a “World Café” of all the working groups to look at sustainable cities from different perspectives. A Greek foundation will organise an event in Athens at the end of June on how foundations can help in the crisis and alleviate the causes of the crisis, as well as a discussion on social movements in Greece.

Session 2: Reflections on morning session

One way to look at the multitude of initiatives is to cluster them in groups, for example: Global economy: resistance/impact; Rights, justice, equity; Climate, agro-ecology, etc; Tools: awards, heroes, resilience, popular education. However, building on gardening analogy, we can see all of these activities as a form of “permaculture” where there is interdependence, no hierarchy of issues, where “weeds” do not exist, and while it looks messy it is also resilient and self-managing.

Twelve permaculture design principles ¹

1. *Observe and interact*: By taking time to engage with nature we can design solutions that suit our particular situation.
2. *Catch and store energy*: By developing systems that collect resources at peak abundance, we can use them in times of need.
3. *Obtain a yield*: Ensure that you are getting truly useful rewards as part of the work that you are doing.
4. *Apply self-regulation and accept feedback*: We need to discourage inappropriate activity to ensure that systems can continue to function well.
5. *Use and value renewable resources and services*: Make the best use of nature's abundance to reduce our consumptive behaviour and dependence on non-renewable resources.
6. *Produce no waste*: By valuing and making use of all the resources that are available to us, nothing goes to waste.
7. *Design from patterns to details*: By stepping back, we can observe patterns in nature and society. These can form the backbone of our designs, with the details filled in as we go.
8. *Integrate rather than segregate*: By putting the right things in the right place, relationships develop between those things and they work together to support each other.
9. *Use small and slow solutions*: Small and slow systems are easier to maintain than big ones, making better use of local resources and producing more sustainable outcomes.
10. *Use and value diversity*: Diversity reduces vulnerability to a variety of threats and takes advantage of the unique nature of the environment in which it resides.
11. *Use edges and value the marginal*: The interface between things is where the most interesting events take place. These are often the most valuable, diverse and productive elements in the system.
12. *Creatively use and respond to change*: We can have a positive impact on inevitable change by carefully observing, and then intervening at the right time.

¹ From <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Permaculture>

We can see the interconnectedness between all the things that are happening and the things we are doing but they are happening at different scales and speeds. Schematically, one can see the continuity between different levels of action:

Intimate/individual → care community → political engagement → global

Of course we need defensive strategies to protect our garden from GMOs, but just because we are facing the hegemony of industrial agriculture, does that mean we need our own hegemony? Perhaps we should think about the “affinity of affinities” rather than the “hegemony of hegemony.”

Closing session: Next steps

European funders caucus report: We will make contact and build affinities with other like-minded funders, and with the environmental working group of EFC. On specific issues such as agro-ecology, new macro-economy etc., we can start working now on making connections. We will start working on introducing social issues into the EFC Environmental Working Group. Need something that can bring together funders and foundations.

US funders caucus report: looking at where there is alignment and possibilities for collaboration and high-impact interventions. Need to find a way to keep this thread of discussion going: it is important for both sides of the Atlantic to build this space together. EDGE has a role to keep the conversation going, maintain a connection to the issues. The “edge” concept of permaculture should also apply to EDGE funders. Agreed that the point is to move money to work that is transformative.

A note on next steps: Perma-funding begins, through cooperation on Agro-ecology

Following our convening at La Bergerie and additional discussions among a number of us at the WSF in Tunis the following week, seven funders - FPH, Solidago, Grassroots International, Christiansen, Oxfam Novib, and New Field Foundation – are coming together around a request from La Via Campesina to collectively earmark as much as \$100,000 in support for LVC's upcoming strategy development and planning conference in Indonesia aimed at strengthening food sovereignty and peasant-based sustainable food production. A joint statement on the importance of supporting organisations of peasants and other small food producers as part of a long-term strategy of strengthening the peasant agenda is being drafted by funders associated with this initiative.

This statement will serve as a call to action to the foundation community, and provide context and parameters for an “Engagement Lab” at the EDGE Funders annual Just Giving Conference in Washington, DC in May, at which funders will discuss strategies for greater collective engagement in this area over the months and years to come.

ANNEXES

Objectives

- Share perspectives and deepen our collective understanding of the global landscape of civil society initiatives addressing structural injustices in key areas and domains, and of networks and movements working for a more equitable and sustainable world;
- Explore potential collaboration among grantmakers interested in supporting new forces and dynamics working on transitions towards deep social and ecological transformation.

Background

Many of the new coalitions, networks and movements working on the transition towards deep societal transformation share an assumption that the future must be socially just and ecologically sustainable if there is to be any viable future at all. Our convening will allow us to share perspectives on the nature and state of these emerging movements, and on our own funding priorities and strategies.

Agenda

- Saturday, 23 March · Afternoon arrival at La Bergerie (by 5 pm) · Evening welcome reception and introductions · Informal conversations over dinner · After dinner remarks and conversation on transformative movements
- Sunday 24 March · Who we are, and what has made a difference (funder survey and small group discussions) · Context setting: What can be learned from the World Social Forum process? · Informal conversations over lunch · Walking tour of agro-ecological center · Emerging transformational work: Analytical framing and discussion · Informal conversations over dinner · Evening discussion: What is significant and motivating to each of us, and why
- Monday 25 March · Review/consolidation of what should be on our (collective) radar · State and nature of funding for this work/challenges, and opportunities, going forward · Approaches and strategies/potential areas of collaboration · Informal conversations over lunch · Next steps: Meetings and follow-up in Tunis EDGE Global Social Justice Philanthropy Conference (Washington, DC, May 21-23) European Foundation Centre General Assembly (Copenhagen, May 30-June 1 · Wrap up and checkout assessments · Late afternoon departure (by 5 pm)

Convening Participants:

Alnoor Ladha, The Rules

Benoit Derenne, Foundation for Future Generations, Belgium

China Ching, Christensen Fund, US

Ellen Dorsey, Wallace Global Fund, US

Imad Sabi, Oxfam Novib, The Netherlands

Juliane Kronen, Right Livelihood Award Foundation, Sweden

Juliette Timsit Feeney, FACT, France

Kathy Krueger, Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights, US

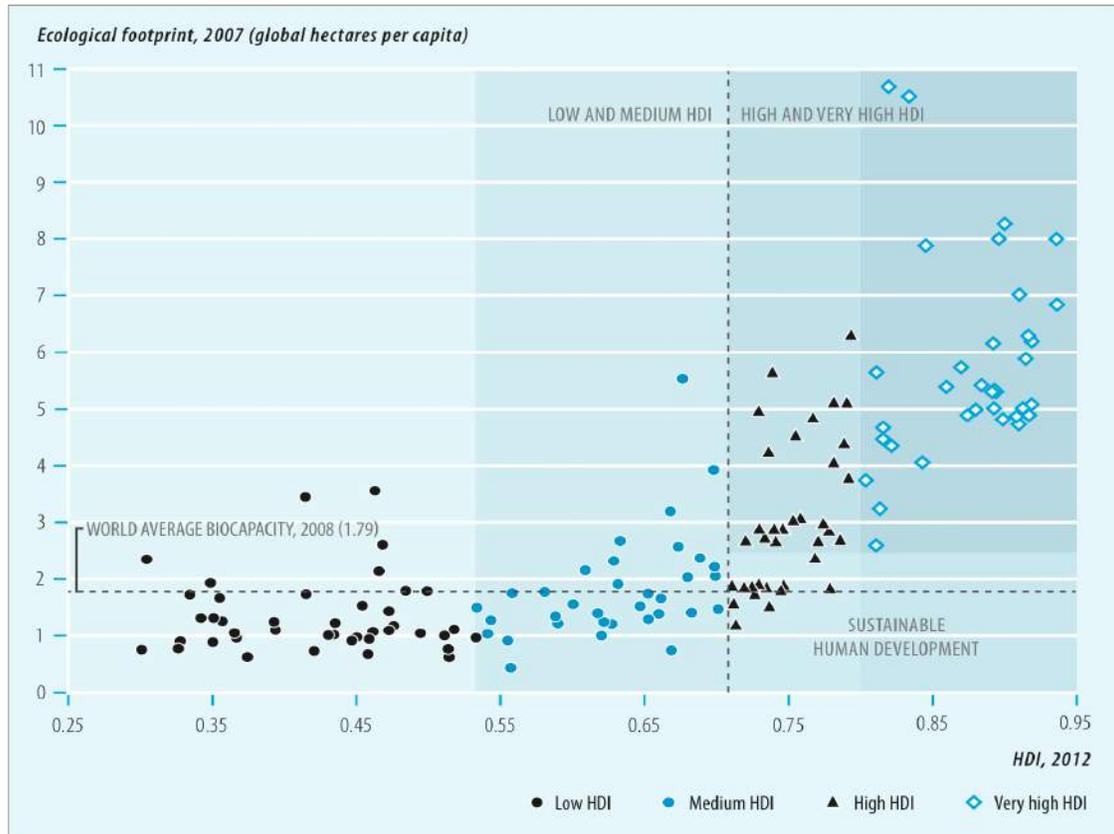
Laura Livoti, Common Council Foundation, US

Leah Hunt-Hendrix, Sister Fund

Marilena Vrana, European Foundation Centre, Belgium
Mark Randazzo, EDGE Funders, US
Matthieu Calame, Fondation Charles Léopold Mayer, France
Amanda Gigler, Mama Cash, The Netherlands
Nicola Bullard, France
Nicolas Haeringer, France
Nicolas Krausz, Fondation Charles Léopold Mayer, Switzerland
Nikhil Aziz, Grassroots International, US
Noha El Shoky Arab Digital Expression Foundation, Egypt
Pat Mooney, ETC, US
Sara Burke, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, NYC
Sarah Christiansen, Solidago Foundation, US
Pierre Vuarin, Fondation Charles Léopold Mayer, France

FIGURE 1.7

Few countries show both the high HDI and low ecological footprint required for sustainable human development



Note: Ecological footprint is a measure of the biocapacity of the earth and the demand on biocapacity. It depends on the average productivity of biologically productive land and water in a given year.
Source: HDRO calculations and Global Footprint Network (2011).

The latest UNDP Human Development Report “The Rise of the South: Human progress in a diverse world”³ shows very clearly that, while economic growth and human development (as defined by the HDI) can be achieved with the “right” mix of state action, investment in social welfare, and openness to trade and innovation, this policy mix fails to deliver socially and ecologically just outcomes. Inequality continues to be an almost inevitable outcome of dominant economic practices, while environmental degradation and escalating greenhouse gas emissions are the inevitable side effect of growth based on material consumption. Neither the traditional development institutions nor the majority of states seem to have any answers to how the “sustainability quadrant” can be populated. What’s more, there appears to be a huge lag (or perhaps it’s the deafness of power) between the practices and struggles on the ground and the “lessons” learned by the elites.

² Nicola Bullard is a researcher and activist for social and ecological transformation. nicolabullard@gmail.com

³ Human Development Report 2013 “The Rise of the South: Human Progress in a Diverse World”, UNDP New York

What are some of the new ideas and practices that are emerging from the struggles of social movements⁴ and from intellectuals engaged with these movements? I realise that the word “struggle” can seem like a Leftist cliché, but I am only calling a spade a spade: across the world, communities and populations are engaged in pitched battles against state and corporate power. More often than not, their challenge to elite power is being met with violence and repression: whether it’s here in France at Notre Dames des Landes or in the anti-POSCO movement in Govindapor, Orissa.⁵

My interest is the extent to which these movements are formulating their resistance and alternatives in terms of *social and ecological transformation*. That is, they are not merely trying to ameliorate impacts or redistribute alleged benefits, but they are attempting to radically re-draw the contours of power and visions of the relationship between Society and Nature.

In their demands, they are re-defining (or defending existing) relations with Nature, engaging in new (and old) practices of participatory democracy, challenging the very logic of economic policy (capitalism, development, however you name it), and offering new ways of thinking about sustainability, or more accurately, social and ecological transformation.

In Asia, there is a long tradition of “livelihood social movements”. These movements have been principally concerned with defending access to and control over water, land, and forests: the essential elements of traditions, cultures and livelihoods. To a large extent, Indigenous Peoples have been at the forefront of livelihood struggles in Latin America, defending rivers and forests, territories, traditions, language, culture and Mother Earth itself.

I am not very familiar with the situation in Africa, but between Asia and Latin America we can see many similarities, most obviously they are largely non-urban and “conservative” in the sense that they resist displacement and dispossession of their livelihoods and commons by large dams, mining companies, big infrastructure, plantations, industrial agriculture, urbanisation, etc.

In the past five years, either precipitated by or accelerated by the global financial crisis, there appears to be a rise in livelihood-type movements in Europe and North America. These include communities who are defending their urban environment against fast-track progress (for example Stuttgart 21 in Germany); rural communities defending villages and farmlands against projects that are of marginal “benefit” (such as Notre Dames des Landes, No TAV in Italy and the recent vote in Greenland against escalating mining investments⁶); and indigenous peoples of Canada (and joined by many others) defending land, territories and resources (Idle no More and No Fracking).

Drawing on these new and not so new examples, it seems to me that there are some emerging paradigms or framings that express and reinforce the *interconnectedness* and *indivisibility*, even the non-separateness, of society and nature. This embedded-ness between social and ecological is key because it gives us the tools to go beyond the traditional hierarchies or trade-offs, where gains in the social arena can be traded against losses in the environmental field, and vice versa.

I have attempted to systematise these framings/paradigms as:

- *Buen vivir* and the Rights of Nature
- Defending the commons and practices of commoning
- Eco-feminism/Overcoming patriarchy and relations of domination
- Realigning production/reproduction/consumption/localising

⁴ The term social movement is used rather loosely but I understand it as “interlocking networks of groups, social networks and individuals, and the connection between them is a shared collective identity”. Here, I am mainly interested in radical “new social movements” who are centred on issues that go beyond class. However, some of the examples, such as Stuttgart 21, are an interesting amalgam of what might be seen as conservative social forces (middle class urban dweller wanting to protect the public space) and radical groups who have come together on a common platform.

⁵ The Korean steel company is diverting 1,253 hectares of forest land for the purpose of mining iron ore as part of an integrated steel plant, which is hailed as the largest foreign direct investment (FDI) anywhere in India.

⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/mar/15/greenland-government-oil-mining-resources>

We can see these ideas, broadly expressed, in the visions and demands of many of these movements.

Buen vivir and the Rights of Mother Earth/Nature^{7 8}

The concept of *buen vivir* (the good life) has been raised by indigenous movements and intellectuals of Latin America as a fundamental challenge to Western concepts of a “good life” and to the dominant, capitalist development model that is destructive of nature and society. Usually linked with the concept of the Rights of Nature, *buen vivir* seeks to re-draw the relationship between humans and non-humans, society and nature, based on ideas of balance and harmony rather than domination and competition.

Framed this way, *buen vivir* pulls us out of our individualistic, European-Western-anthropocentric standpoint and forces us to acknowledge the possibility of other ways of living, even other cosmologies. The Indigenous Peoples of the Andes speak of the ultimate crisis – the “civilisational crisis” – that obliges us to reimagine what it means to “live well”. Bolivian president Evo Morales describes this as “Thinking not only in terms of income per capita but also of cultural identity, community, and harmony among ourselves and with our Mother Earth.”⁹ In Ecuador and Bolivia, the concepts of the Rights of Nature and *buen vivir* have been incorporated into the national constitutions. The government of Ecuador is developing indicators of what “buen vivir” might look like and how it might be measured, and they are working with environmental lawyers, social movements and diplomats to see how the Rights of Nature can be advanced internationally.

Although the reality on the ground in both countries is fraught with contradictions and dilemmas, the idea of re-aligning economic and social relations within the larger frame of Nature with the goal of “living well” is a tantalising and challenging paradigm shift. At the very least, it starts conversations and contestations.

Re/Claiming the commons and practices of commoning

A second reframing is emerging in discussions of the commons and (new and old) practices of commoning. The commons -- whether natural or cultural, local or global -- is by definition neither commodified nor exclusive. Commons and the practices of commoning speak to our rejection of the privatisation and the commodification of life, yet it is not simply an “anti” stance: there is a long tradition of commoning, still practiced widely in the South and still surprisingly resilient in the North, from which to draw, while new forms of commoning are emerging, particularly in the production and sharing of knowledge. There is huge transformative potential in reclaiming the commons -- from the State and from the profit-seeking sector. Enlarging the natural, social, economic and cultural commons (for example, through cooperatives, not-for-profit banks, community gardens, child care, seed exchanges, and so on) could de-monetise some sectors of the economy and thus reduce wage dependency. At the same time, commoning implies deepening democratic processes through direct participation or, at the least, active delegation. Finally, and most importantly, the essential character of commoning is to “take care” to ensure that the commons are not depleted and that they are available for other commoners and for future

⁷ The concept of “Buen Vivir,” or good living, emerged as a reaction to the traditional strategies for development and their negative environmental, social, or economic effects. “Buen Vivir” is an alternative concept of development that focuses on the attainment of the “good life” in a broad sense, only attainable within a community; a community that includes Nature. A popular approach to “Buen Vivir” is the Ecuadorian concept of *sumak kawsay*, meaning a full life in *kichwa*. Part of this concept also emphasizes living in harmony with other people and nature. The concept of “Buen Vivir” has gained new popularity, spreading throughout parts of South America and evolving as a multicultural concept. Social consensus led to the inclusion of “Buen Vivir” in Ecuador’s new constitution, supported as an alternative to neoliberal development. The constitution outlines “Buen Vivir” as a set of rights, one of which is the rights of nature. In line with the assertion of these rights, “Buen Vivir” changes the relationship between nature and humans to a more bio-pluralistic view, eliminating the separation between nature and society. From *Wikipedia*

⁸ Rights of Nature is significant as it is the first case where this concept has been evoked at the national level. The articles set out a rights-based system that recognizes Nature, or Pachamama, as a right-bearing entity that holds value in itself, apart from human use. This differs from traditional systems that see nature as property, which allows ownership of land to carry with it the right to destroy the ecosystems that depend on that land. It also allows the interests of the environment to be subverted to the interests of corporations and commerce. The rights-based approach spelled out in the Rights of Nature expands on these previous laws for regulation and conservation by recognizing that nature has rights that fundamental and unalienable as a valuable entity in and of itself. The system also assigns liability for damage to the environment and holds the government responsible for the reparation of any damage. If an ecosystem’s rights are violated, it also recognized the authority of people to petition on behalf of the ecosystem to ensure that its interests are not subverted to the interests of humans or corporations. From *Wikipedia*

⁹ Quoted in the article “Hugo Blanco on the Indigenous Struggle in Amazonia,” *Socialist Voice*, 28 August 2008, <http://www.socialistvoice.ca/?p=317>

generations. Hence, the commons are not the exclusive domain of one person or group to use as they see fit without regard for others and for the future.

Overcoming hegemonic masculinity & realigning production/reproduction

However, giving meaning to *buen vivir*, acknowledging the rights of nature, reclaiming the commons and building real democracy is not enough to construct new politics and ethics. Into this already heady mix of ideas, we must inject an explicitly eco-feminist agenda.

The ecological and social problems we face are not only the results of capitalism but also of patriarchy and masculinity. Eco-feminist Ariel Salleh argues that global warming itself is driven by the “lifestyle choices of affluent white men.” In this system, competition is more important than human well being, production is more important than reproduction, and accumulation is more important than ecosystem integrity.

As Salleh argues, “... if the end of capital is a necessary condition for sustainability, it is not a sufficient one. For capitalism itself is a modern version of patriarchal social relations and so a parallel political devolution is called for. In other words, the ties between hegemonic masculinity and the diminishment of women and nature still have to be unravelled.”¹⁰

The late feminist philosopher, Teresa Brennan, also talks about the destructive character of capitalism: “In the short run, profit is made by consuming the sources of long-run profit (nature and labour) faster than they can adequately reproduce themselves -- or, to say the same thing, faster than the time it takes to meet human needs or safeguard the environment.”¹¹

She also argues for “the local” when she says that “the closer to home one’s energy and raw material sources are, the more one’s reproduction costs stay in line: paid and domestic labour will be less exploited, the environment less depleted.”¹² Brennan also believed that “personal productivity should be expanded and mobile, while economic productivity should be limited and self-contained.”¹³ This sentiment turns the world upside down and is profoundly emancipatory in its implications. It means that our creative, intellectual, emotional and social selves could (and should) be enlarged while the economic is contained. This is the opposite of the capitalism, where the economic defines all social relations, and in which our private selves, and especially females, are either objects of commodification or transformed into mere consumers.

This throws out a huge challenge: if sustainability and equity (or the achievement of *buen vivir*) are going to constitute our core political objectives, then overcoming both patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity is a precondition not an afterthought, alongside recalibrating and redefining the relationship between production and reproduction.

These “reframings” -- around the commons, *buen vivir* and eco-feminism -- are not purely theoretical: communities, indigenous peoples’ movements, the indignad@s and Occupy, eco-feminists and commoners are already, in different ways, putting these ideas into practice on the ground. There are many new forms of resistance and struggle that are opportunities and sites of praxis for actively deconstructing and surpassing the gendered functioning of capitalism and productivism with a view to re-embedding humans in nature.

Some interesting websites

Berlin energy: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/business/an-unlikely-effort-to-buy-the-berlin-power-grid-a-886426.html>

<http://www.berliner-energetisch.net/>

Buen vivir: <http://plan.senplades.gob.ec/objetivos-nacionales-de-desarrollo-humano>

¹⁰ “Embodied Materialism in Action: An Interview with Ariel Salleh”, Gerry Canavan, Lisa Klarr, and Ryan Vu, *Polygraph* 22, 2010, p 187

¹¹ Teresa Brennan, *Globalization and its terrors: daily life in the West*, Routledge, 2003, page 8.

¹² Kelly Oliver, “Living a Tension”, in *Living attention: on Teresa Brennan*, by Teresa Brennan, Alice Jardine, Shannon Lundeen, Kelly Oliver, SUNY Press, 2007, page 15.

¹³ Oliver, op. cit. page 15.

Commons: <http://newxcommoners.wordpress.com/about/>

Greenland: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/mar/15/greenland-government-oil-mining-resources>

Occupy: <http://greenliving.about.com/od/greenprograms/a/Occupy-Wall-Street-Environmental-Protest.htm>
<http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/occupy-rebounds-on-the-strength-of-environmental-solidarity/>

Posco: <http://sanhati.com/articles/3634/>

Totnes: <http://www.transitiontowntotnes.org/about/who-we-are/aims/>