PATRICIA E. PERKINS

Social Diversity, Globalization, and Sustainability in Community-Based Economies

Bioregional and "ecological economics" theory describes the growth of local economic linkages as vital to move post-industrial economies in the direction of sustainability.[1] This involves expanding local stewardship over environmental and economic resources, so that progressively more production for local needs can be done within the community. Far from existing solely in the realm of theory, this is a pattern which is becoming more familiar in many parts of North America and Europe (see, for e.g., Rajan; Forsey; Dobson; Nozick; Mazmanian and Kraft; Hannum; Shuman; Beatley, Norberg-Hodge, Schor).[2]

The blossoming initiatives to create local, community economies can be understood in light of the long history of environmental challenges faced by people living in the industrialized North, and the economic blows of trade liberalization/globalization and recession. Many communities in North America and Europe have been organizing around environmental concerns for decades. Recession or trade-related layoffs in the early 1990s, and again since 2008, have given many people both time and incentives to exercise long-dormant skills for generating incomes and exchanging goods and services. Environmental awareness, community organizing, and "alternative" employment creation (e.g. in environmental remediation and energy conservation activities) form a natural and dynamic synergy which draws upon feminist theoretical insights and relies upon women's skills.

Stronger community-based economies not only help people to survive the vicissitudes of world market fluctuations, they hold the seed of more fundamental economic transformation.

> As individuals and households become more self-reliant and empowered, they lay the groundwork for new community responses to larger social and economic problems. When plant closings, layoffs, loss of local stores, or other large-scale economic hardships afflict their communities, such empowered, creative individuals may be more able to develop new solutions to these problems. And the new community

> ties they have been forming through their shared activities serve as a base for building new economic structures and enterprises that more fully meet their community's needs. (Brandt 153)

Self-sufficient communities need the global economy less. In such communities, it is possible to live a healthy, fulfilling, productive life without consuming many goods and services which come from far away. But this requires knowing one's neighbours: their skills, needs, abilities, and trustworthiness. This makes possible the sorts of exchanges which are efficient and beneficial for everyone concerned—be they skills exchanges, community-supported agriculture, Local Enterprise Trading Systems, credit unions or informal credit circles, urban gardens, child-care and other cooperatives, environmental housing improvement programs or any other enterprises where local resources are transformed into goods and services which local people need (Norberg-Hodge). In many communities in both North and South, it is women who do the bulk of the networking, the conflict mediation, the organizing, and the fund-raising for such community endeavours.

Working toward self-sufficiency involves fostering the development, preservation, and appreciation of the skills needed to live our lives with more quality and less material consumption. To the extent that women are the guardians of these skills, and the teachers of young people, their role in skills transmission is central for any community's future self-sufficiency.

As Margo Adair and Sharon Howell state:

> If we are to secure the future, we must reconstruct our communities. To do so, women's ways of talking, listening, and being together must come to define all public and political life. The qualities embodied in our relationships over the kitchen table are the very qualities needed for our talk of strategies and actions... For the world to survive, *everyone* must act like a woman. Let us reweave our communities, reclaim the wholeness of life, and empower ourselves to heal the future. (41)

Many of the things women all over the world are already thinking, writing, and doing in the face of globalization and global recession reflect the essence of Janine Brodie's statement that a feminist analysis

> must begin with the premise that (global) restructuring represents a struggle over the appropriate boundaries of the public and the private, the constitution of gendered subjects within these spheres and ultimately, the objects of feminist political struggle. (Brodie 19)

Since local communities are, in a sense, intermediate between the "public" and the "private," they represent a terrain in which many women are comfortable acting politically. At the same time, it is exactly the fact that local communities

are somewhat removed from national or international "public" life that can make them strong (and potentially subversive) bulwarks against centralized control, refuges of diversity, and incubators for creative human interaction.

CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNITY ECONOMIES

As Community Economic Development (CED) practitioners have demonstrated for decades, strong interactive multiplier effects can be created in communities by generating jobs and needed local services, and keeping money circulating within the local area.[3] "Green CED," as currently practiced, involves the extension of CED ideas to include financing of local economic initiatives via energy and other conservation measures, and environmental remediation as an important job creation focus (Jones, Carter). The particulars of how this works, and the potential for CED in a given community, are of course closely related to the specific situation.

Toronto, for example, is home to a vast and growing network of locally-based initiatives aimed at creating jobs by addressing environmental problems, and increasing local control of basic economic necessities: food, shelter, transportation, money.

When Central American refugees form an agricultural cooperative, lease land outside Toronto, and provide weekly food baskets of organic vegetables to urban consumers in a "community shared agriculture" project; or when the City of Toronto provides seed loans for energy-efficient retrofits of private housing and office towers which create construction jobs and save both energy and money; or when Afghan-born women begin a catering service in a church kitchen; all these initiatives contribute to the development of a more ecological, less wasteful, more locally-centred social economy.

There are countless more examples in Toronto of small-scale organizing and local economic initiatives involving people of all ethnicities and backgrounds:

- The GreenxChange Project creates energy-retrofit jobs, training programs, and pilot projects to include residents of Toronto's marginalized Jane-Finch neighbourhood in the growing green-collar economy.
- Yes In My Backyard links homeowners who have unused yard space with other city residents who are eager to garden, for increased local food production and social interaction.
- The Toronto Islands Residential Community Trust, negotiated by local residents, shows how complex land ownership and stewardship issues can be resolved using unconventional institutional approaches.
- The Access Community Capital Fund, linked with the Canadian Community Investment Network co-operative, helps promising local entrepreneurs gain access to new sources of financing for business start-ups.

- Not Far From the Tree mobilizes volunteers to pick fruit from Toronto trees which would otherwise go to waste. The harvest is split among the pickers, tree-owners, and local food banks and community kitchens.
- "Green Community" initiatives across Toronto have forged wide-ranging partnerships to create jobs by upgrading the energy efficiency and environmental quality of neighbourhood life. These include Autoshare, Toronto's first car-sharing program, the first wind turbine for distributed energy production, started by TREC Renewable Energy Co-operative, and the Solarshare Co-operative.

Several factors particular to Toronto have contributed to the development of a local economy. As the largest city in Canada, Toronto benefits from ethnic and cultural diversity and a wide range of community traditions; it also has relatively well-developed environmental and community organizations, and well-defined downtown urban neighbourhoods; pressing urban problems put attention to local environmental and job creation issues near the top of the public agenda; changing governments and downloading of social services to the municipal level have forced the city to develop ways of addressing local needs; downtown neighbourhoods, and at times the city as a whole, have generated progressive political leadership.

The fact that similar examples of burgeoning local economies can be found all over North America and Europe, however, indicates that in many different contexts the trend persists. This raises a number of interesting research questions, especially concerning the relationship between globalization and the growth of local economies.

GLOBALIZATION AND COMMUNITY ECONOMIES

The "restructuring" which is part of globalization inevitably leads to layoffs in some places, and laid-off workers often cannot move to where the jobs are, or be retrained for them. They may either have the wrong skills or be in the wrong places for the global economy to make use of them. They also, however, are likely to have very important knowledge of the places where they live—and community connections—which allow them to substitute local economic activity for whatever they formerly did. Such a substitution:

- provides personal satisfaction and contact with others;
- can provide basic goods and services which people need (food, clothing, shelter, personal services such as childcare and home repairs);
- makes money less necessary at a time when money is probably less available;
- facilitates the development, "remembering," and transmission of skills which are necessary for personal and community self-sufficiency (such as gardening, food preparation, crafts, construction and repair, music, etc.);

- encourages thrift and efficiency of resource use, and intrapersonal specialization.

All of these are things that people intuitively are attracted to and see as pleasant, worthwhile, and "good." De-linking from the global economy allows people to relax, depend on and learn from each other in a way that is impossible when time is precious and scarce because "time is money." When you are laid off, you can spend a week teaching your granddaughter how to rebuild a junked bicycle—*as long as* you've got a home to live in, health care, and food on the table.

At this stage we must ask a somewhat tricky question: Is this ridiculously naïve? Are local economies at best hopelessly anachronistic and at worst a futile dead end? This is a criticism of local economic thinking which I have heard from a number of progressive colleagues. I would like to offer a few thoughts on the theoretical importance of developing a local-economy focus along the lines sketched above.

First, any local-economy activist knows that global trends are driving the emergence of local economies. All of the grassroots initiatives described above involve awareness of and interaction with global-economy issues: fossil fuel depletion, climate change, food security, population and capital shifts. This does not mean, however, that local activists feel disempowered by globalization — quite the opposite! Their work is essentially a process of growing things in the cracks of globalization's splitting facade. The resulting micro-environments create space and support for a vast diversity of human-scale economic alternatives to dependence on the global economy. Simply because these are so diverse and far-flung, we should not have the false impression that they are weak and uncoordinated. Together, as I have attempted to outline above, they make up a picture of defiance and "refusal to be homogenized" that is a source of tremendous hope.

The "degrowth" movement, which aims to build social sources of value to replace material throughput as the driver of economic well-being, shares this perspective (Foster, Martinez Alier, Thomas).

Exactly because of their diversity and variety, local economies fly in the face of the simplifying forces of globalization. What local-economy theory is about is a new sort of economic development that honors ecological realities and finds efficiencies in small-scale, shared knowledge at the community level. By recognizing and refusing to accept the externalization of costs spun off by the juggernaut of broad-brush globalization, people in local places worldwide are in effect seeking to minimize those costs. From an ecological and "sustainable development" viewpoint as well as a social-economy viewpoint, this process is theoretically important.

Important conditions which make this vision of global-local restructuring feasible (and they are perhaps more realistic in Canada and some European countries than in other places) are a guaranteed basic income, such as that provided by an adequate welfare system or a Basic Income program, and healthcare or health insurance for all. In other words, while local economies can

certainly contribute, people's basic needs must be met. Other factors which can facilitate the growth of a local economy include the following:

- Flexibility in the way basic social services are provided, which allows people to switch to locally-sourced and communally or barter-provided food, health care, and housing if they wish, using the money saved for other things. This implies welfare payments of a "guaranteed annual income" kind, rather than food stamps, government housing, etc.
- Dramatic economic upheavals or shocks. Large-scale economic change happening suddenly in a local area can be more conducive to development of local economic activity than protracted, smaller shifts. This is because in the former situation, people are less likely to feel personally responsible for being laid off; many people are in the same situation at once. When big changes hit a community, a unified response seems easier, and radically new institutions and lifestyles are more acceptable.
- Good examples. If pilot projects or small-scale local economic endeavours pre-exist a globalization shock, this can help people to see them as a viable solution to new problems. There may be an openness to community approaches within a short time following economic upheaval which dissipates over time as people "adjust" on their own, so a strong energy for creation of community-based economic institutions may be lost in the initial learning-by-doing phase. Pre-existing trials and and projects formerly seen as "fringe" can reduce this. Individual adjustment and alienation are dangerous because of the high costs in depression, family violence, alcoholism and other health effects. This has many gender implications.
- Strong communities. People who know each other well, have intergenerational connections, and participate in strong local institutions like churches, parents' groups, clubs, and sports leagues, can expand and develop their interpersonal ties into new areas. There is no substitute for this sort of community self-knowledge, which builds social resilience.
- Shared history. The longer most people have lived in the area, the easier it is for a local economy to develop. People need to know each other as individuals, including each others' non-work related skills, strengths, and needs They need to know how the community works—its institutions and history. And they need to know the local geographical area well: What grows readily in backyard gardens? Where can you get sand, or walnut planks, or locally-grown apples?

To the extent that globalization depends on accelerating consumption of nonrenewable resources, it is destined to be short-lived. Trade in goods which are produced and transported long distances using fossil fuels cannot continue

at current rates. Transport prices will rise, the goods' final prices will rise, and locally-produced substitutes will become competitive. Anything made from metal, or which is otherwise energy-intensive in its production processes, will see a similar trend, as will goods which generate toxic or hazardous wastes as waste disposal costs rise (O'Connor). Production/consumption/disposal loops are already becoming shorter, and local economic linkages more important. The use of renewable energy sources is much easier in small-scale, dispersed settings. Decentralization is congruent with ecological economic development.

In the remainder of this article, I wish to focus particularly on the issue of social diversity as it affects the growth of locally-based economies.

DIVERSITY IN COMMUNITY ECONOMIES

From a bioregional and ecological perspective, cultural and biological diversity is a natural response to climatic and geographical differences across the earth's surface; cultural and biological diversity have evolved together (Coleman; Rajan; Bormann and Kellert). Ecologists detail the role of diversity in increasing an ecosystem's stability and chances of survival in the face of climatic or other shocks (see, for eg., "It's Natives vs. Newcomers, Down Under in Worm World; Bormann and Kellert). Diverse human cultures have played an important and largely unrecognized role worldwide in protecting plant and animal diversity, especially for species which are used as food (Rajan).

Humility *vis-a-vis* nature is linked to respect for other human cultures and diversity; cultural and social diversity allows for, accompanies, fosters and makes possible the growth of other ecological values (Coleman). "Green politics" is characterized by acceptance and embracing of functional differentiation, pluralism, decentralization and complexity; it is designed to unite diverse viewpoints in a cooperative participatory democracy leading to a deepening of community (Pepper; Coleman). "If diversity is good for an ecosystem, it's good for a social movement as well!" (Forman qtd. in Forsey).

New models of wealth involve wide variation in meeting ecological realities, a "new elegance" in respecting subsidiarity, anti-uniformity, and a "credo of diversity" (von Weizsacker 207-211). Diversity must be deliberately fostered to permit adaptation to future surprises (Norgaard; Yap). While most CED and ecological economics literature speaks favourably of social diversity as a goal, mention can also be found of the difficulties this can pose in practice for achieving consensus in decision-making processes. For one thing, differences can make "community" hard to achieve (Forsey; Gujit and Shah). A non-hierarchical process, "honouring what everyone can bring to the group," takes time and care, and conflict mediation skills may be necessary (Sandhill; Andruss and Wright). Moreover, decentralized communities may have the potential to become misogynistic, homophobic, racist, anti-Semitic, and otherwise repressive (Wallace). Social change may seem easier to accomplish in a group of like-minded people (Cousineau; Johnson and Tait).

Nonetheless, acceptance and welcoming of diversity in communities is a sign of their health; the skills required to mediate and develop community amidst diversity are extremely valuable for community stability (Coleman; Adair and Howell; Johnston). Often it is women, working together on food preparation, childcare, and/or income generation activities, who recognize commonalities across cultural divides, build respect and friendship, and create the social ties which become foundational for local economic stability in diverse communities.

It is a common theme in virtually all writing on CED, "Green CED," and ecological economics that social diversity, mirroring and enhancing biological diversity, is desirable, beneficial, "natural," and to be cultivated.

CONCLUSION

Marcia Nozick states,

> Feminine principles are forming the foundation for an alternative vision of society which is influencing how we work, organize and make decisions—smaller, more personal structures and processes, co-operative work situations, consensus decision making and reliance on community supports and the informal economy. They are values which support the building of sustainable communities. (38)

As community economies grow in response to economic globalization, climate change, and global ecological pressures, their characteristics and implications are becoming clearer. The examples cited above from Toronto, along with many others from elsewhere, demonstrate the importance of social diversity as a positive contributor to the stability and potential of local economic development.

Patricia E. (Ellie) Perkins is a professor at York University, where she teaches in the Faculty of Environmental Studies.

[1]See, for example, Merchant; Rifkin; Sale; Daly and Cobb, Jr; Hines; and the discussion in Perkins, "Exploring Sustainable Trade: Definitions and Indicators."
[2]Communities in the global South, of course, have struggled for centuries to maintain social and economic autonomy in the face of colonialism and neo-colonialism. The focus in this article is on the global North, although many parallels exist between South and North with regard to the role of diversity in community economies.
[3]An overview of this literature is contained in Boothroyd and Davis; see also Nozick; Roseland.

REFERENCES

Adair, Margo and Sharon Howell. "Women Weave Community." *Circles of*

Strength: Community Alternatives to Alienation. Ed. Helen Forsey. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1993. 35-42.

Andruss, Van and E. Wright. "A People of Place." *Circles of Strength: Community Alternatives to Alienation.* Ed. Helen Forsey. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1993. 105-110.

Beatley, Timothy. *Green Urbanism: Learning from European Cities*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2000.

Boothroyd, P. and C. Davis. "The Meaning of Community Economic Development." University of British Columbia Planning Papers, Discussion Paper 25, School of Community and Regional Planning, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, 1991.

Bormann, F. Herbert and Stephen R. Kellert. Eds. *Ecology, Economics, Ethics: The Broken Circle.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991.

Brandt, Barbara. *Whole Life Economics: Revaluing Daily Life*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1995.

Brodie, Janine. "Shifting the Boundaries: Gender and the Politics of Restructuring." *The Strategic Silence: Gender and Economic Policy.* Ed. Isabella Bakker. London: Zed Press, 1994. 19.

Carter, Majora. http://www.majoracartergroup.com/

Coleman, Daniel A. *Ecopolitics: Building a Green Sociey.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994.

Cousineau, Paige. "Of Mice and Elephants: The Individual, Community and Society." *Circles of Strength: Community Alternatives to Alienation.* Ed. Helen Forsey. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1993. 67-72.

Daly, Herman and John Cobb Jr. *For the Common Good.* New York: Beacon Press, 1989.

Dobson, Ross. *Bringing the Economy Home From the Market.* Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1993.

Forsey, Helen, ed. *Circles of Strength: Community Alternatives to Alienation.* Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1993.

"It's Natives vs. Newcomers, Down Under in the Worm World." *The New York Times* March 28, 1995: B13.

Foster, John Bellamy. "Capitalism and Degrowth: An Impossibility Theorem." *Monthly Review* 62 (8) (January 2011). Web.

Gujit, Irene and Meera Kaul Shah. Eds. *The Myth of Community: Gender Issues in Participatory Development*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1998.

Hannum, Hildegarde. Ed. *People, Land, and Community.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.

Hines, Colin. *Localization: A Global Manifesto*. London: Earthscan, 2000.

Johnson, Sonia and Jean Tait, "A Passion for Women's World." *Circles of Strength: Community Alternatives to Alienation.* Ed. Helen Forsey. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1993. 87-92.

Johnston, Barbara Rose, ed. *Who Pays the Price? The Sociocultural Context of*

Environmental Crisis. Washington, DC: Island Press, 1994.
Jones, Van. *The Green Collar Economy*. New York: HarperOne, 2008.
Martinez Alier, Joan. "Socially Sustainable Economic De-Growth." *Development and Change* 40 (6) (November 2009): 1099-1199.
Mazmanian, Daniel A. and Michael E. Kraft, eds. *Toward Sustainable Communities: Transition and Transformations in Environmental Policy.* Cambridge, MA:MIT Press, 1999.
Merchant, Carolyn. *Radical Ecology.* New York: Routledge, 1992.
Norberg-Hodge, Helena. "Building the Case Against Globalization and For Community-Based Economics." *International Society for Ecological Economics Newsletter* 5 (2) (April 1994): 3-4.
Norberg-Hodge, Helena. *Shifting Direction: From Global Dependence to Local Interdependence.* Berkeley: International Society for Ecology and Culture, 2000.
Nozick, Marcia. *No Place Like Home.* Ottawa: Canadian Council on Social Development, 1992.
O'Connor, Martin. ed. *Is Capitalism Sustainable?* New York: Guilford Press, 1994.
Pepper, David. *Eco-Socialiam: From Deep Ecology to Social Justice.* London: Routledge, 1993.
Perkins, Patricia E. "Exploring Sustainable Trade: Definitions and Indicators." *Global Political Ecology.* Eds. Bell, David V. J., Roger Keil, Leesa Fawcett and Peter Penz. London: Routledge, 1998. 207-242.
Rajan, Vidal. *Rebuilding Communities: Experiences and Experiments in Europe.* Totnes, Devon: Resurgence Books, 1993.
Rifkin, Jeremy. *Biosphere Politics.* New York: HarperCollins, 1991.
Roseland, Mark. *Eco-City Dimensions: Healthy Cities, Healthy Planet*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1997..
Sandhill, Laird. "Community as Crucible," *Circles of Strength: Community Alternatives to Alienation.* Ed. Helen Forsey. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1993. 75-79.
Schor, Juliet. *Plenitude: The New Economics of True Wealth*. New York: Penguin, 2010.
Shuman, Michael H. *Going Local: Creating Self-Reliant Communities in a Global Age.* New York: The Free Press, 1998.
Thomas, Richard. "The Proximity Solution: Community Enterprise, Social Resilience and Slower Consumption." Paper presented at European Society for Ecological Economics conference, Istanbul, July 2011. Web. Accessed March 27, 2013.
von Weizsacker, Ernst Ulrich. *Earth Politics.* London: Zed Books, 1994.
Wallace, Ira. "The More We Do, The More We Know We Haven't Done," *Circles of Strength: Community Alternatives to Alienation.* Ed. Helen Forsey. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1993. 51-55.
Yap, Nonita T. *Sustainable Community Development: An Introductory Guide.* Toronto: Ontario Environmental Network, 1989.