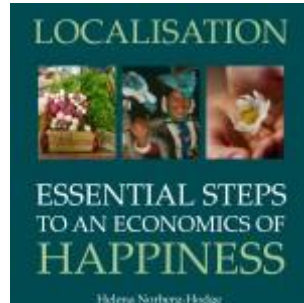


Big Picture Activism

By Helena Norberg-Hodge

Excerpted from *Localization: Essential Steps to an Economics of Happiness*, a report from [Local Futures](#) by Helena Norberg-Hodge.



Despite the countless grassroots projects already under way, the global economic juggernaut can seem too powerful to stop. But because more and more of us are becoming aware of how disastrous the global economy is for people and the planet, I believe that the chances for meaningful change are greater today than ever before.

The environmental costs of the current system have been obvious for quite some time; now the social consequences, too, are becoming more apparent. The gap between rich and poor is escalating to obscene proportions; most people are seeing their real incomes decline, and must work longer hours just to cover basic needs. Governments – many of them too poor to meet their obligations – now respond to the wishes of international lenders rather than their own citizens. People are beginning to understand that something is fundamentally wrong, and that minor tinkering with the current system is not the answer. A critical mass is ready for fundamental change: what they need is a clear explanation of the root cause of the crises we face, and solutions that are meaningful.

Helping to create that critical mass is the goal of what I call “big picture activism”. Raising awareness involves more than just theoretical analysis: every day we can point to inspiring new examples of localization projects. We can show that in North

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and South, in the city and the country, people are rebuilding connections to others and to Nature, with immediate spiritual, psychological, and practical benefits.

Big picture activism also involves a widespread and holistic re-thinking of basic assumptions. Today's consumer culture is based on myths and misinformation that paralyze and confuse people with contradictory ideas: on the one hand the evening news regularly asks whether consumer spending is adequate to keep the world going; on the other hand we're told that consumer greed is *destroying* the world.

We need to point out that it is not individual greed that created this economic system. None of us voted to put in place an economy that requires endless growth, and uses subsidies, regulations, and our taxes to work against both personal and planetary well-being. Until recently, the broad perspective needed to deconstruct the global economic system has been marginalized, with the field left to narrowly focused market fundamentalists. As a result, it appeared that the only viable option was to head towards ever larger and more inhuman economic scale, with wealth and power concentrated in ever fewer hands. Big picture activism informs us that another way is possible.

For big picture activism to succeed, a number of mental blocks need to be overcome. Many people want to move straight to action when they recognize a problem; they say: *"we already know that the economy's the problem and that corporations have too much power – we don't need to keep discussing that."* But while most of us have a sense that economic forces are behind environmental and social justice problems, few understand how the economy undermines individual and cultural self-esteem; how it exacerbates ethnic, racial, and religious conflict; and how it damages our physical and psychological health. Nor is the majority aware that trade treaties have given corporations and banks so much power that they have become a de facto global

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government – ruling behind the scenes regardless of whether a “left” or “right” party has been elected. A broad, global-to-local perspective can make even those who already oppose corporate rule more effective.

I also hear people saying, *“the system is going to collapse of its own accord, there’s no need to waste time trying to change it.”* But despite its deep flaws and contradictions, the economic system may outlive much of the natural and social world. Many years ago, the Swiss economist H.C. Binswanger convinced me that deregulated capital – money de-linked from any standard or limit – could keep multiplying endlessly, even as ecosystems and societies crash. In other words, the economy could keep growing until the last tree falls. A depressing scenario, and one that we must do everything we can to prevent.

Unfortunately, many have completely given up on the idea of fundamentally changing the system. Even committed activists sometimes say: *“there’s no point in trying – governments won’t listen no matter how many of us march in the streets.”* It is true that millions of people marched against the Iraq war, and yet policymakers took us into that senseless and destructive conflict. It is true that millions are opposed to gas fracking and nuclear energy, and yet governments continue to promote those technologies. However, the potential for people to really be heard will grow exponentially when they move beyond a fragmented perspective to focus on the common thread that runs through all their concerns. Since the current system is so destructive of both people and the planet, a “new economy” movement – one that is clear about what we are for, not just what we are against – has far greater potential to succeed than almost any single-issue campaign.

There is another stumbling block, one which is particularly common among people whose emphasis is inner transformation. This “New Age” movement has done

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tremendous good in encouraging millions of people to listen to their hearts and to the wisdom of ancient indigenous cultures. This deeper consciousness creates a yearning to turn away from the competition and consumerism of the global economy and build more loving relationships with others and the Earth. Until recently, however, there was a tendency in the New Age to focus almost exclusively on the 'inner' dimension, on "thinking positively," and personal change. And among those who focused on this inner world, many tended to look down on activists who seemed fixated on the 'outer' world.

In the activist community, meanwhile, many have ignored their personal, inner needs, while emphasizing "outer", practical, and political change. Even though their work is usually born of altruism, ignoring the inner dimension has often hampered their efforts. Neglecting peace of mind and inner reflection and focusing on the negative can lead to self-righteousness and helpless anger. Burnout, conflict, and alienation have often been the consequences. Big picture activism makes clear that our problems have both an inner and an outer dimension, and that solving them requires working on both levels.

Big picture activism does not point a finger at individual politicians, corporations or bankers. Our destructive economic system continues to expand primarily because of ignorance. The economic pundits that promote this growth model have been trained to look at flows of money and numerical representations of the world, and are shielded from many of the real-life social and ecological consequences of their abstract models. The CEOs of large corporations and banks are driven by speculative markets to meet short-term profit and growth targets, and so have even less ability to contemplate the overall impact of their actions. Even concerned consumers, taxpayers and citizens can find it difficult to see the many hidden ways that their choices support an energy-intensive, job- and soul-destroying economy.

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The system has been running on blindness for a long time, enabling tremendous destruction to be perpetrated with the best of intentions. The way forward lies not in anger and confrontation, but in actively seeking to encourage peaceful, broad-based, systemic change.

Awareness can spread like fire, and it's empowering to realize that we don't necessarily need to convince our political and economic leaders – who tend to be too locked into their misguided assumptions – or that sector of the population that is deeply immersed in consumerism. Despite enormous financial and time pressures, there is a large number of engaged and concerned people who are working to make the world a better place. They may be focused on improving their children's school, working to protect wildlife, reducing CO2 emissions, feeding the hungry, or promoting spiritual and ethical values. No matter what problem they're addressing, the economy is a common thread that links them all.

In recent years, many individuals and organizations involved in these separate campaigns have begun to embrace a holistic approach that moves beyond single issues. As a result, a big picture, *broad* analysis is beginning to build a *broad, united* movement. People are harnessing their love, their hope, and their creativity to give birth to a new world – to cultures and economies of happiness.