It is very inspiring to see the changes that have been happening in Australia since I first started coming here, about seven years ago. I was giving talks about local food systems and starting farmers markets, and there was very little happening in Australia at that time. So it’s a great source of hope and optimism for us to reflect on the real progress that has happened in these last seven years.

I am finding that today that there is a tendency for most people to feel very overwhelmed and rather depressed by world events. I, on the other hand, was much more worried ten years ago than I am now. I had been thrown into unusual circumstances by going to a remote part of Tibet called Ladak, which had not been affected by either colonialism or by the modern development colonialism. So I had an unusual opportunity to see what cultures and economies look like when people are free and independent to develop according to their own needs and their own values. I have also had the opportunity to witness—now over three decades—the changes wrought by the global economy.

So, ten years ago I was coming back to the West every year, warning about the violence and the poverty and the environmental destruction wrought by the global economy. At that time I was often told I was too dramatic—it wasn’t that bad and, anyway, business and government were all getting involved in sustainability, so why was I so worried. I was trying to say that what was actually being implemented was a very superficial version of sustainable development. In fact, I had witnessed that as governments and big business agencies used more and more of the language of community, cultural diversity, sustainability, conservation and concern about the environment they were actually implementing policies that were larger-scale and more destructive.

I had a very clear experience of this in that my book *Ancient Future* was subsidised by the Swedish and Danish governments. There were full-colour
pictures and they promoted it with me giving talks all over Scandinavia. They were also funding the initiatives that we had started in Ladak, which, among others things, included renewable energy as an alternative to fossil fuel. We were demonstrating that by using solar and water and wind you could actually raise the standard of living very significantly without the same social and ecological costs that fossil fuels, nuclear power and large dams—large centralised energy developments—create. These were also funded by Scandinavian aid agencies. This was in the 1970s and 80s. I then witnessed how those agencies stopped funding that type of work; how now, about twenty years later, they wouldn’t touch my talks and my book with a barge pole. And, in the meantime, if you read their literature, their language is very much about cultural and ecological protection.

Problems of Scale

So we have had a very difficult situation. This is not, I believe, because of some sort of evil conspiracy. I have had enough conversations with well-intentioned people in power to feel quite confident that what we suffer from—more than conscious ill-will or some bad guys up there—is scale. We are operating at a scale today that is far too global, far too large for people to have an overview, to have a clear understanding of what is happening. We can see that as the scale of economic activity increases it demands more and more specialised knowledge. So what we have is a tragic and very frightening combination of narrowing vision with larger impact.

This combination of specialised knowledge and large-scale impact on culture and nature is something that we were aware of when Rachel Carson wrote her very important books in the 1960s. By the 1970s, there was a demand from populations across the entire world, especially the industrialised world, for a dramatic shift—a shift in direction. The mandate from the people was that we needed to make changes at the level of the university. We realise now that narrow science—thinking in very narrow channels, believing we can control nature in a way that we can’t—doesn’t see the impact on the other side of the world. We therefore need to proceed in a different way. We need more interdisciplinary, more holistic thinking.

At the same time, populations across the world said we need to develop renewable energy instead of being dependent on fossil fuels or nuclear power. They had seen the horrors of what nuclear bombs could create. They had recognised the power of this very frightening technology and asked for research into renewable energy. Across the world we had public funding for research into renewable energy. We had at that time a very clear questioning of economic growth. We had books like (lead author Dana Meadows’) Limits to Growth and the very famous book, which I hope you have all heard of, Small is Beautiful (by E.F. Schumacher).

But something very dramatic happened between the 1970s and today. What happened to those departments of interdisciplinary learning in Scandinavia
and across the world? Why did things change? Why is it that, as of a couple of years ago, the Danish government withdrew funding for renewable energy and was funding research into nuclear power, even though the vast majority of the Danish population had voted against nuclear power in favour of renewable energy? Furthermore, the Danish government was one of the few that had actually earned money from selling their windmills worldwide. Why would the Danish government, despite profit from windmills, and with a mandate from its people not to develop nuclear power, still do research into nuclear power? How is it that today Tony Blair is now clearly and actively promoting nuclear power? George Bush announced in his State of the Union Address: ‘We are far too dependent on unstable oil-producing countries; we must develop renewable alternative energies’. Yet the following day, the New York Times reported that the US government had reduced or totally removed funding for renewable energy. What is actually happening is a major push for nuclear power. Governments worldwide are promoting a development that is the opposite of what people have asked for.

Meanwhile, throughout the industrialized world many people are feeling quite overwhelmed and very depressed by world events. In particular, I think people are feeling, rightfully, very stressed and also a bit unwilling to look at the big picture. From my point of view, this is very understandable because there has been a very effective media campaign, if you like, that insists on pointing the finger at individual citizens and home-owners, in discussing the crises in the world. So when we hear about global warming in the media today we only hear about how we need to turn our lights off and drive our cars less. In other words, it is our fault that the climate is changing. When we hear about starvation in Africa, again it is our fault. Throughout the Anglophone world there is a lot of media attention on the obesity problem. And the general message is that we slobs are over-eating, while over there people are going hungry and it is because we are so greedy.

Now, from my point of view, this message is extremely false because it leaves out the truth and the bigger picture of what is actually happening. Why don’t we hear, when we talk about global warming, about the fact that potatoes, milk and butter are being transported in larger and larger quantities back and forth across the world? Or about how today, when you buy local apples in a UK supermarket, they’ve been flown to South Africa to be washed and waxed and then flown back again.

The logic of the so-called integration of economic activity across the world, through so-called trade deregulation and economic globalization, is leading to a disastrous trend across the world. Not only one of identical products being shipped back and forth in larger and larger quantities, faster and faster, but also a sharper concentration of wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer people, and banks. The people in those banks and corporations are not evil people. They are not people sitting looking at the world and trying
to figure out how they can destroy it. They are usually people at the head of corporations and banks who are sitting in the hot seat, under pressure from speculators to make their business grow. Tragically, those people, blinded by the pressure to grow, have recognized that for them to grow they need to have the freedom to move into any and every market. They need to be part of a process of homogenisation. They cannot tolerate the need for different systems of measure, different languages, different seeds. Diversity is the enemy of this system.

**Life is Diversity**

Now I am convinced, as are many of my colleagues, that continuing down the direction of trade liberalization, trade deregulation and trade globalization is a disaster for life itself. Life is diversity. We are now learning that the large monocultures on the land are a disaster because they simply cannot sustain life. We are beginning to have a huge movement across the world for organic agriculture. The very meaning of that organic culture is more diversified and more adapted to natural systems. However, people are not alert to the fact that that very movement and that concept of ‘organic’, has been dramatically co-opted by the Coca Colas and the Kelloggs that, structurally, need homogenisation, and are encouraging producers to make larger and larger-scale standardized products. They cannot tolerate a system in which growers might say, ‘Well, this week I have some carrots, and next week my basil will be just right for the market, and maybe there will be some eggs there too, and maybe some milk too, and the wheat might be harvested by then’.

I did a study about a decade ago on butter. I had seen the impact on the Tibetan plateau of subsidized roads, subsidized monocultural production and subsidized energy, leading to imported butter coming across the Himalayas, travelling three or four days by lorry and landing on the Tibetan plateau at 12,000 feet. And, despite all that transport, it cost half as much as local butter. In Mongolia, I found that they had 25 million milk-producing animals and wonderful dairy forever, and yet in Olambata you can only buy butter that was made in Germany. You couldn’t even find Mongolian dairy products. In Devon and Cornwall, which are famous for their delicious dairy, you find that New Zealand butter costs a third of the price of butter produced a mile away.

Now this phenomenon is a global problem and it is about swapping. If we start becoming more eco-literate—and by that I mean economically and ecologically literate—and see education as activism, I think that we will soon see campaigns that will say, as the number one agenda for reducing global warming, ‘Let’s stop swapping identical products’. Now who would lose if we do that? If people around the world ate their own potatoes and their own butter and their own wheat, rather than importing it from around the world, of course the giant corporations wouldn’t make a profit—but millions of smaller businesses, farmers and retailers would.
I feel very much more encouraged today than I did ten years ago because I see a huge awakening going on. Part of what is so empowering and so exciting about this awakening is that you are getting developments that have never happened before. In the 1960s and 1970s, when people were concerned about environmental breakdown and the fact that the way we measure growth doesn’t make sense, they didn’t address trade treaties as the arena where businesses were simply getting too big and becoming monopolies. They were becoming monopolies out of sight because they were becoming multinational mobile companies, and the arena where they gained their strength and power was at the level of trade deregulation.

Until Seattle—where protestors shut down the World Trade Organisation summit for three days in 1999—the world did not know about it, didn’t think about it. But all those people in Seattle were there because they understood that, while we need trade rules for sure, what was happening at the WTO was not about rules that support a fair and free trading system. It was actually monopolies that were selling out and pressuring governments to sell out their own national economies. So what is totally historical is that people now are waking up to this. And the wakening up is very rapid. Paul James was telling me today that there are about 120 centres around the world that are dealing with globalization and globalism. None of them existed ten years ago. This is incredible growth, not only of those institutes but of books and films and articles and activism.

I feel particularly excited and hopeful because out of the United States—a country more pressured and more manipulated through the media than any other culture to believe that these trade agreements are benefiting society—you have an incredible movement now, particularly in the form of documentary films. There are hundreds of documentary films coming out of North America now—on Enron, on the scandals behind the Iraq war, on the corporation as a structure—that are beginning to shed light on these systems. There is a proliferation that has led to a shift of thinking in Hollywood. In Hollywood now, the word is out that people are hungry for real information because they are not getting real information through television or the dominant Hollywood make-believe films.

We are at a very fragile period and in a period of crisis. We are realizing that global warming is a serious problem. Oil is becoming more costly and is limited, and we have to do something about it. So the big push coming from above is for nuclear power. Please inform yourselves of the facts: renewable energy technologies exist, they have been tested and tried, and they work. We, the people, need to recognise that the decentralized path that is essential for providing work for all of the population, for maintaining diversity, for maintaining cultural and truly ecologically sustainable ways of living, needs to go in that direction of decentralization, or what I call ‘localization’.
The Local Food Movement

The local food movement is growing around the world. People in the United Kingdom started writing books and organizing conferences about fifteen years ago. Since that time, we have seen a huge growth in local food initiatives: from farmers’ markets, to edible school yards, to figures such as Prince Charles, and other influential figures, supporting government procurement of local foods.

Remember that ‘localizing’ is a relative term. It’s not saying that in Hamilton as of tomorrow you can only eat what’s grown locally. But it is saying that in Hamilton, as in every other community, it makes sense to keep in mind that if oil prices shoot up we are not going to want to be left with just wool to eat. We are going to want to see a more diversified economy here so that we can return to a balance between regions producing a diverse range of products for their own regional needs before supplying more distant markets. We need to return to a balance where trade is there because it makes sense for a majority of people. No society would ever have invented the idea that it is in its interest to just produce for some distant giant corporation.

Very often people’s reaction to this way of talking about the economy is to think that this is too big. We can’t possibly change this big system. I urge you to look at some of the literature, and there is a lot of it now, that will give you a different picture, based on people’s experience from around the world. The dominant picture that you’ve been getting in having the finger pointed at you, as individuals, for everything that is going wrong, and that you, through your individual actions, are going to set things right, is an incredibly disempowering message because it simply can’t work. We need to work together. We need to come together at the local community level and discuss what’s in the long-term interests of our community. We need to express that at a level of regional changes—national and international. We need to share information. And, paradoxically, we need internationalization in order to create a really powerful movement to change the global trading system.

When communities turn towards the localization model, what you see very clearly is that it helps to strengthen the community fabric. People start engaging again with one another. They start rebuilding links and connections. If you ask people round the world what they really want, what they really need, what makes them happy, you will find across every culture that family, friends and community are number one on the agenda. You will also find that in the industrialized, urbanized world, people long for more connection with nature. This combination of community and connection with nature is what localization furthers. So it is basically an economics of happiness.
Helena Norberg-Hodge is the founder and director of the International Society for Ecology and Culture. She has worked to strengthen local food systems internationally for several decades and her contribution has been acknowledged by several world leaders, including Prince Charles, the Dalai Lama, and the Indian prime ministers Indira and Rajiv Gandhi. She rose to international prominence through her work in the Himalayan region of Ladakh and in 1986 she and the Ladakh Ecological Development Group were awarded the Right Livelihood Award, considered in some circles to be the Alternative Nobel Prize. In the 1990s, she helped to establish the Women’s Alliance of Ladakh (WAL), which now has over 5,000 farming women as members.

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