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# Slowing Down, Coming Together

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**JOHN LENNON SAID ALL WE NEED IS LOVE TO COME** together and prevent our world from coming apart.

**A**nother dreamer, Donella Meadows, advised those who think the world needs saving to *slow down*, a solution that no activist has ever suggested.

Donella died in February 2001 at age 59. She became famous, notorious to some, for the Club of Rome, a global society of multidisciplinary experts who came together in 1968 to grapple with the problem of sustaining world development. She was the lead author of *Limits to Growth* (1970), a great “manifesto” for sustainable development.

*Slowing down* can be the single most effective action to save the world. It’s a very radical way of looking at things, at how to get out of the present mess.

Liberals may dismiss *slowing down* as a refuge of the weak-hearted and conservative, as more precaution than

cure. They may be right, but in any case we say to them: it's payback time.

Give it a break. Slow down. Take a minute to listen to what Donella has to say.

What if we aren't in a hurry? We can take time to walk instead of drive, to sail instead of fly. To clean up the messes. To discuss plans for the whole community before sending in the bulldozers. To figure out how many fish the ocean can produce before the fishing boats race to whatever fish are left.

**W**hat if we take time to smell the flowers, feel our bodies, play with children? What if we resist the urge for fast food, and instead start savoring slow food, grown, cooked, served and eaten with care? What if we take time each day to sit in silence and ponder what deep shit we've gotten ourselves into?

If we did those things, Donella believed the world wouldn't need much saving. We'd be spared from making so many mistakes. We could listen more and hurt each other less.

But Donella ended up saying, "Good advice. Too bad I don't have time to take it. I have to go save the world."



## **The world that needs saving**

This is a beautiful world, but it has turned so ugly in many parts.

**O**ur blue planet is home to more than six billion humans and to many times more other creatures. Before us is a modern world that has more than enough accumulated wealth to sustain us. We have more than enough to feed, to clothe, to house, to educate, lengthen the life, expand the freedom of movement and choices of every man, woman and child now living and yet to be born.

Yet, an ad in CNN says that 815 million people around the world go to bed hungry everyday while America is worried sick about obesity, its number two killer disease.

It took all of human history for the world economy to reach 600 billion dollars by 1900 but only two years to produce this much from then on. On average, the additional economic output in each of the development decades — from the 1960s to the 1990s — has equaled the total from

the beginning of civilization until 1950. Within the last century, the global economy has grown 20 times and nearly five times from 1950 to 1990, from 4 trillion dollars to about 20 trillion dollars.

**W**hat an incredible growth story! It makes you wonder why anyone would go hungry at all. Maybe, as Mahatma Gandhi said, the earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need but not every man's greed.

This grand growth story was described by the 1996 Human Development Report as *jobless, ruthless, voiceless, rootless* and *futureless*.

*Jobless* because the expansion of the economy results in limiting employment opportunities, increasing job losses, longer hours of work and declining incomes, deteriorating working conditions, increasing burden for women.

*Ruthless* because growth widens the rich-poor gap. The level of alienation between the richest fifth and poorest fifth has been increasing with every development decade, by a ratio of 30 to 1 in 1960, 32 to 1 in 1970, 45 to 1 in 1980 and about 60 to 1 in 1990.

*Voiceless* because there is no democracy or empowerment of people. The most impressive growth in recent times happened in countries where voices demanding respect for human rights and more citizen participation have been suppressed.

*Rootless* because growth erodes the integrity of some 10,000 distinct cultures that provide diversity to human life on this planet. With growth comes domination by the modern culture of accumulation, irresponsible consumption, wastefulness, and homogenization at the expense of indigenous cultures and national identities.

*Futureless* because growth undermines humanity's survival itself. Rapid growth has destroyed forests, farmlands, river systems, wetlands, lakes, coasts, seas and oceans. It has polluted the air and destabilized the climate system. The present generation has been eroding the basis of its own sustainability.

The world community has failed to arrest the decline of the natural systems on which we all depend for survival. Humanity may just perish not because of cataclysmic terrorism or world revolution but because of climate change.



## It's about justice and fairness in a fragile world

**C**losing the equality gaps in societies is a most urgent concern. Policies and programs must help accelerate the social leveling process. This goes beyond the rhetoric of making poverty the all-encompassing theme, as in the vision statements of the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. Asia has seen the most dramatic reduction in poverty in the last three decades, mainly because of rapid economic growth. But we cannot say that we have a more just, a more equal Asia now.

The 2005 Human Development Report, launched in time for the September 2005 World Summit, claims that the rich-poor gap has worsened since 1990.

In the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, we thought we had the answer to the world's problems — sustainable development — defined basically as justice and fairness between and within nations, between women and men, between generations, including payback to our degraded environment.

We also had a global plan, some kind of “global deal.” The “deal” was about human survival, not about the rich and powerful setting conditions for sharing, especially ones that burden and humiliate the poor. The rich and poor alike stood to lose in a global system collapse. What each side was expected to do under the principle of common but differentiated responsibility was but a just and fair share based on differing accountability for what happened and continues to happen.

And yet, real net transfers from the rich to the poor imply deep cuts. And deep cuts means giving up on a lifestyle that's possible only if the rich themselves begin to dramatically change in the way they see the world, in how they produce and consume things.

**T**he founders of the Club of Rome, Aurelio Peccei, an Italian, and Daisaku Ikeda, a Japanese, had warned the world about the alarming state of our environment long before environmental advocacy became fashionable. Peccei was chairman of Fiat and Italconsult and president of Olivetti. Ikeda was the third president of the largest Buddhist lay organization, Soka Gakkai. That was 1968.

The Club of Rome, although caricatured in some quarters as a bunch of population doomsayers advocating population control and “zero growth,” was a trail blazer of the new global consciousness.



Humanity is in deep trouble, a condition resulting from a relentless drive to create material wealth at an ever increasing pace with little thought about nature's limits.

Let us take a break and seriously rethink how to proceed. Our best hope for the future lies in a new human revolution that will fundamentally change our view of life and nature and the ways by which we seek to achieve human progress and happiness.

## **Back to community**

We are trapped in a modern paradox. Along with the interlinking of national economies we find nations and communities breaking up in many different ways. Wealth is created, concentrated, and appropriated on one part of the world as extreme poverty and social exclusion are reproduced all over the place. Traditional communities disappear, and ancient cultures are eroded by dominating cultures.

Many now begin to see our current development dilemma as a process of unprecedented wealth creation made possible at the expense of two of humanity's most treasured traditional assets: a supportive local community and a healthy, productive natural environment.

For the common good we must bring back the idea of community on the table.

**C**ommunity means people living in the same place. It is what others call "community of place." Of course not all communities are a community of place. There is the diplomatic community or the Muslim community, each defined by mutually supportive relations among members, regardless of residence. Usually, they are not constrained by physical boundaries or nationalist allegiance.

Today it's common to be part of multiple communities. A Filipino born in the Philippines works in the UN, resides in New Jersey, joins the Filipino-American Friendship Society, and keeps his membership and connection to a home fraternity through internet. This reality need not contradict local communities which people sometimes find too parochial and constricting.

Globalization has brought us within touching or wrecking distance of each other, literally and figuratively. It has made us realize how so tightly connected we are, how a minor glitz in one part could trigger a



breakdown in the whole system. The world has become so small that we can hardly avoid each other.

Our diverse world is composed of 10,000 distinct cultures, according to the UN. This number would translate into equally diverse communities many times over, depending on what level would achieve social cohesion.

**D**onella Meadows says it is difficult to build a just, fair, sustainable world community. We need to overcome so many barriers — race, religion, communication, poverty and inequality in all their shades and forms. But this is not to say that our dream world cannot be built.

The compass is clear. Development to be sustainable must happen in ways that bring about improvement in the well-being of every community. Instead of jobless growth, a striving for full employment. Instead of ruthless growth, a more egalitarian relations. Instead of voiceless growth, the liberation and empowerment of every man, woman and child. Instead of rootless growth, the enhancement of communal cohesion and indigenous cultures. Instead of futureless growth, a development that is nature-caring and that secures our common future.

### **Reconstruction of community**

Knowing how a community is destroyed will tell how it can be rebuilt. The Philippines, like many countries, mirrors the diversity of the world community. It is a national community of local communities. Differences are so stark across communities. The city of Manila is so different from any other community in Mindanao, where you find communities without water and sanitation facilities. Neglect by central government is most pronounced in this part of the country, so typical of how development has transpired in much of the past five decades since the last World War.

**M**indanao itself is a mirror-image of the country in terms of great disparities. When talking of human development you must be clear what community you are referring to. Is it that village in the middle of a vast pineapple plantation? Or that Mamanwa community around Lake Mainit? Both are communities, but they are worlds apart. The plantation community belongs to somebody else. The Mamanwa community belongs to the local people who are perpetually harassed by mining and other development projects.



Since the 1950s Mindanao has been absorbing waves of settlers from different parts of the country, including the Visayas, Central Luzon, and Ilocos region. Massive migration has intensified competing claims over land and other natural resources, causing conflicts between and within communities.

Big agribusiness corporations, like Del Monte and Dole, introduced the plantation economy and transformed Mindanao's subsistence economy and smallholder agriculture. Large enclosures required by plantation-type farming crowded out demand for land. It caused massive displacement and dispossession for many small farmers who were hired as workers of the multinational companies or became landless peasants.

The plantation economy hardly caught attention when space and environmental degradation were not yet on the table. The whole situation changed when Moro separatist movements, communist rebels, different peasant organizations and their church allies raised landlessness as a major justice issue.

People also started to realize the effects of a farming technology focused on a few cash crops destined mainly for export, and highly dependent on the use of heavy and high-tech machineries and massive doses of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides. Soil degradation, land compaction, depletion and contamination of surface and ground water became so common and widespread.

As in a gold rush, logging and mining corporations came in droves to Mindanao, created their own enclaves there like the big plantation companies did. We now see vast tracts of denuded forests and wastelands around decommissioned mining plants. Mindanao is once again the main target location for policy-directed resurgence of mining operations.

Mindanao has been ushered into modernity with the construction of huge energy and infrastructure development projects, like big hydroelectric dams. It used to be that an inconsequential town like Gingoog in Misamis Oriental would pass for a city, even with only a minimal built-up area around its tiny *poblacion*.

This process of modernization has brought about extremes of wealth and poverty. On one end of the social divide are big plantation owners, timber, mining, construction, and services companies. On the other are landless peasants, factory and plantation workers, tribal Filipinos, and ordinary Muslims.



The communities in Mindanao are struggling against odds to protect their environment, sustain their livelihoods, and preserve their traditional cultures.

A world free of poverty is a rural world freed from this condition. Cities, despite their own share of poverty, will always represent progress and prosperity. It is the progress and prosperity of towns and villages outside of the metropolis that will help cities keep up to that prosperity symbol, and reduce urban poverty itself to insignificance.

**R**ural areas can be made an attractive place to venture, risk, and make money for anyone with money to invest. But this would suggest a policy of disincentives for public and private investors who naturally prefer the developed areas. This sounds rather negative but it's a necessary tack to take. Cities can and should finance any further urban improvement.

Inequality is expressed in spatial terms. Urban means disproportionate claims on food, education, health, shelter, communication, energy, opportunities for civic participation and cultural interactions, freedom of movement, and amenities that make us enjoy life. Rural means just the opposite, though romanticized by environmentalists as "refuge" from polluted brown jungles even as they themselves realize the transboundary nature of most ecological problems.

A closer look at the production pipeline reveals that those who grow food usually suffer a double whammy. They get screwed on both ends of the pipe, so to speak. At the head, there's the high cost of land, water, seeds, farm machineries, interests on credit, etc. At the end, there's the pricing down at the farm gate, the high costs of storage or of bringing the produce to the market.

The "cheapness" of the products of rural labor is neither friendly to the producer nor to the environment. To have, say, a karaoke set, a poor farmer needs several harvest cycles in a one-hectare farm, assuming no crop failure and a good price. Likewise, a poor municipal fisher would have to catch hundreds of kilos of fish from an already seriously depleted fishing ground.

**T**he rich and urban consumers, the non-agricultural sectors, enjoy cheap prices that discount both rural labor and the land, water, forest resources. Some ways should be found and articulated in any development strategy to deal with these negative externalities.

Poverty seems easier to reproduce than reduce. This is an everyday phenomenon at the micro level. From experience livelihoods are hard



to create and sustain but easy to lose, especially when the macroeconomic environment turns hostile. Cash incomes are hard to come by and easy to flow out of communities that buy from the outside most of the means to live and enjoy life.

### **If I were government...**

I would disabuse myself of the idea that development is project, that is, a factory, a dam, a plant, a superhighway, a mall, or anything that raises the GNP but destroys communities. Development is about enabling a community to improve the quality of life of all its members. This is possible even with zero or modest growth in GNP.

I would be scared shit of where we seem to be heading — a generation of less educated, less healthy Filipinos living in a much degraded environment. The Philippines still struggles to deliver on its social commitments, compromising long-term sustainability by not investing enough in education and health and by failing to protect the natural wealth.

If I were government and enjoying people's trust, I will attack poverty as if it were an emergency. The first order of the day would be the suspension of automatic appropriation for debt service and reallocation of budget for the following urgent tasks:

**F**irst, get all poor children in school and make sure they stay to finish basic education. Abolish all user fees and make all the essential textbooks and materials available for free. Provide poor children with free and nutritious meals, preferably prepared from locally grown food. Get the best teachers and pay them highly.

Second, ensure that no poor mother gives birth without being attended by a professional health worker and that no child dies of hunger and malnutrition. Build the primary health care system to address every poor (wo)man's disease.

Third, engage in massive productive employment program based on natural resource conservation and restoration of environmentally degraded areas and by building light infrastructure especially in rural villages.

Development is politics. When a government allows foreign and local corporations to come in and mine our mountains, cut down forests, build polluting factories, the impacts are on the community and the



environment but the decision is a political one. Since it is political decisions that cause the damage, it should be political decisions that should steer the way to reconstruction and regeneration.

In the end, it is the communities who should make the political decision about what development they themselves find desirable. The role of politicians is to enable that to happen. And when that happens, chances are, the choices will lead to development that is more sustainable.

Building or rebuilding community is a slow process. So is regeneration of our environment. But if these were our priority agenda we will give justice to Donella Meadows' suggestion on how to save th

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