

THE SEARCH FOR ALTERNATIVES: KEY ASPECTS AND PRINCIPLES

Notes for a dialogue

Can we collectively search for frameworks and visions that pose fundamental alternatives to today's dominant economic and political system? How can such frameworks and visions build on an existing heritage of ideas and worldviews and cultures, and on past or new grassroots practice? This note, evolving through the Vikalp Sangam process², attempts to lay out some thoughts towards such a process, and is offered as one means to stimulate dialogue and visioning.

The note does not contain a critique of the currently dominant system, but assumes that we have some common understanding of this system, most importantly, that there are structural roots to the crises of ecological unsustainability, inequity and injustice, and loss of life and livelihoods. Centralised and hierarchical state systems, capitalist corporate control, patriarchy and other forms of social and cultural inequality (including caste), alienation from the rest of nature and from our own spiritual selves by forms of modernism and reductionist science, privatisation of property and means of production, individualisation leading to alienation between 'me' and 'them', cultural xenophobia leading to alienation between 'us' and 'them' (in terms of religion, ethnicity, 'race', clothes, food, and other attributes), and undemocratic control of knowledge and technology, are part of this structure. Not everyone may agree with all of this, but it is proposed that we can discuss the specifics of the *problem* elsewhere, while here we move towards what we think the paths and visions forward could be based on broadly shared sense of the crises. As part of this we also need a greater political understanding of and within local initiatives, and of resistance movements, and through these to create larger solidarity of struggles. And the ability to convey that a search for alternatives is not about everyone retreating into states of scarcity and deprivation, but of having plenty of real wealth within the context of sustainability and equity³.

¹ This document was first prepared in 2014 to stimulate dialogue in the Vikalp Sangam process. This version is based on comments received on successive drafts at the first four Vikalp Sangams (Timbaktu, October 2014; Madurai, February 2015; Ladakh, July 2015; and Wardha, October 2015), at the Sangam Core Group meeting (December 2015), and other comments received orally or on email. For comments and correspondence: Ashish Kothari, chikikothari@gmail.com

² Vikalp Sangam is a platform for networking of groups and individuals working on alternatives to the currently dominant model of development and governance, in various spheres of life (see <http://kalpavriksh.org/index.php/alternatives/alternatives-knowledge-center/353-vikalpsangam-coverage>). Its major activity is the convening of regional and thematic Confluences across India.

³ We recognize that many terms in this note may have multiple meanings; they should be interpreted in the context of the full note, and in relation to the rest of the contents.

What is an ‘alternative’?

Alternatives can be practical activities, policies, processes, technologies, and concepts/frameworks. They can be practiced or proposed/propagated by communities, government, civil society organizations, individuals, and social enterprises, amongst others. They can simply be continuations from the past, re-asserted in or modified for current times, or new ones; it is important to note that the term does not imply these are always ‘marginal’ or new, but that they are in contrast to the mainstream or dominant system.

It is proposed that alternatives are built on the following pillars (or overlapping circles) seen as an integrated whole; in this or other forms these have been expressed by many in the past, but are re-emerging in the new contexts of the 21st century:

- a. **Ecological integrity and resilience**, which includes maintaining the ecoregenerative processes that conserve ecosystems, species, functions, cycles, respect for ecological limits at various levels, local to global, and an ecological ethic in all human endeavour.
- b. **Social well-being and justice**, including lives that are fulfilling and satisfactory physically, socially, culturally, and spiritually; where there is equity between communities and individuals in socio-economic and political entitlements, benefits, rights and responsibilities; where there is communal and ethnic harmony; where hierarchies and divisions based on faith, gender, caste, class, ethnicity, ability, and other attributes are replaced by non-exploitative, non-oppressive, non-hierarchical, and non-discriminatory relations.
- c. **Direct and delegated democracy**, where decision-making starts at the smallest unit of human settlement, in which every human has the right, capacity and opportunity to take part, and builds up from this unit to larger levels of governance by delegates that are downwardly accountable to the units of direct democracy; and where decision-making is not simply on a ‘one-person one-vote’ basis but rather consensual, while being respectful and supportive of the needs and rights of those currently marginalised, eg some minorities.
- d. **Economic democracy**, in which local communities and individuals (including producers and consumers, wherever possible combined into one as ‘prosumers’) have control over the means of production, distribution, exchange, markets; where localization is a key principle, and larger trade and exchange is built on it on the principle of equal exchange; where private property gives way to the commons, removing the distinction between owner and worker.
- e. **Cultural⁴ diversity and knowledge democracy**, in which pluralism of ways of living, ideas and ideologies is respected, where creativity and innovation are encouraged, and where the generation, transmission and use of knowledge (traditional/modern, including science and technology) are accessible to all.

A crucial outcome of such an approach is that the centre of human activity is neither the state nor the corporation, but the community, a self-defined collection of people

⁴ ‘Culture’ here is used to mean ways of being and knowing, including language, rituals, norms, ethics and values, worldviews and cosmovisions, lifestyles, links with the rest of nature, and knowledge.

with some strong common or cohesive social interest. The community could be of various forms, from the ancient village to the urban neighbourhood to the student body of an institution to even the more ‘virtual’ networks of common interest.

Many or most current initiatives may not fulfil *all* the above. Perhaps we can consider something an alternative if it addresses at least two of the above pillars (i.e. is actually helping to achieve them, or is explicitly or implicitly oriented towards them), and is not violating but rather being open to and considering to adopt the other pillars. This means, for instance, that a producer company that achieves economic democracy but is ecologically unsustainable (and does not care about this), and inequitable in governance and distribution of benefits (and does not care about this), may not be considered an alternative. Similarly a brilliant technology that cuts down power consumption, but is affordable only by the ultra-rich, would not qualify (though it may still be worth considering if it has potential to be transformed into a technology for the poor also).

The above is offered only as a thumbrule to the discussion on what could be considered fundamental alternatives to the current system.

What principles are expressed in alternatives?

Practical and conceptual alternatives vary widely, and none are replicable in precise form from one place to the other, given the diversity of local situations. However, it may be possible to derive the crucial, commonly held principles underlying these initiatives. Here is an initial list of such principles.

We note here that there can be a list of even more fundamental human ethical values that should be the bedrock of the principles below, including compassion, empathy, honesty & truthfulness, tolerance, generosity, caring, and others. These are espoused by most spiritual traditions and secular ethics, and are certainly worth keeping central to a discussion of the principles described below.

Ecological integrity and the rights of nature

The functional integrity of the ecological and ecoregenerative processes (especially the global freshwater cycle), ecosystems, and biological diversity that is the basis of all life on earth.

The right of nature⁵ and all species (wild and domesticated) to survive and thrive in the conditions in which they have evolved, and respect for and celebration of the ‘community of life’ as a whole (while keeping in mind natural evolutionary processes of extinction and replacement, and that human use of the rest of nature is not necessarily antithetical to its respect)

Equity, justice, and inclusion

Equitable access and inclusion of all human beings, in current and future generations, to the conditions needed for human well-being (socio-cultural, economic, political, ecological, and psychological), without endangering any other person’s access; and

⁵ As in footnote 6

social, economic, and environmental justice for all regardless of gender, class, caste, ethnicity, race, and other attributes, (including a special focus on including those currently left out for reasons of physical/mental/social ‘disability’).

Right to and responsibility of meaningful participation

The right of each citizen and community to meaningfully participate in crucial decisions affecting her/his/its life, and to the conditions that provide the ability for such participation, as part of a radical, participatory democracy.

Corresponding to such rights, the responsibility of each citizen and community to ensure meaningful decision-making that is based on the twin principles of ecological sustainability and socio-economic equity.

Diversity and pluralism

The integrity of the diversity of environments and ecologies, species and genes (wild and domesticated), cultures, ways of living, knowledge systems, values, livelihoods, and politics (including those of indigenous peoples and local communities), in so far as they are in consonance with the principles of sustainability and equity.

Collective commons and solidarity with individual freedoms

Collective and co-operative thinking and working founded on the socio-cultural, economic, and ecological commons, respecting both common custodianship and individual freedoms and choices (including the right to be ‘different’ such as in sexual orientation) and innovations within such collectivities, with inter-personal and inter-community solidarity, relationships of caring and sharing, and common responsibilities, as fulcrums.

Resilience and adaptability

The ability of communities and humanity as a whole, to respond, adapt and sustain the resilience needed to maintain ecological sustainability and equity in the face of external and internal forces of change, including through respecting the conditions enabling the resilience of nature.

Subsidiarity, self-reliance and ecoregionalism

Local rural and urban communities (small enough for all members to take part in decision-making) as the fundamental unit of governance, self-reliant for basic needs⁶ including health and learning/education, linked with each other at bioregional and ecoregional levels into landscape, regional, national and international institutions that are answerable to these basic units. (The term ‘self-reliant’ here means self-sufficiency for basic needs as far as possible, and the right to access what is not possible to meet locally, from more centralised systems guaranteed by the state). (*swayam-samruddhi*)

Simplicity and sufficiency

The ethic of living on and being satisfied with what is adequate for life and livelihood, in tune with what is ecologically sustainable and equitable. (*aparigraha*)

⁶ Food, water, shelter, sanitation, clothing, personal security, learning/education, health, and livelihood.

Dignity and creativity of labour and work

Respect for all kinds of labour, physical and intellectual, with no occupation or work being inherently superior to another; giving manual labour and family/women's 'unpaid' work and processes of sharing/caring their rightful place, but with no inherent attachment of any occupation with particular castes or genders; the need for all work to be dignified, safe, and free from exploitation (requiring toxic/hazardous processes to be stopped); reducing work hours; and moving towards removing the artificial dichotomy between 'work' and 'leisure' by enabling more creative engagement.

Non-violence, harmony, peace

Attitudes and behaviour towards others that respect their physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being; the motivation not to harm others; conditions that engender harmony and peace amongst and between peoples.

Efficiency in production and consumption

Efficiency in the use of resources, in terms of eliminating or minimising waste (and not in modern industrial terms of narrow productivity).

What are the alternatives in various sectors?⁷

Society, culture and peace

Initiatives to enhance social and cultural aspects of human life, including:

- the safeguarding, revival and progressive use of visual, performing, and other arts, of the myriad crafts of the country, of threatened or submerged languages, and other such traits and processes that are part of cultural diversity and pluralism;
- struggles and constructive movements to resist ecologically and/or socially disruptive activities, to achieve social justice and peace, to remove inequalities and inequities of various kinds including those based on caste, class, gender, ethnicity, literacy, race, religion, and location (rural-urban, near-remote), to create harmony amongst communities of different ethnicities, faiths and cultures, to respect diversity and pluralism, and to create dignity in living for those currently oppressed, exploited, or marginalised, including the 'disabled' or differently abled and sexual minorities;
- movements to generate ethical living and thinking, and spread values such as simplicity, honesty, frugality, and tolerance.

Initiatives that have casteist, communal, sexist, or other motives and biases that are related to social injustice and inequity, or those appealing to a parochial nationalism intolerant of other cultures and peoples, would *not* be considered alternatives.

Alternative economies & technologies

Initiatives that help to create alternatives to the dominant neo-liberal or state-dominated economy and the 'logic' of growth:

- localisation and decentralisation of economic activity with democratic control

⁷ This section is adapted from broad guidance used by the website www.vikalpsangam.org. Other sectors and aspects could of course be added.

- respect to and support of diverse livelihoods (including traditional ones in the ‘primary’ sector, see below) rather than priority to a few
- producer and consumer collectives
- local currencies and trade, non-monetised and equal exchange and the gift economy
- larger trade and economic relations built on the above, in line with ecological principles
- ecologically sensitive products and processes
- ecologically sustainable production and consumption
- innovative technologies, that respect ecological and cultural integrity
- macro-economic concepts that respect ecological limits, and approaches to human well-being that go beyond growth, GDP and other narrow measures and indicators
- ecologically and socially reflexive mechanisms for planning and investment in all sectors such as infrastructure

What may not constitute alternatives are superficial and false solutions, such as predominantly market and technological fixes for problems that are deeply social and political, or more generally, ‘green growth’/ ‘green capitalism’ kind of approaches that only tinker around with the existing system.

Livelihoods

The search for dignified, ecologically sustainable and meaningful livelihoods and jobs, including:

- continuation and enhancement of fulfilling traditional, ecoregenerative occupations that communities choose to continue, including in agriculture, pastoralism, nomadism, forestry, fisheries, crafts, and others in the primary economy;
- ecologically sustainable, dignified jobs in manufacturing and service sectors where producers and service-providers are in control of their destinies and revenues are equitably distributed.

Possibly outside the purview of alternatives are livelihoods, traditional or modern, where non-workers are in control and profiting (monetarily or politically) from the exploitation of workers, even if the enterprise claims to be ecologically sustainable.

Settlements and Transportation

Featuring both rural and urban areas (and their interlinkages across a continuum), and the search to make human settlements sustainable, equitable, and fulfilling places to live and work in:

- sustainable architecture and accessible housing
- localized generation of basic infrastructural, water and energy needs to the extent possible
- biodiversity conservation through conservation of wildlife habitat including migration corridors
- waste/garbage minimisation, materials re-purposing, upcycling, recycling, efficiency and frugality in the use of resources
- avoidance of all toxic products (e.g. pesticides, plastics) and practices (e.g. waste incineration)
- defense and revival of common and open spaces
- decentralised, participatory budgeting and planning of settlements

- sustainable, equitable means of transport (especially mass, public, and non-motorised to replace current model of private and individualised transport) that can be accessed by all
- prioritisation of non-motorised transportation, and protection of safety and rights of users of such transport (e.g. pedestrian and bicycling right-of-way and dedicated paths)
- reclamation of areas given over to private vehicles, for common use, asserting the primacy and dignity of the public commons
- a cap on the speed of road traffic

Expensive, elitist models that may be ecologically sustainable but are not relevant for most people, may not fit into alternatives.

Alternative politics

Initiatives and approaches towards people-centred governance and decision-making, with direct participation, and based on principles of social and environmental justice:

- local non-hierarchical systems of decision-making (direct democracy or *swaraj*) in urban and rural areas
- mechanisms to redistribute power equitably amongst various sections of society
- linkages of such direct democracy institutions to each other at bio-cultural or ecoregional levels
- re-imagining current political boundaries to make them more compatible with ecological and cultural contiguities and connections
- collectives or communities that raise non-party political concerns at the local level and beyond
- activities enhancing accountability and transparency of political bodies containing delegates or representatives of direct democracy institutions, including parties and the state, and movements towards a truly democratic state
- policy frameworks that are based on or promote the alternatives discussed in other sections here
- providing due space to individuals in politics, within the umbrella of collective priorities necessitated by the need for sustainability and equity/justice
- internal democracy and transparency within organisations and institutions

Knowledge and media

Initiatives using knowledge as an empowering and enabling tool for a more equitable and ecologically sustainable world:

- encouraging cross-fertilisation between ideas, and promoting information exchange and transcending boundaries between modern and traditional, formal and informal, and urban and rural spheres of knowledge
- processes that make information access free, or easier in places usually neglected, considered 'remote' or disconnected
- making (or reclaiming) knowledge as part of the 'commons' rather than a privately owned or controlled commodity
- alternative media initiatives that raise questions ignored or deliberately allowed to remain hidden in the mainstream media, innovative use of media to communicate enabling information, and processes that make media part of our life/work rather than an 'external' tool to use

- regulating advertising to ensure it is not misleading, offensive, and invasive, especially that which is aimed at children

Environment and ecology

Initiatives that promote the principles of ecological integrity and limits:

- decentralized conservation of land, water and biodiversity, based on a respect for both local and modern knowledge, and considering environment as an integral part of life and work linking livelihoods to ecological regeneration and restoration at local and landscape level
- eliminating or minimising pollution and waste
- greater understanding of ‘nature’ which includes sociological, historical and geographical considerations, and aspects such as rights of other species and of nature⁸

Superficial solutions to ecological problems, such as planting trees to offset pollution, may not be considered alternatives.

Energy

Initiatives that explore and encourage alternatives to the current centralized, environmentally damaging and unsustainable sources of energy, while continuing to advocate more equitable access to the national grid:

- decentralized, community-run renewable sources and micro-grids
- equitable access to ecologically sustainable energy (replacing coal, oil, nuclear and large hydro), including to grids
- promoting non-electric energy options, including traditional technologies like watermills upgraded as necessary, and passive heating and cooling
- optimizing production and distribution, equitably distributing costs of such production/distribution, improving efficiency, making public institutions accountable, incorporating end-use orientation into planning, and regulating as also putting caps on demand (e.g. for luxury consumption)
- promoting energy-saving and efficient materials over wasteful ones (e.g. cement for construction)

What may not count are expensive, elitist technologies and processes that have no relevance to the majority of people.

Learning and Education

Initiatives to create spaces and opportunities for learning and education that enable continued or renewed connection with the environment and nature, with communities, with one’s inner voice, and with humanity as a whole:

- nurturing a fuller range of collective and individual potentials and relationships
- unlearning the alienating, fragmenting, individualizing ‘education’ that mainstream institutions have been giving
- synergies between the formal and the informal, the traditional and modern, the local and global, and head-heart-hands

⁸ One participant of the Maharashtra Vikalp Sangam felt that the ‘rights of species/nature’ are not congruent with the fact that most people have been non-vegetarian; others argue that one can still respect other species and nature while consuming what needs to be consumed.

- ensuring accountability of public institutions including the state towards facilitating such learning and education, and prioritising these over private institutions

Health and Hygiene

Initiatives ensuring good health and healthcare for all:

- preventing ill-health in the first place, by improving social determinants of health such as nutritional food, water, sanitation, a clean environment, safe transport, avoidance of health-damaging habits and addictions, and so on
- ensuring access to curative/symptomatic facilities to those who have conventionally not had such access, including through accountability of the state's responsibility towards citizens
- avoiding an over-interventionist framework, accepting limits to medical interventions
- pluralism and integration of various health systems, traditional and modern, bringing back into popular use the diverse systems from India and outside including indigenous/folk medicine, nature cure, Ayurvedic, Unani and other holistic or integrative approaches
- community-based management and control of healthcare and hygiene, with individual responsibility towards maintaining healthy surrounds, and elimination of caste-based management of human and other wastes

Food and Water

Initiatives towards food and water security and sovereignty:

- producing and making accessible safe and nutritious food
- sustaining the diversity of Indian cuisine, and promoting slow food over junk fast food
- ensuring community control over processes of food production and distribution, and commons from where uncultivated foods are obtained
- promoting uncultivated and 'wild' foods
- making water use and distribution ecologically sustainable, efficient and equitable
- decentralised conservation
- retaining water as part of the commons
- democratic governance of water and wetlands

Purely elitist food fads even if they pertain to healthy or organic food, and expensive technological water solutions that have no relevance for the majority of people, are unlikely to be considered as alternatives.

Global Relations

State, civil society, citizen or multi-lateral initiated activities that target and explicitly seek to offer an alternative to the prevalent state of dog-eat-dog, belligerent and hyper-competitive international relations fuelled by geopolitical rivalries, including

- collective well-being and not just narrow national priorities as the mandate of diplomacy
- dealing with historical grievances and developing relationships of trust and respect through cross-national dialogues among citizens and diplomats

- global moratoriums on increases in military, surveillance and police spending, and progressive reduction in spending on these, eventually eliminating weapons of all types by all states
- global bans on ‘harms’ trading (e.g. arms, toxic chemicals, waste)
- recognition of a multi-polar world as imperative to collective survival.
- erasure of notions such as national exceptionalism (such as the US holds) or inherent superiority (such as the Chinese self-image of “middle kingdom”)
- re-examining notions of ‘nation-state’ and emphasising relations amongst ‘peoples’ of the world including through restructuring the United Nations to provide central say to non-state collectivities (e.g. indigenous peoples)
- encouraging and fostering a universal citizenship based on the principle of one humanity

What other sectors and aspects should be listed here?

What strategies could lead us to such alternative futures?

A number of strategies and actions are needed to forge the pathways towards a sustainable and equitable future. These include:

Resistance, civil disobedience, and non-cooperation (both collective and individual) towards the forces of unsustainability, inequality and injustice

Decolonisation of mind-sets and attitudes and institutions, to remove hierarchies and dichotomies, e.g. between science and other forms of knowledge, modern and traditional, intellectual and physical labour

Initiatives in re-commoning including of previously ‘enclosed’ or privatised commons

Facilitation of voices of the disempowered/disprivileged (dalits, adivasis, women, landless, disabled, minorities, nomads, ‘denotified’ tribes, workers, etc) in forums of decision-making

Encouragement of public innovation and experimentation in solutions in various sectors; networking of alternative initiatives at regional and thematic levels

Counter-shaming of those who display gender, sexual, or other stereotypical prejudices and biases (can this be better worded?)

Facilitation for non-violent communication and resolution of disputes; methods of healing trauma (individual and community)

Fostering public understanding of diversity and non-antagonistic differences in culture, ideologies, lifestyles, and faiths

Promoting traditions, festivals, practices that are related to nature's regenerative and productive capacity, and spiritual/religious pluralism and syncretism

Responsibility in one's personal lives ('walking the talk') regarding sustainability and equity, and honesty when this is not possible; listening to one's conscience and intuition in directing actions and behaviour

Public ('commons') sharing of knowledge, experiences, resources, and skills, especially through non-monetary means

Continuous and multi-level dialogue, including amongst those who disagree on ideological and strategic grounds

Use of all available democratic means of redressal and transformation, including policy forums and the judiciary

Consumer awareness of the consequences of different consumption choices, and options for change, eventually evolving into a system where responsibility to provide safe and healthy goods lies with the producer

Engagement with all political formations, including in both party and non-party processes

Use of both mainstream and alternative media to carry forward the message of transformation

Fostering public understanding of historical and structural roots of the contemporary crises, and collective search for solutions

Learning from both 'classical' and 'folk' traditions including humanitarian ones (eventually removing the dichotomy between them); from both prominent ideologists and thinkers (Gandhi, Marx, Phule, Ambedkar, Aurobindo, Tagore ... others), feminists, environmentalists, and adivasi/indigenous/tribal/dalit worldviews

Mutual learning with other peoples and civilisations across the world

Integrating art into everyday lives, fostering the creative in every individual and collective, bringing work and pleasure together

Could all this converge into holistic alternative worldview(s)?

Can some holistic worldviews and frameworks emerge in the above exploration, which can be a strong challenge to the currently dominant systems? For this, we need to address the following (amongst many) questions:

How strongly can we posit the *community/collective* as the fulcrum of power, rather than either the state or corporations?

How much are ancient or early practices and concepts, that have emerged over the last few thousand years in India, still relevant; how much are they susceptible to being co-opted by communal or capitalist/corporate forces, and how can they be rescued from such misuse to further causes inclusive of all?

How do we learn from worldviews usually submerged under the more dominant articulations? The same, with other special perspectives, such as feminist?

How do we make all this relevant to today's India, including its youth? Some issues like corruption, or gay/lesbian rights, seem to bring young people out on the streets ... how can 'alternatives' also be made relevant like these, how do we tap people's need to see positive messages?

How can these issues reach across to a wider (non-converted) public, what languages and forms of communication (oral, written, printed, visual, audio) would work more effectively while not dumbing down the message? How to combine reason and emotion in the messaging?

What kind of transitions would work for those already fully caught in today's dominant systems, including the urban middle classes; conversely, how to ensure that those already living relatively sustainable lives are enabled to continue and enhance them?

Who would be the main political agents of change? How can mass movements that are resisting currently dominant systems, be engaged with for an orientation towards alternative futures?

And last, but not the least, what processes can bring together the dispersed, fragmented, and diverse struggles working towards alternatives across India, on some common grounds and visions? How does this become a force for political change?

How much are we as individuals or organisations living these values and principles? Are our organisations and our work based on solidarity, simplicity ... are there alternative economic options for our own work?

Is there consensus on issue of private property?