IV-30 Exploitation of the Commons

Find out cause of this effect.
Or rather, say the cause of this defect.
-Shakespeare in Hamlet

The heritage of public commons is about knowledge inherent in the traditional practices and products based on experience of centuries. Knowledge of the people who have lived sustainable existence is highly desirable because sustainable diversity and plurality is intrinsic in all viable traditional practices that balance the forces that shape existence if not survival. It is reality-based because it has evolved by the method of trial and error that thrives on anything goes within the bounds of reality. Diversity and stability of the common intellectual and physical resources at micro level of bio-habitat are now being increasingly exploited and sacrificed to sustain the macro level demands unleashed by globalized consumption pattern. People at the micro level rarely benefit from such one-way flow of resources and knowledge. They do not even benefit from the value created by the marketing of their products. The experience has raised issues about sustainability and indigenous rights in the context of international piracy and robbery.

Unilateral Charter for International Exploitation. Salient facts of modern means of global exploitation are intrinsic in the first move made by Portuguese in late 15th century. Based on the information from some Arab sea-farers, Vasco de Gamma arrived in Calicut (India) by taking a direct sea route from Malindi on the Central East coast of Africa. Within few months the king of

Calicut ordered Vasco de Gamma to leave the port when it was noted that unlike other traders who visited this international trading port Vasco de Gamma was dishonest in his dealings. A few years later another Portuguese returned to Calicut with a Royal Decree from his king that not only the Portuguese are not required to pay taxes for trading in Calicut but all other ships using the Indian Ocean are required to pay taxes to the king of Portugal. To reaffirm their intentions they destroyed dozen of ships in the area.

When British took over India, in recognition of the one-sided European Charters, they left the *possessions* of Portugal and France independent. Yet they never recognized the sovereignty of the local rulers. Even at the dawn of the new millennium, strategy of unilateral charter and preemptive actions remains the corner stone of the instruments of the Western foreign policies backed by destructive technologies.

Forked tongue: European practices have earned them the reputation of forked-tongue where ever they have come in contact with the traditional societies of Asia, Africa and the Americas. The culture that has evolved through collusion of Church and State emphasizes the second order pride where individual achievements are credited to the race, whereas their misdeeds are ignored as individual aberrations. They sermonize the world about virtues while hiding their own filth and depravation. Modern prophets of Human Rights hide their own inequities that require incarcerating 1% of their population. A permanent underclass is indoctrinated to find meaning trough war.

Traditional societies did not reinvent because they never assessed themselves by external measures, nor did they judge others by their own standards. There is nothing for them to lie about.

Hunting, Poaching and Piracy in the Commons. Virtually all cultures have tales to the effect: Whenever little man chances upon a big fortune, he finds only trouble. At issue is impact of asymmetrical practices on the life and resources. Term *tragedy of commons* was coined to polarize thinking behind mindless use of the resources on a small planet. The political wrath of Hardin's characterization of the problem was directed towards the under-developed countries where the problem of growth was exacerbated by population increase (Malthusian doom and gloom) in the short run due to an increase in the life-expectancy following introduction of immunization and antibiotics. The other shoe dropped as it became apparent that the real tragedy is from over consumption of resources and the pollution of the environment. The metaphor is common to the desire of a herder who wants to increase the size of his flock grazing on the public land, to the parents who see more children as the way out of poverty and perpetuate their genetic resource, and to the acts of governments that defend life style of their subjects, including the right to drive gas-guzzlers, by claiming and depleting the resources outside their sovereign national boundaries.

A critical boundary condition to the scope of the problem emerges with the recognition that the prevailing models of progress are based on quantitative growth: It is unsustainable because such practices by few exacerbate limitations of the physical resources. A more sustainable model of progress could be based on creation of value by qualitative change. In the current version of the global market place, the critical issue is inequitable flow of the resources (capital, raw materials and labor) and the products of the technological change. Economic development is rarely in accord with indigenous social and political changes necessary for innovation. As communities are subjected to

devices and methods beyond their comprehension, resulting conditions create new opportunity for wholesale corruption and unchecked exploitation beyond the control of the caretakers of the commons. In effect, centralized practices of the globalization model are fundamentally at odds with the innovation diffusion among and from the under- and un-represented classes of people.

For centuries traditional knowledge and practices have been available free for taking. Such societies were guided by the vision that *the use improves the knowledge*. It is certainly the case if the value that is created remains in the commons for sustainable improvements. However, during the last few centuries and now more than ever before, the goodwill is being exploited by those who have no legal, ethical, intellectual, social or economic obligation to the source communities. The bounty of mineral resources, music, and plant pharmaceuticals to timber, has been liberally taken away from the local cultures decimated by the forces of asymmetry.

Contrast the asymmetry of attitudes and behaviors of the copyright holders of software and music disks in which the work is based on lyrics and notes *borrowed* from other cultures. Motive to secure markets is the beginning of asymmetric practices inherent in patents, copyrights, trade secrets, and specialized deals and treaties for protections. In this tug, the term intellectual property has become a surrogate for protecting secrets of one party and to appropriate the property of the other as *unprotected* by alien set of standards and criteria. Its effect is same as those of the Colonial practice to outlaw traditional values and languages. It stifles ways of thinking and innovation.

Considering what has been done so far, the demand for local sovereignty and control over resources and cultural information appears tame. In the international arena, issues of the

control of resources and responsibility for the commons are still in the hunter-gatherer stage. Prospecting for the indigenous knowledge, practices, and germplast (seeds, cultivars, strains) constitute the basis for much of the modern agriculture, medicine and biotechnology. Many of the traditional musical instruments, arts media, stories, tunes and melodies have also found their way into the entertainment industry. Even the names of food products need protection. Should *the semi-synthetic velvety slime concoction of dozens of chemical additives for color, flavor and texture mixed with milk products* be allowed to sell as cheese? Such outright deception is not a legalistic distinction of category. The rich common heritage of generic names and processes is being robbed, exploited and corrupted in thousands of products marketed today.

Contributions of the common heritage were never compensated and their value was never recognized in any of the international treaties. On the other hand, the modern copyright and patent laws governing globalization condemn as *piracy* the use of the practices and products resulting from industrial espionage. It has been argued that diffusion of common heritage is difficult to trace or it was not considered necessary. In any case, such problems can now be addressed.

Public commons is fast becoming casualty of global homogenization. Recall that the potato-famine in Ireland was the result of agriculture built on a single genetic variety. Now chemically intensive farming of genetically engineered Russet potato uses *chemical sand*. Here the objective is that all McFrench Fries have to be of the same length with the fat-fried hue of California-blond. On the other hand, traditional agricultural methods suited for local environment are based on mixed-duration and resistance classes of crops. Agro-ecological coping strategies are built into farming practices. For example the use of

straight versus curve sickle changes the mix of the harvested seed: straight sickle selects certain strains of crop plants.

Tragedy is in the loss of practice. Local communities are not empowered for international sustainability. In biodiversity role of marginality and plurality is in transfer of risk. In situ conservation of crop genetic resources occurs through maintenance of traditional farming systems. At the same time, the farmers who nurture such crop genetic resources are economically and technologically isolated minorities. These groups are likely to be most marginalized by nation states, and more so by globalization. Consider the paradoxes and contradictions:

(a) Foundation and health of agriculture in industrial countries largely depend on their access to the rich crop genetic diversity found in Third-World countries. Yet the very same germplast resources most sought after for their potential application in biotechnology are constantly threatened by the spread of modern agriculture. In the area of seed-selection alone we do not know what we have lost in terms of hardiness, fecundity, survival, and yield potential.

(b) It is now generally appreciated that at the end of twentieth century more than 70% of the drugs in the market have their first generation relationship to the lead-chemicals obtained from the indigenous medical knowledge appropriated freely by Ethan botanists. Less than 0.001% (one penny out of $1000) of the profits from such drugs has ever gone to the indigenous people including who lead researchers to them.

(c) Inequities, if not the contradictions, are a part of a more fundamental paradox: Tendency to charter and incorporate - to make the other the same as the self - is strong even in the face of the possibility that such a transformation may contravene the long terms interests.

(d) Then there is paradox of perceptions: *Indigenous people have in effect been engaged in a massive program of foreign aid to the urban populations of the industrialized North. Genetic and cultural information has been produced and reproduced over the millennia by peasants and indigenous people. Yet the fruits of this work are given no value despite their recognized utility. On the other hand, when such information is processed and transformed in the developed nations, the realization of its value is enforced by legal and political mandates.*

(e) Even the do-gooders do not see contradiction in their opposition to cut-and-burn operations in Argentinean jungles and their own use of cheap dog-food from the cattle raised on these lands. Many of the problems of resource and environment degradation resulting from over consumption have now moved out of sight to the less vigilant countries in the private hands.

(f) People are quick to bad-mouth and attack growers of coca plants and poppies. Yet the same people and governments do little to curb the demand for cocaine and heroin in their own countries. Asymmetrical international trade practice is also part of trade in tobacco, liquor, insecticide, cigarette, and pornography. Other asymmetric practices include threats from genetically-engineered organisms in the biosphere, overuse of antibiotics, restrictions on the migration of labor and jobs without a control on the flow of capital and products. Pushing preconceived notions and potions in the guise of principles for reforms *to do good.* Should the asymmetric practices of encroachers and poachers not be outlawed - rather than supported as the foreign policy instruments.

(g) Not many nations are free to evaluate impact of smart money - let alone deal with the consequences of attached strings. Such alien influences and products breakdown the internal controls and cause social, economic and environmental dislocation. A serious

unexpected consequence of the disruptions is that the checks and balances of traditional practices and methods of innovation are passed on to or succumb to the forces that are not under local control.

Homogenization on unequal turf. Not-knowing what is optimum is at the roots of fiascoes that follow from mindless march towards progress and change introduced from outside. We think and innovate by controlling what is available around us, including the resources and the building blocks. Clashes of ideas, values and products are intrinsic in the diffusion and development of innovation as well as the common heritage. Here choices have to be adequately evaluated for desirability.

The internationally funded renovation project of Angkor-vats temple in Cambodia (South-east Asia) attracted the elite because it meant money from the International tourists. Many local people were slaughtered in the conflict and many others were uprooted. Such experiences point to gaping holes in the current practices of regional and tribal exploitation with imported capital, resources and technologies.

Monopolies of nepotistic tans-national elites and oligarchs mask the democratic controls that ensure social justice. This experience is a rule rather than an exception for major development project all over the planet. For example, the Farm Forestry Research and Development Project supported by US Agency for the international Aid selected the same 3 to 5 "most important" species of trees, presumably to facilitate project wide administration and research activities. This center-based imperative failed.

For the programs for alleviation of poverty and want it is assumed that there is a relationship between knowledge and economic status. Also the knowledge and material benefits that

become national resources are likely to be far more accountable than international corporations. Often the assumption is that the benefits from external appropriations may not reach the marginalized farmers. Even under best of conditions, it is also true that the resources from the center rarely reach the peripheral community except through changing it. Therefore, one need be fully aware of the perils of centralized conservation efforts, and the fact that there is no guarantee that the imported technologies will assimilate or preserve it. The empiricism of expediency is not much different than that of cutting corners or shooting for a limited success in a shorter time.

The basis for the traditional conservation practices derives from other local practices developed through trial and error. While some transplanted technological solutions to the local problems integrate in the traditional societies, many more do not. Transfer and introduction of practices requires deliberate and well thought out changes in the traditional societies as well as the market approaches. Without such understanding of the local relations, even the well-intentioned international academic and development community can become part of the problem, rather than offer a solution. The web is broken by the accelerated rate of resource degradation by industrialization and consumption promoted by markets. For example, bicycle has been integrated in most places. The use of electricity and tractors has not developed to the point that the local know-how can take care of all the maintenance needs and fuel supply. Such asymmetries can not create a stable and viable system of *give and take*.

Tragedy of asymmetry. Asymmetrical practices unleash forces that diminish the resources. Tragedy lies in the concept of external intervention and incorporation of the local knowledge into central and global political-economic system. As is already

clear from the uncompensated transfer of genetic resources it is not an adequate model for integration of innovation. Can the international intervention be a part of an acceptable solution in a broad social-economic and development context? Possibly so if it is based on premise of fairness, and if it recognizes the current inequity in the transfer of shared knowledge and resources (genetic, biological) from the less-developed to the more-developed ones.

To make any solution stick it is necessary to break the hold of imported technologies that degrade the resources. Empowered communities have stake in the development of local solutions to help the trends towards sustainable resource use, and towards creating the new resources and solutions suited for the local environments. Other considerations are:

(1) A viable system of value creation can develop if the local knowledge can be used to develop technologies. Is the just compensation enough? Would the resulting technology solve the problem? Could it create another vehicle for another round of wealth and resource transfer?

(2) One could debate the benefits of transferring benefits to the local elite in terms of creating local capital if it can be assured that the capital would be reinvested locally. Smart-money has no stake in the long term well-being and viability of the population. Feudal families and band of oligarchs in power have no interest in correcting the socio-economic inequities. It is not clear if the demand for equitable distribution would follow the awareness and flow of resources.

(3) Is development and democracy a ploy to reduce international tension for the control of petroleum and other resources being overused by profligate countries at unsustainable rate? Development intervention, howsoever well-intentioned, is a

double-edged sword because it comes at a cost in terms of the technology and good-will. Provision of economic resource without political resource is often problematical. On the other hand, economic empowerment that comes from the local control of resources creates climate for social and political change locally as well as elsewhere.

Beyond these basic measures lie the concerns: Would a centralized intervention begin to safeguard interests and rights of citizens? What can be done to preserve the knowledge that is intrinsic in the traditional practices? How the knowledge and resource can be used towards a desirable goal? What can be done to recognize the contributions of the cultures? Do the well-intentioned volunteers and members of academic communities contribute by creating a dialog?

Room for Doubt