

# Common Voices

Issue 6



Addressing  
the Commons



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## Suggested Citation

FES. Year. Article Title.  
*Common Voices* Issue No.: Page range.

The e-version of the newsletter and  
its archive are available at  
<http://iasc2011.fes.org.in/>

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Year of publication: 2011

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Leaders on the Commons at the IASC 2011 © Foundation for Ecological Security

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the Commons

# Keynote Address

## Stories of Hope: Towards a Radical Ecological Democracy

**Ashish Kothari**

Founder Member, Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group



I would like to start by expressing very deep gratitude to the hundreds of local communities, indigenous peoples, grassroots organisations, civil society organisations and individuals, and a number of remarkable government officers from whom I have learnt, some of whose ideas and experiences I will try and encapsulate in this presentation. These groups and people have been a good part of my education for the last 30–35 years. I still recall, immediately after school some of us as students, going up to the Himalayan foothills and trekking, walking with the members of the Chipko movement; I am sure most of you have heard about the Chipko movement which has become world famous and inspired a whole lot of similar movements to try and save forests from logging. Those were some of our first lessons in what the commons mean to the common person, and how the so-called common person can actually galvanise as a collective to try and stop the destruction of the commons. It is from those very early days that I, and a number of my colleagues, have actually learnt a great deal on the issues of the commons. I am also of course grateful to the FES and other organisations for making this very exciting event happen.

Now, in today's presentation there are two things that I do not want to do because they form a general context to my main focus, and because they are aspects on which we have heard a lot in the last three days, aspects on which many of you are much better experts than I am. Firstly, that we are speaking here in the context of the commons becoming increasingly uncommon. The erosion of the commons, the enclosures by the state, the privatisation by individuals and/or corporations, and of course, the ecological destruction that we see all around us which is affecting the commons and our lives—much has been said about this, much more of course needs to and continues to be said but I will not focus on that aspect.

### **...we are speaking here in the context of the commons becoming increasingly uncommon**

The second context is a very deep understanding of the history and the dynamics and the current status of the commons, the past governance and management regimes, some of which continue, the institutional dynamics that make them work or which lead to their destruction, issues of gender, caste, class and other divisions and inequities and so on; again these have been the focus over the last 3 days, and many of you have already contributed greatly to this understanding.

These are all part of the context of the commons, and I will not dwell much on them. What I'd like to do is, given this context, what is it that the future looks like? Are we going to see the continued erosion and destruction and marginalisation of the commons in our lives? Or are we actually going to see the revival of the commons in the next few years, in the next few decades? I think that's a question that's probably troubling

all of us. It's not a question to which anybody can give an accurate answer. But it's a very crucial question that we all need to think about, discuss and maybe envision the answers to. And it's a question I'll come back to a little later.

Before I do that, I'd like to give a number of examples of where the reassertion and the revival and bringing the commons back into our lives is already happening. We've already heard, I think many stories in many of the panels here. Some of the keynote presentations also hinted at some of such examples. But I'd like to give a few from the areas that I work on and some others that I've learnt during these last few days.

If we look at community based natural resource management as one example and take in that community forestry, there's some incredibly interesting things that are happening around the world—of communities and collectives reasserting their rights and their controls and their governance and management systems on forests as well as the commons. There was, some time back, an estimate done by the Rights and Resources Initiative which suggested that between 1985 and 2000, there was a doubling of the forest area under community owned governance. And from 2000 to 2015 there will be a further doubling as communities assert themselves more and more and as governments also respond with appropriate laws and policies. That's actually a huge, huge trend that we are already seeing and it's going to increase.

Linked to that or overlapping with that is the example of indigenous and community conserved areas, something on which I and a number of colleagues have been working for many years. Wetlands, grasslands, forests, deserts, coastal and marine ecosystems, mountain areas—all kinds of natural or semi-natural ecosystems which communities and indigenous peoples are either continuing to govern and manage as they have been doing traditionally, or in tens of thousands of cases actually reasserting their governance on, and bringing back the ecological integrity of those systems, bringing back the biodiversity and wildlife that exists there. They do this from different perspectives and different motivations. They are not necessarily interested in the wildlife; many of them are and they think they have an ethical responsibility for the wildlife. But there are also many others who are doing it because they want to protect their watersheds, they want to protect the resource catchments, they want to reassert their cultural and political identity, they want to revive their spiritual relations with nature or many other such reasons. And our very rough estimates, or I should say guesstimates at this stage, are that these indigenous and community conserved areas which are helping both to secure livelihoods and to conserve biological diversity could be equivalent to or more than the total coverage of officially government designated protected areas in the world, which is currently estimated at about 12–13% of the world's surface. But what's crucial is not just the extent of coverage but the fact that they are showing a different model; they are showing a model in which conservation doesn't become an exclusive prerogative of a bureaucracy and excludes people, but actually is much more inclusive, much more participatory, much more grassroots and democratic, and yet as effective.

Both community forestry and indigenous and community conserved areas are also, in many countries, placed within the context of yet another very positive move that is taking place, which is the assertion of indigenous territories. In a large number of countries we see the increasing voice of indigenous peoples in either retaining control over their territories or in many countries actually regaining control which had been lost due to either colonial policies or state enclosures. Take the restitution of lands in South Africa, or the indigenous assertions and recognition of territories in many Latin American countries, Australia, Canada and so on. In India too the new forest rights legislation has created the potential of communities regaining governance over forests they depend on or have related to.

So if you actually look at it, there's a global trend and of course the very, very happy (finally!), passing of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples is something that will hopefully take it that much further.

If you take water, there is on the one hand very widespread resistance to the privatisation and corporatisation of water. Just recently in central India for instance, one move to privatise a stretch of water by the state government was defeated by local communities protesting against it. And this is happening in of course many countries where unfortunately the governments or donors like the World Bank are pushing for privatisation. There is a lot of resistance to that. And to me it's a positive move for the commons. But there are also the more proactive moves to control water resources as the commons; to promote decentralised water harvesting, to build community governance mechanisms and institutions for the management of even river basins (such as on the Arvari river in western India), water use federations (or associations) about which we've heard a lot in this conference, and many other such initiatives trying to retain or regain water as the commons.

If we then go to agriculture and pastoralism—many of us yesterday were in field trips looking at what some of the movements here are trying to do around Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh for reviving community based agriculture or pastoral systems. One of the most fascinating—which I am sure some of you went to yesterday—is near Zaheerabad, couple of hours from here, the Deccan Development Society—where Dalit women, traditionally amongst the most oppressed and marginalised sections of Indian society, have reasserted their common rights to seeds—traditional seeds—bringing them back into their agricultural systems, working the agricultural plots as a collective, and looking at food and the access to food as also part of the commons. So that, for instance, those who are really poor in the villages have access to the grain banks and to subsidised food which is locally produced, is organic, is healthy. DDS has linked that food to the public distribution system which otherwise in India is a complete mess; and in many other ways revived food security and crop production as part of the commons. Even in a country as atomised and privatised as the United States (with due apologies), there are hundreds of initiatives at things like community supported agriculture—CSA—and many others which I am sure many

of you in the audience would be able to tell me more about. We heard the minister from El Salvador talking about the repatriation of potato varieties in Peru to the Quechua community which has set up a several hundred square kilometer Potato Park (Park de la Papa). But the last I heard, about 800 varieties of potato are being grown at different altitudes for different purposes, and even responding to climate change. The repatriation of those potato varieties from the International Potato Research Institute—where they had got in a way sort of institutionalised and almost privatised—back to the commons, to the Quechua community, is a significant achievement of this initiative.

There are many, many other such initiatives towards agriculture. Look at pastoralism. Sometime back I heard the most interesting example from Niger of the Tuareg pastoral community, claiming and getting recognition for 10 million hectares territory of nomadic pastoralism, getting recognition from the government as an indigenous or pastoral managed area. In Iran, several hundred tribal groups and confederacies have grouped together, have come together to demand from the government the recognition of nomadic and other pastoral territories and are making considerable headway. We heard the other day, I think from Ruth, about the decentralisation law in Mongolia which is giving back to the Mongolian pastoralists significant amount of control and rights over their pastures. So again, these are just some examples. There are many, many more.

If we move from the physical and natural resource arenas to the mind, the intellect, we see the assertion of knowledge commons. David Bollier spoke the other day considerably about it so I will not go into details, but the creative commons: open source software, copyleft instead of copyright and so on. Again, many, many different initiatives—the internet itself, and the way in which many people are able to use it

**If we move from the physical and natural resource arenas to the mind, the intellect, we see the assertion of knowledge commons**

for asserting common voices. More difficult arenas like markets and trade: again, in countries like the US, in Europe, increasingly in India, the attempt to try and actually bring producers and consumers together as part of relationships, not just anonymous buying of a good that you don't know who has produced, where the producer has no idea whether all the love and effort that's going into making that product is actually being respected by the consumer. Well, here are attempts—literally hundreds and thousands of them—of trying to bring them together, establish relations between consumers and producers, for instance farmers' markets

in many countries, collective marketing by people who otherwise are [under]privileged because the market forces are way too strong for them. Weavers, handicrafts people, farmers, pastoralists, fishing communities and so on, they are all exploring such democratic economic options. And very exciting, still marginal but increasing, the attempt to try and reduce the stranglehold of money in our lives by bringing back systems of barter, not just of products and goods but also of skills—the example of course which many of us might be familiar with is that of the Ithaca hours in the US. But again, there are hundreds more such examples where people are saying, okay, if I want your skills as a carpenter and you want my skills as a sociologist or whatever, we don't necessarily have to pay each other, but could actually simply be saying, okay, I am going to give you three hours, and you give me an equivalent amount of time. That actually is a system that used to be very prevalent all across the world in the past. We don't necessarily need revivals in the same way everywhere, but they are happening increasingly in many countries.

Also community currency movements—currencies that are not actually dollars and rupees but local currencies which are used locally and which actually give much more control to people over markets and trades and exchange. And again there are actually thousands of those.

Then there are arenas like health and education. We all know that health for instance is, [and] has been, increasingly privatised, that schools and education have been increasingly privatised; it's happening in India right now. But again, many initiatives are trying to reassert health and education as part of a collective responsibility. Community health movements,

the attempt to try and actually help each one of us regain some control over our own bodies and not have to depend for everything on a doctor, the training of barefoot doctors, para-doctors, etc., are all examples of a radically different health system. The same with educational institutions—just a few months back I was at a fascinating institution called the Adivasi Academy in Gujarat which brings indigenous students into a college situation, and of course goes through the normal, you know so called modern educational system, but also continues to engage them in understanding their own tribal systems, understanding the history of their trib[es], the languages, the culture, the ecological understanding etc., with the elders from the villages, so that they are also teachers. So again looking at education not as a money making racket which it unfortunately has become, but more as something which is giving us the learnings to survive and flourish as human beings and even attempts at what Illich called de-schooling—removing the sort of cobwebs from our minds which our current educational system has built.

Now these are just some indicative examples, and they all have problems. I am not suggesting that any of these examples I am giving are ideal, that they are without their own issues and challenges and problems. But I think that they all actually present to us the potential of what the future could look like. And I am going to come back to that a little later. What I'd like to do at this stage is to actually open it up for those of you who have your own examples of positive assertions, reassertions, continued control over or the use of the commons, examples of the kind I gave or others, and with the permission of Susan I think if we can open it up for a few minutes, I'd very much like to hear from you all your own examples.

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Susan: We have a number of people throughout the audience with microphones, so if you'll just put your hands up and we can get a mike to you. And please start by introducing yourselves, please.

Ashish: Remember we are not talking about the problems right now. We'll come back to that. These are only stories of hope that we want to hear right now.

Good morning. Jeff Campbell from the Christiansen Fund. I wanted to share very exciting developments which are taking place in Melanesia, particularly spearheaded by Vanuatu: [it] is a very, very serious effort to develop a completely alternative set of indicators which would replace the GDP and these other sorts of indicators, building on, but perhaps going to maybe a higher level than those developed in Bhutan. But this is around what they refer to as the 'traditional economy' because they were ranked first in the happiness index and much, much lower in all the kind of usual indicators of development. And so they are very, very keen to base this in their customary agriculture, their local use of customary community lands and in indicators which they themselves develop.

Ashish: Thank you Jeff. And I think many of you would also know the work of the New Economics Foundation which is trying to put a lot of these things together into indicators of wellbeing and happiness and so on.

Good morning, Dr. Avshesh from Shimla. I would actually like to thank Ashish Kothari for his innovative ways of putting back the economy into the global sustainable livelihood. I would like to put before [you] little elaborate existence of commons. I would say we have one sun, one moon, many stars to share. Similarly if we take the entire planet as our own and become a little more responsible to wherever we live and travel and sense of belonging, that is missing out. People are trying to capture the commercialised and the authoritative and trying to square up the properties on to the personal benefits and exploiting the others' hard work for their own benefits. That has to be discarded. Thank you.

(Anonymous) Yes. Hi, is it my turn? I would like to mention a successful, pretty interesting case of collective action I came across recently in Mauritania and it's an initiative from the World Food Program which has established several community-based grain banks. So the purpose of this collective action is actually food security. WFP provides a certain stock-up stock of cereals which then the community manage[s] by selling it to the community members. And so it becomes a revolving stock of cereals. And I found it really successful and very interesting. Thank you.

Good morning. My name is Barbara van Koppen, from an organisation called International Water Management Institute and I would like to raise a note of caution with regard to water rights in the sense of formal water legislation. At the moment the only law that is really promoted are permit systems; the civil law traditional permit systems—certainly in Latin America, quite widespread in Africa as well, less in Asia as yet. And in good colonial tradition there is basically the legal system that dispossesses all existing commons, especially in a more informal, very urban setting where people use small quantities of water to provide for livelihoods. By pushing one legal system and ignoring indigenous customary informal systems, of course the commoners, they are dispossessed formally. Then the argument is here, you can converge your existing law for use into a pyramid or for any new other use where you apply pyramids. All of us know that an administrative system says that like that discriminates against the poor illiterate who can't get the administrative licenses and then they take in the loss. Basically the large majority of people are exempted from the obligation to apply for a license basically means that that majority is left with second class entitlement, that they can't have them against the big people who can then point at the license, permit, concessions [...]. So there is dispossession and discrimination. Water pyramids are promoted because there seems to be a neat way to allocate water and also very much to impose taxation on water, water use, so not for the services—the infrastructure services, but for the use of water as such. [The] idea promoted by the World Bank, let us tax water, well there is a need for revenue collection by the state which is valid. And now pyramids are promoted to governments, this is the way to allow you to tax water users. But there is of course a cap; nonsense—you can tax, you can take fiscal measures without changing the legal system. So also for governments pyramid systems are not the type of regulatory, need-regulatory tool that you hope it will be. So dispossession by design, discrimination by design, weakening safe regulation because you connect regulatory measures that should be separated. I think it is a thing that should be exposed as well. Thank you.

Ashwini Chhatre, University of Illinois. Thank you, Ashish, for bringing attention to sources of hope. When we start looking we find we have plenty of those if only we look. And I only want to bring attention to one that I suspect is sort of passing us by as we are too focused on sources of our problems. And also because it happened at the scale where we do not usually have sources of hope, which was global. And I am referring to the cross-scale interlinked integrated process by which the massive juggernaut of biofuels that was threatening to ruin our natural forests, marginal migrant workers and indigenous populations in the remaining natural forests of the world, was turned around by concerted collective action all the way up from villages in remote forests to the power centers of the world in Washington DC and Brussels and London

and Paris and so on and so forth. We pulled it off in less than a year so that today biofuels do not enjoy any legitimacy either in terms of human rights violations, in terms of environmental impact or even in terms of whether it is any good for climate mitigation. That was exposed through collaborations between community groups, activist organisations, scientists, lobbyists, NGOs everywhere, all over the world. And that kind of collective action is, I think, a source of hope that we can only neglect at our own peril because many of our threats are also becoming much more larger scale and global in scope. Thank you.

Good morning. Victor Philip, Global Environmental Management Education Center in Wisconsin, USA. On couple of hopeful notes, I think the local food movement has been embraced in the US and many other countries. Permaculture as a global movement is alive and well in the US. Sustainlane, the Natural Step, many other such grassroots action oriented examples exist. Organic agriculture in the US is growing between 20% and 30% per year. GMO is being rejected in many quarters. Many, many positive things. I also want to mention that notwithstanding the US government's Kyoto Protocol position, there are hundreds of municipalities, there are individual states, regions, cooperatives of states in the US that fully embrace the Kyoto Protocol and want to move forward in that direction. That's very hopeful. And touching on the indigenous people in helping lead us forward to a sustainable future—in the Great Plain regions of the US, heirloom varieties of corn, wheat, other staples, heritage greens, plants and animals are being protected and utilised, as well as wind regimes in the Great Plains area—they eventually serve as a significant component of renewable energy mix into the electrical grid of the country. So green technologies, and I'll stop there, but we can be very hopeful of embracing a vibrant future from the grassroots up.

This is Regina [...]. Thanks for this opportunity to share examples. I would like to share an example from livestock—cattle breeders associations from southern Germany, which keeps a certain breed of cattle called Brown Swiss cow. They are also kept in other alpine countries like Switzerland and Italy. And even though these associations have existed for a very long time, quite recently they have achieved two things. They have gained much more independence from the state that earlier had a quite heavy hand in breeding decisions, and also out of concern with multinational companies may become more interested in the genotype of these cattle, they have also adopted quite strong regulations to keep this diversity for themselves and to do something against that threat. Thank you.

My name is Ben [...]. I am from New State for Law and Environmental Governance, Nairobi, Kenya. Into this basket of hope I want to add two. One is a recent case which went up to the African Commission on Human Rights. This is an indigenous community. They have been struggling to get access rights to some of their resources in their traditional lands in Kenya, one of the drier parts of the country, but which areas are reserved mostly for tourism, wildlife tourism, and have been protected under the command and control system that was the colonial legacy which dominates to date. But recently, after a long struggle and when some of the lawyers like us decided this is more than the government of Kenya could handle, it went to the African Commission for Human Rights. A decision was made that they have those traditional rights to those lands and the government should put in place measures to ensure that they can enjoy their [...] commons and their cultures and tradition in the manner that defeats the trends that are happening today. But just to add to that is there is a new constitution and we are seeing this more and more in the continent, new laws and constitutions are recognising the need to recognise these rights to traditional or indigenous entitlements of communities. The challenge is that implementation is still a problem, but I think this is not for challenges, this is for the basket of hope.

Hello, I am Raju from Institute of Rural Management in Anand. We have come across two examples. Both

of them are in one sense called endogenous development effort. We have one joint farming cooperative which is going on for six decades in Gujarat of very small farmers. It gives lot of hope for so many other small and marginalised farmers across in our country. It is a tested model now. I think it is time for us to pick up other such models and then really propagate them as the other keynote speaker Bina Agarwal talked the other day about the collective. And another one is the Swadhyay movement. It is a movement which is spread over Maharashtra and Gujarat largely, and its presence is there in other states and in some other countries as well. This is based on the belief that God is dwelling in everybody and in the universe, and then it tries to draw the people out and extend their self to others and include them in their concerns. And then it is completely based on no donations from anybody and then the people give. It is fine to encourage people to give and share and create new commons. They have created lot of community farms wherein people, individuals go and work there but do not claim anything for themselves. And they are creating this in some sense like a common wealth and which is also used for both socially useful areas like water harvesting and tree plantation, then also organic cultivation of this thing. And there are lakhs of members involved in this and all of them pay for themselves and give their time and work and then offer whatever efficiencies they have. Starting with farmers to fishermen to lawyers to doctors, all cross sections of people are involved in this movement. This is also a great hope story.

Susan: Thank you very much and thank you all for wonderful stories.

Thank you. I am sure there are hundreds more that those of you in the audience who didn't get a chance to speak can tell us about. In fact this gives me an idea that maybe at the next IASC we should have a full open day with everybody there just speaking about stories of hope and telling each other the stories that we know of. Because one of the problems sometimes we have with these sorts of congresses, we all get split into ten fifteen different side events or parallel sessions which is great, because there's a fantastic learning opportunity, but this kind of opportunity to be able to learn from each other tends to get marginalised. So that's an idea for the next IASC.

What I'd like to do now in the next few minutes is to bring out what I think are some of the most essential elements or principles of these stories of hope, of initiatives that are reasserting the commons. To my mind there are at least seven or eight different elements, and I am sure you can add many more. First, and this is not in any order of priority, there is the principle of localisation as opposed to globalisation, which is absolutely essential in almost all of these initiatives; the complete opposite of what our governments and corporations and institutions like the IMF and the World Bank are attempting to do, which is to globalise everything, to make everything available to the global economy to grab.

This is an assertion by citizens in rural areas, in cities, to say that at least the basics on which we depend, have to be within our control. So it is that movement of localisation which is clearly not as powerful yet as globalisation, but is getting there. Decentralisation policies and laws in many countries are helping with this. We just heard of the Kenyan constitution; there are many others where the governments are finally recognising that decentralisation is... I am not sure they are recognising that it is good... but that it is inevitable

and therefore are responding to it. However, the local is not enough as we clearly know. Problems often emanate from outside, local communities don't necessarily know the answers to all the problems they face, and so we need the larger scale.

We need, and this is also something that is happening in a number of these initiatives, the local community, the local municipality etc., embedded in larger institutions. This is of course an area of work in which Professor Ostrom has done seminal work. 60 years back Mahatma Gandhi spoke about the concept of oceanic circles in which one had self-reliant village economies embedded in larger and larger ripples and circles of institutions which could then manage things at a larger scale, at a landscape level and so on.

The principle of tenurial security is absolutely crucial. A number of you gave examples of reassertion of territorial rights as an example, but what I think is very important in this is that in a lot of places when people are asserting their territorial rights and ownership and so on, they are also talking about the fact that for them it is a custodianship. It is not an absolute ownership to do with the land what they wish. It is a custodianship; it is a custodianship which means a sense of responsibility also towards others, towards nature and towards future generations. So it is this link of custodianship and rights and responsibilities which I think is crucial.

Many of these initiatives also show institutional flexibility. They are not bound in these rigid legal institutional structures which cannot adapt to changes and which are not dynamic, which are not evolving. But in fact they are flexible to be able to respond to changes that are taking place, both local and global. These are initiatives which are beginning to hint at the possibilities of fairly radical transformations in the way

we look at political and administrative boundaries. Even at the way we look at things like nation states. So that we say perhaps as important as the administrative and political boundaries or maybe even more so are ecological boundaries, cultural boundaries; e.g. river basins as unit[s] of planning and governance and management instead of districts and states and countries. It's an idea that's still very far down the line but I think a number of these initiatives are giving us this sense that this is possible.

Cooperation versus cut throat competition is another key principle. Working collectively to solve problems, thinking of fellow humans as collaborators in a common vision rather than competitors who one has to be get the better of, helping to pull one other up rather than push each other down, these are crucial to many of the initiatives I have described.

These stories also show that the informal and non-formal are as important if not more so, than the formal. Linked to that is the place of customs and customary law; as somebody rightly said when you talk about water rights, customs are often more powerful and evocative and maybe more effective than statutory regulations, laws and so on. I am not suggesting we don't need statutory laws but we need to focus also on bringing back the customs and oral traditions and so on, ways in which we work with each other without having to necessarily follow the letter of the law.

A number of other values underpin the search for alternatives. The dignity of physical labour, as being at least as important as intellectual work. And I guess that's an issue we should keep bringing up in a room like this, which has a lot of academics and intellectuals but also a lot of practitioners, and many who combine the two. The value of reciprocity versus looking at each other only in instrumental ways. Rather than 'how can I use you for my gain', can it be 'how can we actually work together, what is it you can give me, what is it I can give you'?

The value of non-violence in all its facets—and you know this is a country which is incredibly two-sided about it. We have the Gandhian values and a whole lot of movements which work on the basis of that, but we of course have very high levels of violence also. But again, many of these, or most of these movements are based on that principle. Of course the principles of equity, sharing, the value of the principle of diversity which many people spoke about already earlier and in fact giving us the idea that maybe we are not talking about one solution or one framework for the future; maybe we are talking about many different parts, many different solutions, but within these value structures and value systems.

I think that combining these different elements, principles and values, these sorts of initiatives are giving us the possibility of something that I call radical ecological democracy; you can name it whatever you want, don't worry about the title and the labels, we all get stuck to our own labels. But radical ecological democracy (RED) is something in which each one of us as a citizen has the right and the capacity and the power to participate in decision making that affect our lives but with

the ecological and social sensitivity that brings responsibility along with that right. To my mind these initiatives are actually taking us towards that kind of framework. The acronym RED is by the way accidental; it wasn't thought of from the start.

And I think these are taking us away from the current form of democracy which I think is pretty shallow where, you know, we elect our leaders once in three years or five years and then sit back and think they are going to do good for us. It doesn't work, as we know. These are much deeper, much more participatory forms of democracy, but also leading us towards being much more ecologically and socially sensitive than we are currently. Let me then finally return to the original question—is there hope for the commons? Will the commons again become common? Here's what I think is going to happen and I am not Nostradamus so don't hold me accountable two decades from now if all of this turns out to be wrong.

I think over the next couple of decades we will see increasing collapse. We will see increasing erosion and destruction of the ecological commons, we will see more conflicts, we will see more food insecurity, water insecurity, water conflicts, etc. We will also see over the next decade or two a whole lot of false beginnings, false starts. Market mechanisms which everybody is gung-ho about these days, like REDD, REDD plus, REDD plus minus, whatever, biofuels—already Ashwini mentioned bio fuels and the global resistance to it. Geo-engineering—a really scary one—I don't know how many of you have read about the mind boggling ideas that people are coming up with to stop climate change, building massive panels over the earth so that solar radiation is reduced, fertilising the ocean so that carbon sequestration rises, etc. There's some incredible stuff happening there, all false starts. All the greening labels that we've put, the eco-labels that we've put—these days you put 'eco' in front of anything and it becomes acceptable—ecotourism, ecodevelopment, ecotechnology, eco-whatever. I think all of these, we need to look at really, really carefully as being really not the real solutions. They are false starts; in fact many of them are about the current economy making even more money. But the initiatives that I spoke about and many of you added to, I think are the real ones, I think they are the radical ones, I think they are the ones that are much more long lasting. What we need to do in the face of the collapse that is taking place around us and will continue for some time is to think of these alternatives and ideas and initiatives as being seeds, seedlings, sprouts, saplings which we have to nurture and which I think will emerge from the ruins of the current economy and the current globalised system that we have... and show us in the future the way by which humanity can actually correct its path.

I think we need a full course correction and these are the ideas, the initiatives that actually give us the hope of how we can actually achieve it. I am not sure that this will happen within the lifetime of many of us sitting here, but I am absolutely convinced that it will happen for those of us in the audience who are still very young and those who are to be born tomorrow. This is not a hope, it's actually a conviction.

With that, I'd like to end. Thank you very much.

Susan: I think we have time for three, two three four questions, if anyone has a question.

My name is Kabir Bavikatte. I am a lawyer. I work with an organisation called Natural Justice. Ashish, thank you so much for an excellent keynote address. It is genuinely the kind of optimism of will against pessimism of intellect, so thank you so much. I'd like to make a point about the radical ecological democracy that you spoke about. I think it's an incredible insight into how things are developing and should develop. As lawyers we've been noticing a certain kind of a positive shift, especially when we start observing a lot of the international environmental negotiations over the last decade. And the momentum has stepped up over the last decade, and what we call the emergence of stewardship rights or biocultural rights—increasingly what we seem to take for granted as things like farmers' rights or livestock keepers' rights or rights of communities to traditional knowledge, rights of communities to genetic resources—these rights are a result of hard fought kind of activism of indigenous peoples and local communities in supra national forums, and almost establishing a certain kind of a trilectic between the local kinds of movements and what's happening at the international level and using this as a way of shifting policy at a domestic level. So it's a fascinating kind of process that is actually happening and in many ways I think what is required is an acute kind of cartography of a certain people's history of the law that is actually kind of happening in this point in time. It is also a testimony to the excellent work that you've done on indigenous and community conserved areas, and this too is a part of these stewardship of biocultural rights. So somewhere down the line I think it would be interesting to start mapping these things and using these things as pegs on which to hang certain claims of communities at a local level and in many ways realise the radical ecological democracy you are speaking about. So thank you so much.

Ruth: Thank you very much. This was just what we needed. In some of the discussions with media, they have been questioning the pessimism that they were hearing a lot; perhaps the pessimism of intellect. What I wanted to ask is a follow up on your point about the importance of shifting values to make this happen and your insights on how do we address that.

Hello, myself Satyam from Orissa, India. So my point to Ashish Ji is you know that FR Act in India has come out, but in the present mindset of the administrative set up we are not expecting the people will get justice to get their common lands. So can you take a leading role by putting non-violence movement against this things, how the people will get their rights over there, they will get their common lands and customary rights of this, for implementing this FR Act for getting the common lands.

I am NC Jain from Rajasthan, India. Ashish, you have made two contrasting statements here. One thing is for those who have little short life. Probably they will not, they don't have to be optimistic within their lives, but the next generation or maybe those who are younger. I only want to raise a point here that in this forum by seeing the response, people endorse that we should move towards a global ecologically sustainable balanced system. It appears to me that when we [are exposed] to the right kind of thinking from maybe early childhood or to the academics or to the administrators; I mean people are spread all over and people are very receptive. Do you feel that the effort for sensitisation of people at large is what is the most missing element and probably acceptance is not the problem? It is not the problem of contestation, it is probably the problem of spreading out and sensitising. What is your response? Thank you.

Milind Wani: Ashish, in the Indian context, and I think increasingly in the world, we often invoke Gandhi—but in the Indian context I think it is also important to invoke somebody like Ambedkar. Yesterday Ingrid was telling me for example in Somaliland how pastoralist society is very privileged vis-a-vis what happens

to them in the Indian context, because many such societies are made of “dalit” people who’ve been oppressed for centuries. Somehow, I get the feeling that in the Indian context, we tend to ignore these issues and sort of romanticise village republics. So how do we resolve this continuing dialogue between Gandhi and Ambedkar? We need to resolve that if we have to go further ahead. Thank you.

My name is Katar Singh, I was formerly associated with the Institute of Rural Management, Anand. I agree with Ashish and so many other colleagues that there are hundreds of thousands of success stories of hope, islands of hope. But they are all built around one single leader. When we try to upscale, then there are problems, they collapse. Now, we all know that the current wave is privatisation, commercialisation, globalisation, urbanisation, industrialisation—this is a very mighty wave. So I’m afraid that under this mighty wave, all these small islands will be swamped, will be swept away. So unless we build a counterpart, a strength, by collective effort, by uniting all the success stories, I don’t think we’ll be able to reverse the trend. Thank you.

Ashish: Thank you so much for these comments and questions. I’m not sure I can do justice to all of them. Let me take first the issue that Dipendar and I think to some extent Ashwini’s example also brings up. One issue that I did not talk about which is also to my mind a huge story of hope is actually people’s resistance to enclosures, to destruction, to privatisation. I spoke about it with relation to water, but you’re absolutely right—resistance to corporate takeover of lands, resistance to government enclosure of the commons, resistance to things like intellectual property rights which are monopolising knowledge, resistance to false solutions like biofuels that Ashwini spoke about—are to my mind very much the pathway towards a radical ecological democracy. These are the ones that are gaining for us the time to be able to develop more of these solutions to do what I think Katar Singh is talking about, to link them up—because that often also does not happen—to synergise so that each of these individual initiatives actually become that much more powerful. And a local group is able to call upon a larger network to be able to help it if it is threatened or to be able to up-scale it. So, I completely agree with you, I think these are parts of that overall alternative.

Ruth raised a question on the change of values. I think that’s absolutely crucial and I’ll link it up to the other question about sensitising people at large. Frankly, I don’t think there’s any automatic wand for trying to make those value changes, but there are two sorts of things which I think can help—at least that’s what’s helped in my life. One is addressing values at the level of school itself. Unfortunately, a lot of our education system has become information oriented, so you provide the information which the child supposedly needs to survive or excel or become a billionaire, or whatever. But the values that we probably used to be provided, I don’t know, but at least that we should provide now, are for instance, rather than heading the class in your tests, actually saying can you be the best person to share your knowledge or your skills or whatever with everybody else in the class, and the whole class becomes something that is the best. So values of cooperation, for instance, than competition. These are things which I think we’re increasingly losing out on even at the school level, and that I guess is where it’s most crucial.

The second kind of thing is, for all of us to actually be a part of and understand these initiatives. And to my mind, a lot of mindshifts often happen with that. Even somebody who’s very well set in their minds—say 50 years old, or whatever—going to an initiative of this kind, a really radical one, tends to if nothing else at least sow a seed of doubt in their minds as to whether their current value systems or their current beliefs are right or wrong. And this ability to be able to exchange with each other, to go to each other’s places, to take people who are in the bureaucracy to some of these sites when they are doing their training, etc., is I think crucial for building these values and the issue of sensitising people at large.

I don't quite know how to handle the media. Maybe some of you can give a better answer to that, but clearly, the media which is currently so dominant in our lives and driving us towards one particular value system—how does one bring that media back in being much more able to sensitise people to these sorts of issues and bring up these values? I don't know, other than maybe completely banning advertising, for instance—radical things like that. And of course the more pressure from the public for a different kind of news, different kind of media content, will also help.

Satya, your question about the Forest Rights Act and the commons—yes, I agree. I think currently there's not been much success in communities being able to claim the forest back as commons, except in a few pockets. But I think those few pockets, and what's happened in those pockets give us the lessons on how it could happen elsewhere also. And I totally agree with you that the larger movement needs to be able to support that for that to happen. It's not going to happen by governments giving those—that's never going to happen. It may not even happen only by communities doing it—it's only when communities link up also with other communities and with civil society organisations that it has worked. And I think we need to do much, much more of that.

Milind, your point on Ambedkar and Gandhi—I totally agree, and actually I would say Ambedkar, Gandhi and Marx as three indicators. I mean, there are dozens of other people also who we should invoke on this. And to my mind, actually a lot of the movements—I mean, I just spoke about Gandhi in the specific context of one or two things—but you know, a lot of the movements are actually embodying a mix of these sorts of things. If you take Deccan Development Society and the assertion of dalit women rights, they don't necessarily talk about Ambedkar, but it is the assertion of dalits, which is the crucial thing. So, I think maybe we don't even need to put things into boxes anymore—the boxes of Gandhism, Ambedkar, Marx, etc.—these are things we need to break out of and say that these were fantastic things that all of these people spoke about, which these movements are actually already bringing into what they're doing, but there are probably lots of things which are not any more relevant which they spoke about, and lots of new things they never did speak about.

Kabir, I completely agree. Again, linked to what I said in my first response, the growing assertion of people at global levels, also like the example that Ashwini gave, and then translating that back into national policy, or the other way round. For instance, the whole idea of community conserved areas came up from the ground—what communities themselves are doing—it became an international movement, and is now coming back into national policy levels. And mapping of those sorts of movements would be fascinating. I also think what would be really fascinating—and that's my last comment—is a history of actions. I think that's missing. Even in a country like India—and I'm sure that would be true for most of the countries—we don't actually have a history of how people have done what they've done. Actions—I mean, even just things like tactics—the kind of tactics that were used in the independence movement, the tactics that were used in the Chipko movement, the Narmada movement—I'm just talking from the Indian context but there are similar ones elsewhere. We don't really have the mapping and history of just the actions that people have done which have helped to save their commons or bring back the commons into their lives. And I think that would be fascinating to do.

Thank you, and I really once again urge the IASC—and Susan is the right person to do it—to maybe have a full day on something like this at the next IASC.

Thank you.