

Business Frontiers:

Social Responsibility, Sustainable Development and Economic Justice

By Wayne Visser (ICFAI Books, 2005)



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A Scottish Odyssey

With the rich texture of African soil once again beneath my feet, the warm sun on my back, and the Cape South Easter wind tugging at my hair, my body and soul have unmistakably returned home. My mind, however, still drifts back and forth between this land and another, the ancient land of the Celts, where I spent the past year studying and experiencing human ecology.

A year earlier I had left South Africa for Edinburgh, Scotland, uncertain about the path that lay ahead, and aware of the risk I had taken in forsaking a lucrative corporate career to undertake postgraduate studies in human ecology in a city so far from home. But I have always been interested in the bigger picture of things. Through these further studies - in the exploration of human relationships within society and with nature - I could focus on my concerns about modern society; I could find a better way to “make a difference”, and play some small part in securing the future for my home country - and for our home planet.

In retrospect, I made a good choice. As well as enjoying a year of valuable dialogue on environmental issues in a humanistic context, I was exposed to the experience of people who are actively living out human and ecological solutions in the world.

Eco-Villages and Sustainable Communities

My first week in Scotland was spent at a three-day conference presented by an activist group that is working and campaigning for the gradual restoration of Scotland’s native Caledonian forest, now denuded through generations of grazing by sheep and deer.

The venue for the conference was Lauriston Hall, an international community of about thirty adults and children in the South West of Scotland. For many years this community has been experimenting with sustainable communal living. Through offering workshops in the summer, working in various part-time jobs in the nearby village, growing and raising most of their own food (most of its members are not vegetarian), chopping wood for indoor coal-burning stove-heaters, and using a water-generator for other energy needs, the community is largely self-reliant and living a different quality of life to their metropolitan fellows.

On I went to the Findhorn conference on "Eco-Villages and Sustainable Communities" where I discovered that the alternative lifestyle option demonstrated at Lauriston and Findhorn was far from being rare or marginal. Individuals and organisations from around the world bore testimony to hundreds, probably thousands, of similar yet uniquely different initiatives of experiments in eco-living.

In the more established intentional communities (such as Findhorn, Auroville in India, the Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales, The Farm in the USA, and Crystal Waters in Australia), as well as the newer ones, what was most noticeable was a shift from them being places for fringe, hippie or spiritual opt-outs to communities that are more actively engaging with mainstream society and its challenges. For example, there was a refreshing emphasis on renewable energy sources, local economic alternatives, community businesses, town planning and urban renewal, and political involvement.

This evidence, together with my experience of other eco-communities I visited during the year, convinced me that a maturation process is well under way in which viable models for more socially and ecologically sustainable living are now being demonstrated.

Challenging Power Structures

In the months which followed this cosy introduction, I was exposed to the less insulated and more bloody daily battles being fought by environmentalists, social and charity groups, religious sects, human rights activists, marginalized communities and rave-culture youngsters. Most of these had to do with challenging existing power structures and the vested interests which they embodied.

One example which epitomised the struggle for land rights and the tyranny of absent landlords, was that of the people of the Isle of Eigg in the Hebrides. In this case, a French artist was the last in a line of wealthy remote landlords who had "bought" the island and obstructed self-governance by the local people. Efforts are currently underway to effect a community buy-out of the island. The story was constantly blown up in the media because it represents the larger issue of land rights (80% of the land is owned by 1% of the population in Scotland) and political self-determination (in lieu of Scotland's drive for its own parliament).

Another illustrative example was the plan for an export-oriented granite super-quarry to be developed on the Isle of Harris (also in the Hebrides). In this case the interests of the major corporates were in opposition to the ecological and spiritual interests of the local community, whose overshadowing mountain would be denigrated and scarred by these activities. Their campaign included bringing the Native American Chief, Stone Eagle, over from Canada, where a similar super-quarry threatens the sacred ground of his people. In addition, an alternative economic development strategy was drawn up for the area, and a public enquiry demanded, the results of which are still pending.

Some of these issues may have a familiar local ring to them. I encountered many more, such as the anti-road and traffic demonstrations (especially around the proposed new Newbury bypass), anti-nuclear campaigns and the protests for greater animal rights. Although I didn't necessarily agree with the methods or finer technical arguments of these groups, I came to realise that they represent a vital counter-balancing force against the increasingly dominant and powerful vested interests of existing economic and political power institutions which are determining the course of people's lives today.

Ecological Economics

The economic dimension of this imbalance was highlighted further by my studies which alerted me to a mood of growing dissatisfaction within the more industrialised countries of the world, such as the United Kingdom, over the failings - and, some would say, looming crisis - of their financial and economic systems.

Globalisation has led to the wholesale and sometimes coercive restructuring of societies behind a single ideology: free market capitalism. From a social and ecological perspective, this change has been catastrophic. It has left in its wake the replacement of indigenous cultures with a new "Coca-Cola mono-culture"; a marginalisation of the poor and discriminated against sectors of societies; and an unprecedented rate of tropical deforestation and other environmental exploitation, together with social breakdown within formerly coherent communities. These are but a few of the effects. Their "costs" are not factored into conventional economic calculations, but are nevertheless very real and require urgent attention and action.

At the same time, there is a rising tide of ideas and experiments for a "new economics", or an "ecological economics", in which humans are seen as but one integral part of a complexity of living systems. This alternative perspective includes proposals for ecological taxes, currency speculation fees, citizens' basic income, ethical investment, community financial institutions, and multi-tiered currencies, amongst others, all of which are hotly debated in new economics circles.

One such new economics initiative which I encountered directly was the setting up of a Local Exchange and Trading System (LETS) for Edinburgh, to add to approximately 300

other such schemes in the UK and more that 1 000 worldwide. The potential of LETS for creating work, promoting economic renewal, fostering individual and community empowerment, and acting as a buffer against the volatile global and national economic fluctuations, is immense. I realised that, now more than ever, true economics (which derives from the Greek word meaning "household management") needs to be demystified and understood by every citizen in the light of its impact on everyday life. In South Africa, the South African New Economics (SANE) Network which I am involved in setting up, will act as a forum for this vital process.

Music, Dance and Celtic Spirituality

Outside of my studies, I was able to immerse myself in various cultural aspects of the Celtic people, of which music and dance is perhaps the strongest and most inspiring element. In both Scotland and Ireland, music and dance not only embody the struggles and triumphs of their past and present, but are also a mode of social expression and participation which is so lacking in many modern societies. At present there is a revival of the art-forms of traditional step-dancing and music-playing, which are seeping back like a river over a thirsty land, allowing people to reconnect with their roots. In addition, their *ceilidh* dances and tune-playing in halls and pubs throughout both countries invite active participation by everyone, whether young or old, talented artist or enthusiastic novice. The liberating and healing effect of this openness to creative expression moved me profoundly.

In Scotland I was entranced by another revival which is occurring at present, namely the blossoming of what could only be loosely described as "Celtic spirituality". Growing numbers, mainly among the younger generations, are beginning to appreciate the ancient traditions of the druids and other earth and goddess religions, previously condemned as pagan or heathen.

Now, their richly symbolic rituals are being publicly re-enacted in massive celebrations such as *Beltaine* in spring, where painted bodies, frenetic ancient-modern drumming and fire dancing all mingle into a dervish ecstasy which cleanses the soul and gets people in touch with all sorts of repressed aspects of their psyche. These need to be experienced and cannot be captured by words.

But there is more to this revival than a return to tribalism. In Ireland there is an emerging stream of beliefs now being called "Celtic Christianity" which is succeeding in integrating the more ancient druidic religious ideas into theology, and thereby bringing a new living and symbolic interpretation to Catholicism. It was noticeable to me that those most engaged in the Celtic revival were also those most active in environmental, community and social enlistment of the kinds already described. The new spirituality is providing the energy and inspiration for a transformed society and ecology on planet Earth.

Green Grass and Diverse Eco-systems

On returning to South Africa in October 1996, I was at first overwhelmed by the mood of fear and despondency which prevailed, as if there were a collective, unrealised expectation that the creation of our rainbow nation was a miracle still waiting to happen (or not). Wherever I went I also encountered the "grass is greener on the other side" syndrome.

However, having just returned from "the other side", I am convinced that there the grass is rapidly dying and tends to be more brown than green, except in isolated areas where it is being fertilised by organic mixtures of people dedicated to socially and ecologically sensitive development. I have also seen how much the diversity of life is being strangled on "the other side" by a combination of monoculture grass and flourishing weeds which have been mistaken for green grass.

In contrast, here in South Africa we still have the enormous privilege of a diverse natural and human ecosystem, recuperating from decades of racial mono-cropping which was poisoned by the chemical pesticides of apartheid. Now the earth is being turned and we are finding rich, fertile soil in which a healthy South African permaculture can be grown. What's more, before the agro-industrial machinery of blind economic growth scars our land, we have the opportunity of learning from other organic socio-economic patches around the world and adapting their methods to the geography, culture and soul of South Africa and her people.

If I have learned anything about eco-living from my Scottish odyssey, it is this: what is needed is for rainbow people to shine the light of clear values on the dark clouds that block the sun, and **act** to clear those clouds. I end with a poem I wrote about my time at the Centre for Human Ecology in Edinburgh.

Building Stone Upon Stone

For many moons have gathered now
People from different lands
Around a table carved from wood
Searching to understand
Why we choke the Earth and Sky
The Rivers and the Seas
And why there is injustice still
Through social inequity.

We've travelled over land and sea
And around the jewel of Eire
With its walls of stone and sacred sites
And people to inspire

Our pilgrimage across the hills
Is also one within
For we know before the world can change
With ourselves we must begin.

When we go our different ways
We'll take all that we've learned
And try to realise the better world
For which we yearn
And the Celtic knot may join us still
Through the vision that we share
That all life is connected and
Needs our love and care.

We have grown, we have grown
Building stone upon stone
A foundation of hope for tomorrow
We have grown, we have grown
And though our future's unknown
Every ending is just another beginning.

Source:

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