

Everything's Local in the Global Community

by Lloyd Field

A community of individuals sharing their life's journey by striving for joy and happiness and the continual reduction of suffering ...

While this may sound utopian, it is, in fact, happening. Let's look at two very different initiatives to Create a Better Society. Both operate within the free enterprise system but emphasize a greater balance between the need for human values and the need to be profitable.

Communities that work: The Slow City

The first is the Slow City Movement, which evolved from a Slow Food initiative started in Bra, Piedmont, Italy in 1986 as a local response to the fast food industry (especially McDonald's).

The international Slow Food Movement has grown from 20 member countries to more than 100, with more than 110,000 members organized in local chapters (including more than 90 in North America).

However, soon after the organization was started, it became clear that the Slow Food founders cared about issues much broader than the stress-producing twenty-minute lunch or non-nutritional meals, which they understood as signs of the deterioration of their lifestyle. From this broader concern was born the Slow City Movement. While clearly not Luddites, the movement's adherents are people who take the time to move thoughtfully, deliberately, and holistically through their lives.

DIVERSITY

The Slow Food Movement asserts that the enjoyment of excellent food and drink should be combined with efforts to save the countless traditional grains, vegetables, fruits, animal breeds, and food products that are disappearing due to the prevalence of convenience food and industrial agribusiness. The movement points out that since 1900, 93% of American food product diversity has been lost and thirty thousand vegetable varieties have become extinct – and one more is lost every six hours. The movement organizes fairs, markets, and events locally and internationally to showcase products of excellent gastronomic quality and to offer discerning consumers the opportunity to meet producers.

Slow Food works to defend bio-diversity in our food supply, spread taste education, and connect producers of excellent foods with co-producers through events and initiatives.

The Slow Food Movement is also related to the Slow City Movement, which is growing quickly. In Germany,

for example, the Slow City philosophy is being recognized increasingly as an alternative urban development vision and even larger cities are taking note of it in their efforts to do commercial revitalization. It is also important to note that Slow Cities could too easily be misinterpreted as regressive, isolationist, or backward communities. This is far from being true. Slow Cities want to be at the forefront of cutting-edge urban planning ideas, technology, and innovation. They are not against locating a McDonald's, but rather hope that through their efforts the citizens will become educated consumers who are aware of the local choices and options for getting fresh, healthful, and tasty meals. Slow Cities want to be eventful places where local traditions are celebrated and mixed with cosmopolitan influences. Unlike the slow-growth or no-growth movements in the U.S., Slow Cities are interested in growing, but to them what matters are the qualitative aspects of growth and development.

The Slow City Movement is now active in Italy, as well as in eight other European, Asian, and North American countries. This local initiative grew in response to many of the negative aspects of globalization: a sameness in mass-produced goods, the extensive use of non-renewable resources, the sacrificing of quality in the pursuit of lower prices, the obstruction of natural beauty by advertising and marketing signage, etc.

To articulate their philosophy, the Movement's first president, Carl Petrini, cited a little-known seventeenth-century Italian writer, Francesco Angelita, who once devoted an entire book to snails. Angelita privileged slowness as an essential virtue, and praised snails' adaptability and ability to settle anywhere.

Since its founding, the Slow City Movement has seen over sixty cities worldwide sign a civic charter requiring them to create a balance between the modern and the traditional, thereby promoting a good quality of life. If we look for similarities between the intentions of the Slow City Movement and the Buddha's teachings we find a unique twenty-first century European application of the Middle Way.

Communities that work: Sarvodaya

A second holistic community initiative is one that, for the present, operates only in Sri Lanka. The founder, Dr. Ari T. Ariyaratne, gave the Sanskrit word Sarvodaya, meaning "the awakening of all," as both the name and mission of the movement. The philosophy of the Sarvodaya Movement is rooted in both the Buddha's teachings as well Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent approaches to building. Dr. Ariyaratne has described the intention behind the movement this way: "The goal of the Sarvodaya Movement is to liberate the goodness that is inherent in every person."

Dr. Ariyaratne, in his acceptance speech for the 1996 Gandhi Peace Prize (awarded by the government of India), observed that "a global transformation of human consciousness is needed to bring humanity closer to peace and justice." He believes that our current political and economic systems inevitably result in the poor becoming poorer. While developing Buddhist-based methods for addressing the problem of poverty, he is solidly committed to achieving this transformation non-violently.

The Sarvodaya Movement, for almost fifty years, has been supporting such transformation in the rural communities of Sri Lanka. From its early beginnings in one village, it has grown to encompass over fifteen thousand villages throughout the island – including Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian communities.



THE COMMITMENT

To become part of the Slow City Movement, a regional or city council must pass by-laws that include the following commitments (among others):

- To implement an environmental policy designed to maintain and develop the characteristics of the surrounding area and urban fabric, emphasizing recovery and reuse techniques.
- To implement an infrastructure policy that actively supports the improvement, not the occupation of the land.
- To promote the use of technologies that improve the quality of the environment.
- To safeguard local and home-grown/homemade production that is rooted in the region's history, culture, and traditions; and to promote preferential retail space for direct contact between customers, producers, and vendors.
- To promote the quality of hospitality as a real bond with the local community.

Eighty cities in Italy, Germany, Switzerland, England, Norway, Brazil, Japan, Greece, and Croatia are members of the Slow City Movement. At the time of publication there are no North American cities that have made the commitment.

During this time, Sri Lanka has been riddled with poverty and divided by political and religious strife. Sri Lanka, like many other Asian countries, has been caught up in the globalized economy and is home to many branch factories of electronics and textiles. As we have seen elsewhere – even in North America – the poor gain some benefits from such industrialization, but the poverty/affluence gap continues to widen. Economic growth has not eradicated this problem; in many cases, it has exacerbated it.

Although in Sri Lanka exports have been increasing and overall income has risen, economic wealth has not reached the population evenly. While the island's cities and corporations have experienced growth, the quality of life in rural areas has not improved. In the agricultural sector, many Sri Lankans continue to live at or below the poverty level. Industrialization has also created a new urban underclass whose earnings have increased but who still cannot afford to feed themselves.

The results of this unbalanced development can be seen in the country's rates of suicide, violent crime, and alcoholism. Left out of the growing prosperity they see elsewhere in the country, many people feel powerless to help themselves. In many cases, they have become desperate and self-destructive.

These are communities that are suffering. To turn these circumstances around, Dr. Ariyaratne proposed a Buddhist solution, where the ultimate goal is happiness and the awakening of our true nature.

The Sarvodaya organization evolved the following five-stage self- and community-development program to actualize its goals:

Stage 1, People from a selected village and Sarvodaya volunteers from neighboring villages participate in planning sessions and then develop essential services such as roads, wells, agricultural irrigation, reforestation programs, etc., with the emphasis on realizing the greatest benefit for all members of the community.

Stage 2, Peer groups from within the village population (e.g., mothers' groups, youth groups, etc.) are formed. These groups are given training in leadership and decision-making skills so that they can effectively participate, along with the volunteers, in providing the ten basic needs (see box, this page).

Stage 3, Through self-reliance and community participation the basic needs in the village are satisfied and a village-level Sarvodaya Society is formed to give organized leadership to all village-level activities that lead to the improvement of living standards.

THE SARVODAYA MOVEMENT'S "TEN BASIC HUMAN NEEDS FOR ALL INDIVIDUALS IN A JUST SOCIETY"

A clean and beautiful environment
A clean and adequate supply of water
Basic clothing
A balanced diet
A simple house to live in
Basic health care
Simple communication facilities
Basic energy requirements
Well-rounded education
Cultural and spiritual sustenance

Stage 4, Economic development activities are introduced to the village, progressively developing the capacity of the people to save, borrow, improve existing enterprises, start new ones, repay loans, and finally to evolve their own village development bank.

Stage 5, Economic relationships with neighboring villages are built, strengthening their capacity to share wealth, products, and services so that development takes place in a cluster of villages. The clusters of villages throughout the country contribute to the building of an alternative approach to economic development, which benefits rural areas.

Think Local, Act Global

Economic growth is essential. However, to be in keeping with the goals of skillful action and skillful intention, it has to respect the rights of all life on the planet, promote equal and non-exploitative relationships among human beings, and recognize the interdependence between human beings, society, and nature. The two initiatives described above – one European and one Asian – are creative examples in which communities have come together to facilitate what today we would call sustainable development. In both cases, a greater balance between human values and unrestricted capitalism has been brought to bear on the free enterprise system. In the case of the Sarvodaya Movement, some people will become entrepreneurs, creating employment and prosperity, while still adhering to the value of Causing No Harm. ☸

Reprinted with permission from Business and the Buddha: Doing Well By Doing Good by Lloyd Field, PhD. Foreword by the Dalai Lama; Preface by Master Hsing Yun. Published by Wisdom Publications. Paperback \$US16.95www.wisdompubs.org



Lloyd Field