

The New Way Of The Future: **Small, Local, Open And Connected**¹



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Beset with a global financial crisis and deepening ecological woes, it's clear that we need alternative models of development. But as **Ezio Manzini** points out, these models are already with us.

There is an urgent need to promote new economic models, new production systems and new ideas of well-being. To define and implement these new models is, of course, very difficult. But it is not impossible. And we do not have to start from zero.

Indeed, over the last few decades, a multiplicity of social "actors" (including institutions, enterprises, non-profit organisations, as well as individual citizens and their associations) have proved themselves capable of acting outside of the

mainstream economic models and, in so doing, provide benchmarks that might well provide the answers to the most pressing concerns and challenges of our time.

What do these ways of living and producing look like?

Promising cases

Examples can be found everywhere, but let's just start with three cases in China and in Korea:²

- **Ainonghui, Farmers' association**

In 2005, in Liuzhou, Guangxi (China), a group of citizens found that they could not access good, safe food in the ordinary markets. They went to some villages, about a two hour drive from the city, and found that traditional agriculture models, though struggling, still survived in the remote countryside. With the intention of helping the poor farmers and developing a stable channel of good, organic food, they found a social enterprise, Ainonghui.

Today, this farmers' association manages four organic restaurants and a community organic food store. By selling traditionally sourced food to the citizens, they also educate them on what traditional/organic agriculture is and (re)introduces a sustainable lifestyle into the city. Thanks to Ainonghui and the direct links it has created between citizens and farmers, the incomes of farmers are now better able to sustain traditional farming while allowing them to lead a better and respected life. What's more, several farmers have returned to the countryside to join in the organic food network.

- **Little Donkey Farm**

Started in 2008, Little Donkey Farm is China's first community-supported agricultural model. Located in a suburb of Beijing, about two hours drive from the city centre, the farm has, to date, 200 members who share the farm activities and 400 members who subscribe to a weekly home delivery of a box of farm produce. Already, the farm is the hub of an innovative food network in Beijing with increasing numbers of eco-friendly and organic farms joining.

The ultimate goal is to turn Little Donkey Farm into a platform for selling farm produce while promoting a sustainable, organic lifestyle. Different events, including countryside fairs and farmers' markets are held on the farm, while lectures and training programmes are organised to further diffuse the message of organic agriculture technology.

- **Hansalim**

Launched in 1986, Hansalim is a Korean food cooperative. As of August 2010, it boasts 2,302,000 consumers and 2000 producers from 19 different regions in South Korea. 2009 sales amounted to €100 million.

Hansalim (Korean for "save all living things"), aims to preserve the ecosystem while rebuilding communities where producers and consumers are connected. In an effort to support sustainable agriculture, 76% of the sales goes to producers and the balance is earmarked as the cooperative's operating costs. Hansalim runs an e-commerce platform where all the products of the cooperative can be ordered and delivered to consumers.

These three examples of a new kind of relationship between farmers and citizens and between food and agriculture are emblematic of a larger wave of social innovation³ that is taking place around the world. Not only are we seeing a new way of eating emerging, a new relationship between production and consumption and between the city and the countryside is being established.

Elsewhere, we find a collaborative service where elderly people organise themselves to exchange mutual help and, at the same time, promote a new idea of welfare. Neighbourhood gardens are set up and managed by citizens in a way that improves the quality of the city and its social fabric; while family groups share services that not only reduce economic and environmental costs, they also create new forms of neighbourhoods.

We also see the emergence of other interesting cases: New forms of social interchange and mutual help (such as the local exchange trading systems and time banks); systems of mobility that present alternatives to the use of cars (from car sharing and car pooling to the (re)discovery of the urban benefits offered by bicycles); and the development of productive activities based on local resources and skills which are linked into wider global networks (such as the establishment of fairs and direct trade networks between producers and consumers). The list continues to grow around the world and reaches out to touch just about every area of daily life.⁴

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being and of production: Specifically, a sense of community based on shared, common goods; and a production system set up by networks of collaborative partners, both local and global. And despite their diversity, they share a fundamental common characteristic; they all refer to places—that is, to local resources and local communities.

Whilst these cases may be marginal in quantitative terms, in qualitative terms, they are extremely meaningful. In fact, they can be regarded as viable experiments in sustainable ways of living. Of course, they assume different significance in different societies and places, but their independent occurrences in such disconnected situations and locations raise the possibility that they, in fact, constitute a first set of spontaneously developed sustainable features. In other words, they are the building materials for developing sustainable alternatives to the unsustainable ideas of well-being, production and economy that dominate today.

Ways of living and producing

In regard to human well-being, a closer look at these promising cases reveals another fundamental common characteristic; each compensates for a decrease in the consumption of products with an increase in other qualities. The latter relates to the physical and social environments with the rediscovery of the common good and healthier relationships with the community. For the first time in a long time, the individual and his social capabilities and responsibilities assume a central role. In other words, the focus shifts from the wider, amorphous whole to the smaller specifics of a system designed for the human scale. Such systems, by their nature must be small, comprehensible and manageable. Once this

is in place, they can then begin to connect with one another and interact with other similar smaller systems to reconstruct the whole. I call this complex relation between being small and open system, cosmopolitan localism.

This new relationship between the local and the global—in which new, local but connected systems of production and consumption are emerging—can take different specific forms: The sustainable usage of local resources (from natural environments and agriculture to craftsmanship and local knowledge); the realisation of symbiotic production processes (from zero waste systems to industrial ecology districts); and the development of distributed systems (from power generation to manufacturing and to the whole economy). What unites these diverse phenomena is that each exemplifies a connected local model in which knowledge, money and decision-making power can circulate in worldwide networks, but also in which they remain in the hands of those who produce them.

The emerging scenario

Thanks to the promising experiences accumulated to date, we are able to outline a new scenario that lies at the intersection of three main innovation streams: The green innovation (and the environmentally friendly systems it makes available); the spread of networks (and the distributed, open, peer-to-peer organisations it generates); and the diffusion of creativity (and the original answers to daily problems that a variety of social actors are conceiving and implementing). I refer to this intersection as the SLOC Scenario, where SLOC stands for small, local, open, connected. These four adjectives neatly synthesise a socio-technical system—or more accurately, a distributed production and consumption system—in which any global system is, in fact, a “network of locals”—that is, a mesh of connected local systems, the small scale of which makes them comprehensible and controllable by individuals and communities.

The SLOC Scenario is useful because it gives a clear direction of where to look for sustainable solutions, in which sustainable solutions necessarily refer to the local (and the community of which this local is a vital part) and to the small (with all the possibilities of relationships, participation and democracy that the human scale makes possible). At the same time, it tells us that to implement solutions, we have to consider these small entities and their localities in the framework of the global network society in which the local and the small are both open and connected. This change in the nature of the small and local has enormous implications; with the new networks, it is now possible to operate on a local and small scale in a very effective way. The goal—especially in the modern complex and fast-changing environment—is to transition out of our current crisis in economy and environment towards a society that is both knowledge-based and sustainable.

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Social innovation

As we noted at the beginning of this article, practical applications of SLOC-oriented initiatives already exist and they are a myriad of initiatives worldwide. Some are rather diffuse. Others are still quite marginal. But all represent practical working prototypes of new ways of living and doing. Considered as a whole, they prove that the SLOC Scenario is not a Utopian dream, but rather it is a potentially viable perspective. The challenge, therefore, is to transform this potential into a broader mainstream reality. To achieve this task, it is necessary to better understand the complex interplay between the social and technical innovations that generate the cases on which the SLOC Scenario is based. In fact, all the promising cases that we have alluded to here emerge from a continuous interaction between social and technical innovation; they have been conceived and implemented (mainly) by the involved actors, using their personal capabilities, their direct knowledge of the problems to be solved and their application and deployment of existing technologies, often in unforeseen ways.

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Small, local, open, connected

The four keywords so central to SLOC—small, local, open and connected—are meaningful because they are, at the same time, visionary, in the sense that they generate a vision of how society could be. By their very nature, they are comprehensible and easily understood by everybody, and they are also viable because they are supported by major drivers of change such as the complex relationships between globalisation and localisation, the power of the Internet and the diffusion of new forms of organisation that makes it possible.

These four words are also important not just because they synthesise 20 years of study and case studies, but also because they clearly indicate that there is no hope for designing sustainable solutions without starting from the twin notions of local and of community. Conversely, there is no hope of implementing sustainable solutions without considering the greater framework of a globalised network society.

Small is not small, in the networks

Some 40 years ago, E. F. Schumacher wrote his famous book *Small is Beautiful*.⁵ At that time, he made a choice in favour of the small and local on cultural and ethical grounds as a reaction to the prevailing trend towards greater scale and delocalisation that he saw around him. Today, we follow Schumacher for these and other, new and compelling reasons. But at the same time, we have to recognise that, in these four decades, things have deeply changed. And that what, at Schumacher's time was a kind of utopia, today is a concrete possibility. Forty years ago the "small" that Schumacher referred to really was small. In fact, it had little chance of influencing the larger scale. The same could be said for the then "local", which really was local because it

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was (quasi) isolated from other locals. Furthermore, at that time, all the technological and economic ideas were moving in the direction of “the bigger, the better” model. That is, against any possibility that the small could be beautiful if economy and effectiveness were taken in account.

Today, the context is totally different. Today the small can be influential at the large scale as a node in a global network. And the local can break its isolation by being open to the global flow of people, ideas and information. In other words, today we can say that the small is no longer small and a local is no longer local, at least in traditional terms.

This change in the nature of the small has enormous implications, for better and for worse. Perhaps the most

potentially beneficial implication is that the global network makes it possible to operate on a local and small scale in very effective ways, because, as we will see, the networked and flexible systems that emerge provide the only possibility for operating safely in the complex, fast changing, highly risky contemporary environment.

Similar considerations apply to the notion of the local and to the related notion of place. In the last few decades, there have been long and important debates about how the globalised flow of goods is bringing about the end of places and localities,⁶ and it is indeed important to recognise how the flow of goods creates a crisis for traditional places and promotes the spread of homogenised “non-places”. But these observations do not capture the entire complexity of



the new reality where a growing number of people are actively searching for local traditions and for new forms of locality rooted in the modern context of global interconnectivity.

Given the new meanings that the terms “small” and “local” are assuming in the network society, it is useful and important to consider their implications on the architecture of the emerging socio-technical systems: The distributed system architecture.

Design for social innovation

Designers, and design researchers, can do much to empower social innovation for sustainability. They can feed the social conversation (i.e. the interplay between social and technological innovation) with visions and proposals.

And they can collaborate with both social innovators (to help them conceive and manage their initiatives) and with technologists, entrepreneurs and policy makers (to develop products, services and infrastructures to make the most promising initiatives accessible and replicable, thereby opening new markets and economic opportunities).⁷

Such a design for social innovation and sustainability holds great potential, though it is still in its initial stage. Everything we've discussed here needs the development of different kinds of research. The new networks require ongoing social learning processes and while the idea of SLOC is helpful, it remains, in the end, a general guideline. The greater challenge is to trigger and orient a broad, open and collaborative programme.



1. The present paper is an up-dated version of: Ezio Manzini, “Small, Local, Open and Connected: Design Research Topics in the Age of Networks and Sustainability,” *Journal of Design Strategies*, Volume 4, No. 1, Spring (2010).

2. The Chinese and Korean examples have been collected by Fang Zhong and Joon Baek in their doctorate research at the Politecnico di Milano.

3. Geoff Mulgan, *Social innovation: What it is, why it matters, how it can be accelerated*, (London: Basingstoke Press, 2006); Anna Meroni(ed), *Creative Communities: People inventing sustainable ways of living* (Polidesign Milano, 2010).

4. To read more about them, see: Sustainable Everyday Project <http://www.sustainable-everyday.net> and DESIS, <http://www.desis-network.org> ; SEP, <http://www.sustainable-everyday.net>.

5. E.F Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful, Economics as if People Mattered* (London: Blond and Briggs, 1973).

6. Marc Augè, *Non-Places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity* (London: Varso, 1995); Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Volume 1*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

7. Francois Jegou and Ezio Manzini, *Collaborative Services: Social innovation and design for sustainability*, (Milano: Polidesign, 2008).