SUSTAINABLE TRADE: WOMEN'S WORK?

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I. Introduction / Definitions

The essence of the contradiction between sustainable economies and trade lies in the fact that sustainable human endeavours of any kind -- be they economic, political, or whatever -- depend on communities of people working together within the ecosystem they inhabit. Since large-scale trade erodes ecosystems and destroys human community, trade clearly undermines sustainability. However, sustainable trade may be possible in principle, as long as it is small in scale and contains some mechanism for keeping itself small -- that is, countering the positive feedbacks which would otherwise lead trade to get out of hand. What are some possible mechanisms which might do this? They depend, it seems to me, on economic roles which are now often filled by women and on principles which women have been foremost in expounding and exemplifying.

Before documenting and tracing this argument in more detail, some definitions are clearly necessary. By "trade", I mean exchanges or transfers of agricultural or primary products, manufactures, craft goods, technologies, production techniques, money, or services from one community, country, or region to another. "Communities", or groups of people living in close geographical proximity who have some degree of economic interdependence reinforced by political structures and interpersonal relationships, may or may not exist in every country or geographical region. (An example of a geographical region without communities would be one where there are virtually no economic interdependencies just among people living in the region -- that is, almost all goods and services consumed are provided impersonally from outside the region -- and where political and social institutions also extend outside the region, and/or are funded and controlled from outside.) Community, therefore, may be felt to be fairly rare today, especially in urban areas of the North. But members of a community know who they are, and some localities are more closely-knit communities than others -- it is not an all-or-nothing state!

Now, what is "sustainable"? Obviously this is an anthropocentric concept; it relates to human occupation of a geographic area, or the Earth itself, for an indefinite length of time. But although the concern is for humans first and foremost, "sustainability" is not solely a matter of human survival, since our lives and well-being are so closely tied up with those of other species, plants and animals. When I use the phrase "sustainable trade", for example, I mean exchanges which can continue indefinitely -- where none of the traders
runs out of the goods traded, or is no longer able to purchase the goods wanted in return, or no longer has anything the other traders want. This is because the trade itself does not endanger the ecological, physical, social, cultural, economic or political foundations of the trading communities or regions.

II. Trade and Community

The insidious effects of trade on human communities have been documented and commented upon by a number of writers. Marcia Nozick, for example, points out that "diversity and uniqueness of place is lost in the process of economic globalization (the replacement of local markets with global markets). We forget who we are and where we come from... Rootlessness, transitoriness and dispossession are the fall-out of an increasing trend toward globalization and global competition... Many industries are viable within their local regions, yet they are being shut down because of global management." She lists five major "pressure points of community breakdown": economic de-industrialization, environmental degradation, loss of local control over communities, social degradation and neglect of basic human needs, and erosion of local identity and cultural diversity.

How does this process happen? "As a community is seduced into wanting the products of another region they will become dependent on those products and give up, often unknowingly, the control over their community. The economic surplus created within a community is then sent out of the community to buy the wanted goods. If the surplus were spent in the community it would be much more prosperous."

Herman Daly makes the similar observation that trade "sins against community by demanding more mobility and by further separating ownership and control" and that it "sins against distributive justice by widening the disparity between labor and capital in high wage countries,... against macroeconomic stability,... and also against the criterion of sustainable (economic) scale".

If trade's effects are so negative, why not abolish trade altogether? For one thing, this seems rather unrealistic in today's trade-dependent world. For another, there are good reasons for some amount of trade. The dissemination of "ideas, knowledge, art, hospitality, travel" -- to use the words of J.M. Keynes -- enriches people's lives in countless ways. Medical devices and drugs produced in some places should be supplied for humane reasons to those who need them worldwide. Foodstuffs may need to be traded in time of famine, and exchanges of minor food and craft items satisfy
people's attraction to the unusual and new. As a contribution to diversity -- which is an essential part of many definitions of sustainability -- such limited trade could be a positive factor.⁹

It seems to be trade's propensity to grow, and feed itself and keep growing, that is its most dangerous characteristic -- both for human communities and for the environment.¹⁰ Trade activates and stimulates a number of "positive feedback" mechanisms which help its scale to keep increasing. For example, a corporation which avoids paying for pollution-control equipment may reap higher profits, which allow it to buy out another firm and "rationalize production", putting some people out of work, which forces them to move away and saps consumer expenditures, which undermines the stability of the community and reduces local political pressure for pollution control. The firm can then threaten to lay off still more workers if the community does not make land-use, tax or other concessions. Its profits rise further; it buys other plants in nearby towns. To benefit from economies of scale, it reorganizes its plants to specialize, each producing one component part so that none of the plants makes anything that is useful without information held by the firm's central management. Production decisions which are vital to the health of all the communities where plants are located are made in a far-away headquarters office... The expansion of such processes on a global scale is possible and economically feasible only because of trade.¹¹

In nature, cycles depend on "negative feedbacks", not positive ones. There are many natural processes which contain the seeds of their own limitation. For example, the growth of individual plants and animals is limited, once they have reached adulthood, through species-specific hormonal and chemical processes which are none too well understood, but which have presumably evolved to help the species survive within the constraints of its ecosystem. These processes work like a thermostat, which is designed to turn the heat on when the temperature drops below a certain level. If the temperature rises too far, the thermostat turns the heat off again. A "negative feedback" corrects any departure of a system from normalcy.¹² What sorts of "negative feedbacks" might we envision which would help to keep trade in check?

Some recent writings on trade and environment stress the importance of protectionism, or controls on trade imposed at the level of national governments, to accomplish the goal of limiting its scale. Herman Daly and John Cobb, for example, write that a sort of targeted protectionism is needed to foster economic self-sufficiency within the United States (and presumably other countries as well).¹³ Stronger international environmental agreements in conjunction with revised trade agreements are also cited as a way of reorienting trade for sustainability.¹⁴ Others advocate limits on international
financial transfers, to reduce the facility with which global corporate
transactions are made.\textsuperscript{15} This regulatory approach to limiting trade, motivated
by ecological concerns, is one way in which human society may be able, as
Elmar Altvater says, to "build into the functioning of the economic system a
series of imperatives which prevent ecological damage."\textsuperscript{16}

What I would like to outline below is another approach which -- while not at
all contradictory to national and international regulation of the global market
-- instead places its primary emphasis at the local, community level. Most of
its theoretical advocates and applied practitioners, insofar as I can tell, are
women. I do not believe this is coincidental.

Many of the things women all over the world are already thinking, writing,
and doing in the face of globalization reflect the essence of Janine Brodie's
statement that a feminist analysis "must begin with the premise that (global)
restructuring represents a struggle over the appropriate boundaries of the
public and the private, the constitution of gendered subjects within these
spheres and ultimately, the objects of feminist political struggle."\textsuperscript{17} Since
communities are, in a sense, intermediate between the "public" and the
"private", they represent a terrain in which many women are comfortable
acting politically. At the same time, it is exactly the fact that communities
are somewhat removed from national or international "public" life that can
make them strong (and potentially subversive) bulwarks against centralized
control, refuges of diversity, and incubators for creative human interaction.

III. Self-limiting Trade: Theory

What are some of the analytical foundations of a community-centred
approach to "negative feedbacks" for trade? For one thing, they require
theoretical tools which are far more adept than those of traditional
economics.

Neoclassical economics, based on analysis of self-interested individuals'
behaviour, ignores other entire realms of human action and motivations.\textsuperscript{18}
While the theoretical economic justifications for trade's supposed
contributions to economic efficiency are increasingly recognized as faulty,\textsuperscript{19}
traditional economic analysis is still used at all levels of policy decision-
making to justify government action (and inaction), from international trade
agreements to child care programs.\textsuperscript{20} Its failure to measure many economic
contributions made by women, its emphasis on individual over collective
wants/needs, and the translation of this emphasis into policy, harm
communities -- and women -- in both the South and the North.\textsuperscript{21}
As Mary Mellor notes, “For the majority of the world's peoples, particularly women, land rights are vital to environmental justice. The enormity of this struggle cannot be overestimated, and the choice between individual and collective principles of ownership is crucial. Women's access to land is generally based on their common rights as members of the community. If individual ownership is established, this usually rests with the male head of the household, and women's independent right to land is lost. Individual ownership also carries the risk of indebtedness and land grabbing by wealthier landowners. Collective models of land ownership are essential if women's rights are to be retained and expropriation by indigenous or external landlords prevented.”

New economic models, based on collective processes and the centrality of people's homes and communities to their ways of life, are beginning to appear. Hilkka Pietila, for instance, envisions economic transactions as taking place in a series of three concentric circles. The central one is the "free" economy, consisting mainly of homes, family groups, and communities, in which labour and goods are exchanged for free on the basis of mutual help; surrounding this is the "protected sector", where governments protect and guide production in the domestic market; finally, surrounding the others, there is the "fettered" economy, in which international transactions are organized almost entirely by transnational corporations on terms dictated by the world market.

Much theoretical work which is central to feminism is also vitally important for community-based approaches to issues of international significance (including trade). Marcia Nozick summarizes these contributions as "...a raising of consciousness to appreciate feminine, life-affirming values, long neglected by Western culture. They are values similar to those held by aboriginal cultures and the ecology movement. They include:

1. Co-operation, empathy and nurture stemming from a relational, nonhierarchical view of the world;
2. A focus on process rather than end results: ends and means are one;
3. A belief that social change begins with personal transformation;
4. The valuing of intuition, subjectivity, creativity and spontaneity.

These feminine principles are forming the foundation for an alternative vision of society which is influencing how we work, organize and make decisions -- smaller, more personal structures and processes, co-operative work
situations, consensus decision making and reliance on community supports and the informal economy. They are values which support the building of sustainable communities."\(^{24}\)

The central theoretical insight linking community-based processes with "negative feedbacks" on trade, however, is that just as trade can work to destroy community, strong communities have the potential to limit the growth and extension of trade. The terrain of the local is extremely important, not just because it is "close to home", but also because community-based economic alternatives and resistance to centralized economic control represent a fundamental challenge to the juggernaut of globalization.

Vandana Shiva puts the issue this way: "What at present exists as the global is not the democratic distillation of all local and national concerns worldwide, but the imposition of a narrow group of interests from a handful of nations on a world scale... The roots of the ecological crisis at the institutional level lie in the alienation of the rights of local communities to actively participate in environmental decisions. The reversal of ecological decline involves strengthening local rights. Every local community equipped with rights and obligations, constitutes a new global order for environmental care."\(^{25}\)

For Barbara Brandt, stronger community-based economies not only help people to survive the vicissitudes of world market fluctuations, they hold the seed of more fundamental economic transformation. "As individuals and households become more self-reliant and empowered, they lay the groundwork for new community responses to larger social and economic problems. When plant closings, layoffs, loss of local stores, or other large-scale economic hardships afflict their communities, such empowered, creative individuals may be more able to develop new solutions to these problems. And the new community ties they have been forming through their shared activities serve as a base for building new economic structures and enterprises that more fully meet their community's needs."\(^{26}\)

Strong communities act as "negative feedback" mechanisms on trade in two main ways:

- Through community solidarity, knowledge of the local ecosystems, and a sense of common purpose, they are able to stand up to intimidation by large corporations, resisting production practices which endanger workers, social solidarity, or the local environment. This effectively limits corporate control over the geographical areas, natural resources, and labour power involved. The more distant the corporation's headquarters and
the less community-sensitive its production practices, the more intensely these will be resisted by a strong community.

As globalization increasingly strips control over production and consumption from communities, consigning many of them to stagnation when cheaper sources of resources or labour power are found elsewhere, they lose wages and disposable income. If they are able, because of strong community ties, to begin producing locally for local needs, they may be able to effectively remove themselves from the global trading system, at least in part. If its participation is not needed by the global economy on the production side, a strong community can bid permanent farewell to the consumption side as well (and still meet its inhabitants' needs), thus shrinking the size of the globalized economy.

An emphasis on strengthening community, therefore, holds the possibility not just of limiting trade through centralized administrative and regulatory means (which, besides being hierarchical, are subject to the vagaries and influences of the political process), but of planting within the global trading system a size-limitation mechanism which becomes more effective the larger the trading system grows.

IV. Self-Limiting Trade: Practice

Communities which can meet their own needs, need the global economy less. In self-sufficient communities, it is possible to live a healthy, fulfilling, productive life without consuming goods and services which come from far away. But this requires knowing one's neighbours: their skills, needs, abilities, and trustworthiness. This makes possible the sorts of exchanges which are efficient and beneficial for everyone concerned -- be they skills exchanges, community-supported agriculture, Local Enterprise Trading Systems, credit unions or informal credit groups, urban gardens, child-care and other cooperatives, environmental housing improvement programs or any other enterprises where local resources are transformed into goods and services which local people need. In many communities, women do the bulk of the networking, the conflict mediation, the organizing, and the fund-raising for such community endeavours.

Working to create community has a lot to be said for it. It's environmentally and economically sensible to reduce the transport of things from where they naturally occur or are produced to where they are used and enjoyed. This requires less fuel, involves less spoilage and breakage along the way, and
makes possible a closer match between what people want and what they get. Moreover, community work is often fun and rewarding in an inter-personal sense.

Working toward self-sufficiency involves fostering the development, preservation, and appreciation of the skills needed to live our lives with much less trade. Women responsible for child care can teach children common sense, how to improvise creatively, and how to fix things! Carpentry, rug-weaving, sewing, growing and preserving garden foods, plumbing, animal husbandry: so many important skills will likely be needed in a post-trade world. New skills will be needed as well: soil remediation, pollution assessment, techniques for materials recovery from landfills, new health care methods. In addition to being able to find joy (or at least satisfaction) in meaningful and necessary work, we will need to be able to dance and make music and have fun with folks who are within bicycling distance! To the extent that women are the guardians of these skills, and the teachers of young people, their role in skills transmission is central for the community's future self-sufficiency.

Many women are the primary household administrators and purchasing agents responsible for meeting their families' basic needs. All women are in the position, as consumers, of considering the implications of purchasing and lifestyle patterns. When economic circumstances force us to make purchases based principally on price, we can use ingenuity -- and knowledge of our community -- to find cheap local sources or substitutes for the goods and services we need.

The transition to a more sustainable future involving much less trade than at present, between much stronger and more self-sufficient local communities, offers many challenges. Women all over the world are already working to address these challenges, by building and strengthening local, community-based economies. Here are a few of their stories.

In Vancouver, WomanFutures Community Economic Development Society has established a loan guarantee fund to give women-controlled community businesses access to financial resources. They also help groups of women set up lending circles, barter systems, savings groups, and other alternative financing mechanisms. The group's brochure states: "Women do two-thirds of the world's work. Shouldn't the economy work for us and our families? Women take care of everything that 'falls through the cracks.' Wouldn't our communities be different if women were involved as full participants in decision-making? Women's community economic development is about women working together to change the future."29
Working through a woman-run nonprofit organization called the Southern Mutual Help Association in the low-income community of Four Corners, Louisiana, women have renovated and built homes and community buildings, and then taught others the skills they learned.  

The Citizen's Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes in Washington, DC, led by Love Canal activist Lois Gibbs, provides resources for local groups who are working on toxic contamination issues, and creates networks among them.  

Women workers in Mexican maquiladoras have developed new forms of organization which allow them to meet periodically in regional conferences, creating a support network for different local maquiladora organizations. At these meetings, women discuss working and living conditions and the demands they face as mothers, wives and workers. Latina women have shared information and organized across the border to stop a U.S. waste management company from constructing similar toxic waste incinerators in Tijuana, Mexico and Kettleman City, California. In February 1992, 110 women from Mexico, Canada and the U.S. met for four days in Valle del Bravo, Mexico to discuss the implications of Free Trade and economic restructuring on women. Several exchanges, conferences and other linkage projects have resulted from the networks formed. 

In Cuba, trade boycotts and a shortage of petroleum fuels have led to skyrocketing bicycle use, especially in Havana. This is changing the feel and look of the city. "With 80 per cent of oil imports gone, traditional patterns of transportation, agricultural production, and industry have had to be drastically altered. There is a growing emphasis on organic agriculture and decentralized production, and the bicycle has replaced buses and cars as the main means of transportation... The most dramatic lesson is that the introduction of the bicycle in a major way can lead to great benefits in fitness, health, and improved social interaction, in addition to the direct environmental and economic benefits. We who are increasingly fearful of life on our streets, who are retreating into 'cocoons' of safety in our homes and vehicles, could instead develop a vibrant, healthy, and positive experience of street life." 

Women in Tanzania have formed rotating credit associations, individual business ventures, agricultural, production and child care cooperatives, and other community networks in response to changing economic pressures in the 1970s and 1980s.  

The importance of Goddess-centred cultural traditions which strengthen local communities in India is described by Frederique Apffel Marglin and Purna
Chandra Mishra, who note the model these traditions may hold for the North.37

The Peasant Women's Federation of the Philippines (AMIHAN) has documented the implications of development projects for women, conducted pilot studies of organic farming methods and pest control, developed safer cook stoves, and coordinated women's protests and political participation with regard to the Philippines government's trade-oriented economic strategy.38

Japanese women concerned about food additives and environmental contamination formed a food cooperative, the Seikatsu Club, in the early 1970s. It now has about 200,000 members with considerable buying power, and members are involved in a wide range of political and environmental activities. One of its goals is to create locally-based economies. Such women's networks, "based not on capitalist principles but on principles of moral economy: mutual help, trust, care, community, respect of humans and of nature", are viable alternatives to other consumption-production-distribution systems.39

Hilkka Pietila relates the growth of the village action movement in Finland -- community organization designed to stimulate population growth and quality-of-life improvements in rural villages. Local committees have focused their efforts on building activity centres for seniors, improving schools and day-care centres, preserving local culture and celebrating artistic heritage. Central to accomplishing the necessary construction and other work, with limited financial resources, is the Finnish tradition of "talkoot" -- voluntary teamwork. Pietila stresses the importance of the village action movement in countering trends of globalization, migration, and trade-induced breakdown of the "values of human dignity and reverence of life and nature."40

The work many women in the U.S. are doing to recreate community is outlined by Margo Adair and Sharon Howell: women who meet to make quilts, sending the proceeds to a sister organization in Central America; whose ingenuity helps to sustain strikes and whose courage gives impetus to civil rights struggles; who recognize the importance of spirituality in effective political work. As Adair and Howell state, "If we are to secure the future, we must reconstruct our communities. To do so, women's ways of talking, listening, and being together must come to define all public and political life. The qualities embodied in our relationships over the kitchen table are the very qualities needed for our talk of strategies and actions... For the world to survive, everyone must act like a woman. Let us reweave our communities, reclaim the wholeness of life, and empower ourselves to heal the future."41
V. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to make the following points:

- Sustainability depends on human communities living within ecosystems;
- Trade can destroy both communities and ecosystems;
- To be sustainable, trade must be small-scale and self-limiting;
- Mechanisms to limit trade within the economy rely on "women's principles" and "women's work".

This does not, of course, mean that men's participation is not necessary as well. But it does underline the importance -- in a global as well as a local sense -- of women's work, and women's ways of working. If trade is to become sustainable, communities will have to become strong and self-reliant, and women's skills will be central to this process.

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1. A more complete discussion of different views on the relationship between trade and sustainability is found in my paper "Sustainable Trade: Approaches to Definitions and Indicators", in David V.J. Bell et. al. (eds.), Political Ecology: Global and Local Perspectives (New York/London: Routledge, forthcoming).


5. Ibid., p. 7.


Daly, Herman E. and John Cobb Jr., *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future* (Beacon Press, 1989), p. 363.


See Altvater, pp. 259-260; the proposed "Tobin tax", or a small fee levied on international financial transactions, is an example.

Altvater, p. 213.


Nozick, p. 38.


33. Ibid., p. 6.


41. Adair, Margo and Sharon Howell, "Women Weave Community," in Helen Forsey (ed.), *Circles of Strength: Community Alternatives to Alienation* (Philadelphia/Gabriola Island, BC:...