

## Grabbing of natural resources and environmental justice: breaking the circle

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### Abstract:

The consumption pattern in the north requires an intensive exploitation of natural resources in the south of the world, making some countries totally depending from the sale of their natural resources. The global north needs to stop consumption without limits of our environment and people must be aware that these limits exist, due to the finiteness of our world. Our lifestyles have a major impact on the living conditions of those living in places rich in natural resources: local communities not only cannot decide whether and how to exploit them, but they are forced to suffer the externalities without enjoying the benefits. Therefore our lifestyles and consumption patterns should be marked by sobriety in order to protect our common home, the earth, knowing that pollution knows no borders. Moreover, the environmental degradation is determined not only upstream by the deep exploitation of the natural elements, but also downstream by the production of huge quantities of waste and scrap, the disposal of which requires the use of additional resources and causes more pollution.

The exploitation of natural elements is strongly guided by the private sector with a lack of participation of the concerned local communities. Institutions and public development actors had play, so far, a little role in ensuring an effective public participation in the decision making processes and public accountability in the resource exploitation. On the contrary many southern governments still faces constraints in achieving a genuine democratic governance and keep the political and economic power concentrated in economical and ethnical elites. In this framework, in the last two decades, new forms of governance have worsened the situation. Among them the Public Private Partnerships (PPP) that are profitable business for private sector with very limited benefit for southern countries and local communities: weak government are pushed to sign contracts with unfavourable conditions for the public, risk of private sector access on natural monopolies, increase on inequalities due to tariffs, etc. Other new forms of governance coming from the climate negotiations provisions, instead of compensating southern communities for the climate debt accumulated by northern countries, are even exacerbating this situation. Mechanisms like CDM (Clean Development Mechanisms) and REDD (Reducing emissions from deforestation forest degradation) are, indeed, proving to increase the inequalities and need to be monitored.

This situation leads to an increased political and economical concentration in southern countries and to the consequent marginalization of communities located in remote areas and relying on traditional socio-cultural patterns. These communities are systematically disempowered by central governments which usually encourage large foreign investors operations giving away the full control of basic resources such as land, water, forests. Moreover, natural resources play a well established role in fuelling and sustaining conflict. The only ingredient that can make the difference and invert this situation is the scrutiny of governments by the citizens and the local communities' empowerment in reclaiming the right to control their own resources. Resources should not only considered as such, or in other words as inputs for the economic system, but should be regarded as commons goods, which require a participative an collective governance.

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**1. Introduction**

We live in a world facing all kinds of crises: economic and financial, ecological, energetic, water and food prices, and finally the crisis of representative democracy. Each is the symptom of a single illness: the actual economic system cannibalizing the very elements that have allowed it to flourish so far, first of all the people and the natural environment – the earth –hosting us and provide raw materials fuelling the system.

The current **economic and financial crisis** is pushing millions of people into poverty, and is impoverishing even more extremely vulnerable and marginalized portions of the population. A report<sup>1</sup> by the International Labour Organization (ILO) states that since April 2007 youth unemployment rates have increased in 80% of advanced economies and in over 60% of developing countries. In addition, the poverty rate has increased in half of the developed economies and in one third of developing countries, and also social tensions have sharpened in many parts of the world. The report features an indicator of social problems (Social Unrest Index ) according to which in 57 out of 106 countries the risk of social tensions has increased in 2011, as compared to 2010, with most at risk areas identified in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and Northern Africa. Finally, the report highlights another alarming information: 50 million jobs are missing compared to pre-crisis levels.

The effects of the current **ecological crisis** are sadly manifest. Climate change is rapidly accelerating, as the 2011 floods in countries such as Bangladesh and Thailand demonstrate, or furthermore the drought during the 2012 winter in the (formerly) rainy England. The level of biodiversity loss is staggering; some reports<sup>2</sup> (dating back to 1993) estimate that each year 30,000 species become extinct. This loss is in large part due to the pressure put on the environment by human activities. The 2012 Living Planet Report shows that between 1970 and 2008 there has been a loss of 30% of biodiversity at global level, with peaks of 60% in the tropics.

The global demand for **energy** is growing very rapidly<sup>3</sup>, especially in emerging economies, and this trend is expected to rise, considering that in 2008 in developing countries some 1.6 billion people had no

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ilo.org/rome/risorse-informative/per-la-stampa/comunicati-stampa/WCMS\\_179784/lang-it/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/rome/risorse-informative/per-la-stampa/comunicati-stampa/WCMS_179784/lang-it/index.htm)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.actionbioscience.org/newfrontiers/eldredge2.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.iaea.org/Publications/Magazines/Bulletin/Bull501/50104013940.pdf>

access to energy. The other side of the coin, however, reveals that in 2007 there were more than 50,000 active coal power plants, and our current dependence on fossil fuels is around 80%. This means that if this trend remains unchanged, according to OECD projections, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions will increase by 50% in forty years. The EU imports 52% of its energy, and its policy is to guarantee the security of the access through the construction of large infrastructure of priority importance.

The **food price crisis** in 2007-2008 and the one in 2010-2011 have resulted in a general increase in the price of wheat, rice and maize. The World Bank estimated that in 2010, in absolute terms, the number of people living in poverty has increased by 43.7 million people, most of them (34.1 million) in middle-income countries, and the remaining 9.5 million in low-income countries. The volatility of food prices has doubled, as compared to pre-crisis periods. Around 1.5 billion people lack **access to safe drinking water**. We make use of about 50%<sup>4</sup> of available freshwater, 70% of which is utilised in agriculture<sup>5</sup> - mostly by agro-business (which means we have to consider the consequences in terms of pollution due to the use of pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, etc.).

In addition we are facing also the consequences of **massive migration flows**. People are moving not only between states, but also from rural to urban areas. Since 2007, the majority of the world population lives in cities, resulting in increased production of waste, pollution, overbuilding.

Finally, also **representative democracy** is showing symptoms of bad health. Fewer and fewer people exercises their right / duty to vote, and people feel more and more strongly a disconnection between themselves and the political class. The major international institutions such as the United Nations fora, are losing credibility, authority and incisiveness: decisions pertaining the management of the world economy are not taken there. The latest example is the UN summit in Rio, the Rio+20 Conference in June 2012, where the states have failed to reach a shared and ambitious agreement addressing the issues of climate change and of stopping the loss of biodiversity: no plans, deadlines and objectives. The agreement is a stalemate, leaving the field open to the private sector, instead of regulating it. The crisis and the evolution of the capitalist system are also shifting geopolitical balances and centers of gravity, making them less defined than in the past. There aren't industrialized countries versus developing countries any more, the West against the rest of the world, the North versus the South. Now there are plural centers and peripheries, and to indicate these new scenarios in this paper we will refer to global North and global South<sup>6</sup>.

All this shows that the current economic system, capitalism, is facing a crisis that can no longer be defined as cyclical. We are facing a systemic crisis, in which the system itself tries to fight back consolidating and exacerbating its positions. In particular, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening rather than diminishing: wealthy classes are getting richer and richer, middle/lower classes are impoverishing rather than improving their status: more inequality and imbalance is produced.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://rampini.blogautore.repubblica.it/2012/04/26/energie-rinnovabili-una-vera-alternativa-al-petrolio-solo-se/>

<sup>5</sup> [http://thewaterproject.org/water\\_stats.asp](http://thewaterproject.org/water_stats.asp)

<sup>6</sup> It is not possible to report here the debate around which categories use, and surely this definition is not closing it. Anyway, for this paper purposes, we will speak about global North and global South, with the above mentioned meanings.

The current economic system must address two fundamental issues to ensure its own survival. The first relates to a crisis of overproduction and the second derives from the physical constraints of nature.

The **overproduction** of commodities is self-evident: we are in a world with a production capacity of 80 million cars<sup>7</sup>, though it can sell only 59 million of them<sup>8</sup>. In order to solve this problem, the economic system is undertaking a two-pronged strategy.

On one hand it is trying to open new markets, but not in the direction of enabling new sectors of the population to buy products. The effort is rather to create new 'commodities' from what was not such until then, in order to exchange them in new markets. This phenomenon is the commodification of nature and its functions. An example is the market for carbon credits: in this market what is being bought and sold are certificates that allow the holder to emit a certain amount of CO<sub>2</sub> (usually 1 ton). These certificates (credits) may be the result, among other things, of afforestation or reforestation projects, given that forests and woodlands secure (lock) the emissions of greenhouse gases. Leaving aside any consideration on the intellectual correctness and the effectiveness of the emission trading system as an instrument for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, what matters here is that the trees' ability to fix carbon dioxide is traded in a market - in other words, a function of nature is bought and sold.

The second aspect of the strategy derives from the fact that in the capitalist system is currently no longer profitable to reinvest in the production, contrary to how it has been so far. Going back to the above mentioned data, the gains from the sales of 59 million cars are not profitable if reinvested in other production facilities, as we are already in a system that over-produces 21 million cars. Therefore, how to generate new revenues? The solution found is financial, i.e. to bring the liquidity of the private sector in the financial markets and gain profits from investments and/or financial speculation. Since the financial markets have a sinusoidal trend, it then becomes necessary to create new bubbles (= new financial markets) when old ones burst.

Not only everything must become a marketable commodity, but it must also become a financial object. Financial products are created on the new "goods" that just entered the economic mechanism, leading to the opening of new financial derivatives: a web becoming increasingly dense and narrow, increasingly trapping the natural elements captured in it.

The second issue the capitalist system faces is an unchangeable objective fact: we live on a **finite planet**.

The exploitation of raw materials supplied by nature and the impacts of production and consumption cycles do not respect the regeneration cycles of the natural elements. Our ecological footprint is very high: if all the inhabitants of the earth lived with the European levels of consumption, it would take three planets Earth to provide necessary resources. The Global Footprint Network has calculated that 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2012 was Earth overshoot day<sup>9</sup>, the day when we run out of natural resources available for 2012 and we have started accessing credit. In 2011 it fell on 27<sup>th</sup> September. Another interesting fact is that mining activities have increased by 50% over the last 30 years, reaching the current level of 60 billion tons of natural resources extracted per year.

Precisely because we live in a close system with resources that have long regeneration cycles, the system itself is enabled to exist only by excluding 4/5 of the world population from certain ways of consumption. From another point of view, excluding the majority of the population from access,

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<sup>7</sup> Dati riferiti al 2011: <http://oica.net/wp-content/uploads/press-release-press-conference-20120307.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Nel 2011 sono stati venduti 58,89 milioni di unità secondo quanto riportato dal 'Global Auto Report' di agosto 2012, Scotiabank: [http://www.gbm.scotiabank.com/English/bns\\_econ/bns\\_auto.pdf](http://www.gbm.scotiabank.com/English/bns_econ/bns_auto.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/earth\\_overshoot\\_day/](http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/earth_overshoot_day/)

management and control of natural resources is functional to the preservation of the system itself. In order to maintain its current lifestyles and consumption patterns the global North must have access to natural resources and be allowed to exploit them, wherever they are physically located.

## 2. Grabbing

What do we mean by “**grabbing**”? We mean that some actors directly or indirectly deprive local communities of the opportunity to continue to base their livelihoods on the territory where they live because those actors “appropriate” the right of access, control and management of the natural elements of that territory through trade and economic agreements.

When we talk about **natural resources**, we refer to water, land, extractive resources (such as oil, metals and minerals), forests. Access to these resources, and their subsequent use / exploitation and management, depend on power relations, and they therefore turn out to be highly unequal and unbalanced. The methods of grabbing can be extremely varied, according to the context of the natural elements involved and the exploitation projects. Some examples are: agreements providing inadequate compensation compared to the loss suffered by the local population (or to compensations they will never receive); contracts signed without adequate and independent studies on environmental and social impacts of the proposed projects; no prior, free and informed consent by affected populations; lack of involvement of the affected communities in the decision-making process. While the modalities of grabbing may differ, the effects on local and/or indigenous communities remain unchanged: impoverishment, loss of sovereignty on resources, lack of democracy and participation in the decision-making processes.

According to our analysis, we have identified three categories of underlying causes of the grabbing natural resources: economic, political and socio-cultural causes.

### 2.1 Economic causes

In order to obtain increasing profits, economic actors must be able to access and exploit natural resources (subtracting them to local population) at the lowest cost. This predatory attitude was facilitated and encouraged by the ultra-liberal model that has been strengthened in recent decades. This model has brought by the reduction of rules regulating the market: we are now in a situation where the few existing rules are designed so as to further benefit multinationals and large companies.

Multinational companies often have higher budgets than entire states, and have therefore acquired a political weight proportionate to the economic one. Furthermore, because of the very way in which they are constituted, corporations (and capitals) have great freedom of movement and can quite easily escape the obligation to comply with national laws: they are divided into many branches, subsidiaries, etc. based in different states. It is therefore extremely difficult to summon them in court as it remains unclear which would be the proper jurisdiction, which is often chosen among the most unfavorable for the victims’ instances.

The deregulation that has taken place in recent years, combined with the scarce capacity of some states to cope with pressures and interferences by corporations, leave the door wide open to grab natural resources on a ‘first come first served’ basis, forgetting that the true ‘first in line’ are the people living where the resources are located. Multinationals and corporations can earn high profits because they have no barriers preventing them to exploit natural elements: resources are available for free, or nearly

so, given the very low concessions they are forced to pay. Because of these characteristic we can speak of neo-colonialism, acted no longer (or rather, not only) enacted by states but now especially by the private sector.

Simultaneously to deregulation, in recent years a number of considerations and ensuing initiatives have flourished with the aim of promoting virtuous behaviours among companies and businesses, so that they would take into account more holistically their impact on society and the environment in which they operate. Corporate social responsibility (and associated standards SA8000, ISO 26000, AA 1000), UN Global Compact, Social Balance, codes of conduct: they are theories and tools intended to act on companies at very different levels, in order to make them accountable of their impact and/or to adopt standards that will lead to good practices in relation to workers' rights, environmental protection, transparency, ethics. A common element is their voluntariness. In fact the decision on whether and how to start a reflection (and, in case, the adoption of concrete actions) is left to the individual actor, with obvious large variations among different companies, contexts and sectors of intervention addressed. In addition there are no sanctions in case these codes are not respected. For the reasons just mentioned, our reflection strongly doubts that these tools may be sufficient to ensure an effective regulation of the private sector, capable of contrasting the predatory attitude described above.

The need to access raw materials (= natural resources) at a low cost goes together with the commodification of nature, that is the process according to which more and more natural elements are turned into commodities, thus being traded in the market. The commodification involves further production of imbalances and inequalities, because whenever new goods are created, they clearly come accompanied by property rights. Therefore there will be some people who can buy and others who cannot do so, which is all the more serious since we are talking about "goods" that are actually natural elements, environment, common goods.

For example, if a forest becomes a protected area under a REDD<sup>10</sup> project and for this reason the original inhabitants are expelled, there is a twofold result. On one hand the trees' ability to fix carbon dioxide is reduced to a "financial value", managed by a long chain of intermediaries before communities can get any profit from it. On the other hand the result is the impoverishment of people being pushed away from the environment where they have lived until then, intended both as an ecosystem as well as the basis of their cultural identity. Thus a tool that should be used to formally protect the environment and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, is in reality a new commodity, exploited to make profits and a cause for the further impoverishment of some segments of the population. In other words it contributes to create new imbalances and inequalities while failing the environmental purpose.

But not only so. We are also facing the so-called financialisation of natural resources. It is not just the evolution of commodification; it also means that the value of a resource or a service (whether present or future, tangible or not) is reduced to a financial instrument or its derivative. It means that the future control of natural resources is delegated to the financial markets.

In background of such a reasoning, there is a more or less rhetorical question to which it is interesting

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<sup>10</sup> REDD is a mechanism to create an incentive for developing countries to protect, better manage and wisely use their forest resources, contributing to the global fight against climate change. REDD strategies aim to make forests more valuable standing than they would be cut down, by creating a financial value for the carbon stored in trees. Once this carbon is assessed and quantified, the final phase of REDD involves *developed* countries paying *developing* countries carbon offsets for their standing forests. REDD is a cutting-edge forestry initiative that aims at tipping the economic balance in favour of sustainable management of forests so that their formidable economic, environmental and social goods and services benefit countries, communities, biodiversity and forest users while also contributing to important reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. Source: <http://www.un-redd.org/FAQs/tabid/586/Default.aspx>

trying to answer. Assuming that a scarce commodity is a commodity that has a higher value in the market, how much economically productive is to preserve the natural elements in order to ensure that they remain abundant and available for all, now and in the future?

## **2.2 Political causes**

**Political causes** of natural resources grabbing are intertwined with economic ones and mark the presence of a democratic deficit, both globally and locally.

Global governance, as currently structured, is proving to be already on the ropes: the places where actions to promote collective interests should be identified and negotiated are paralyzed – let's think about climate change negotiations and the definition of objectives for green gases reduction after the Kyoto Protocol, a sort of 'each against all' where the only result is the endless postponement of decisions. In other fora, such as the above mentioned Rio+20 Conference, some civil society organizations have denounced the ever-increasing influence that the private sector is capable of exerting on the United Nations system. In fact, very often experts with advisory roles come from the industry, and also UN agencies and individuals are more and more dependent on the private sector. On a relatively smaller level, the same international organisations and / or national governments do not fully play the role that they should, in a human rights perspective, which should be of promoters and defenders. They even adopt inconsistent policies, i.e. the European Union with the right hand implements extremely aggressive and predatory (the paradigm is to secure the access to natural resources) trade and energy policies while with its left hand promotes international cooperation policies, focusing on sustainability and respect of human rights.

At national / local level governments or local authorities are often non-transparent and highly corrupted. the result is that economic agreements signed between corporations and (local) governments are almost always opaque and unbalanced in favour of private investors, who often pay almost symbolic royalties while enjoying the possibility of operating in the field for long periods and/or of downsizing or skipping important steps such as impact studies. Indeed, there is a lack of political will to truly involve local people in decisions concerning the management and exploitation of natural resources, to obtain a prior and informed consent and even more difficultly to redistribute to local communities revenues coming from these contracts.

Given such a scenario, civil society is often unable to play a watchdog role and to call for accountability, or if so, the risks for personal safety are particularly high: tensions and conflicts where there is the exploitation of natural resources are very high. The trend is to criminalize protests, turning opponents to certain types of exploitation projects into criminals or subversives, and violently repressing instead of taking into due consideration their stances.

## **2.3 Sociocultural causes**

Then there are deep **socio-cultural causes** that lead the citizens of the global North, that minority consuming the most, to not care about the consequences of the grabbing of natural resources. They rather encourage the predatory activity of the private sector with their behaviours and lifestyles. The model of society that goes together with the dominant economic system has broken up the connections needed for maintaining both society and the 'earth' system: first of all linkages between men and men, and between man and nature.

The prevailing individualism has weakened the ties between people who no longer feel part of a community. On the contrary, community, with its sense of belonging and solidarity, is seen as an obstacle or a remnant of an obsolete pre-modern world. In the current view, the sum of individuals creates society and the whole is not considered anything more than the sum. Each individual enjoys a

sense, a role, or in other words, contributes to the system, only because s/he consumes goods and services. And every single person is called to do their duty. If a farmer produces 100 bushels of wheat, sells them on the market and with the money earned buys food for himself and his family, then he has done his duty and contributes to economy and society. But if the same farmer grows only 5 tons of grain for outside sale and then grows food his or his family, the farmer is almost irrelevant for the system - practically he does not exist.

But perhaps the most profound fracture is that between man and nature. Men do not perceive themselves any longer as part of the ecosystem, an element just like the others that compose it. Men look at the world as something at their disposal, regardless of regeneration cycles of the earth. Nature is seen as something that has no limits, endlessly exploitable. Men are unable to internalize the true meaning of the idea that the world is finite: despite many years of talks on ecology and ecological footprints, many people have no critical thinking, and act as if their behaviour had no impact on the environment. They prefer to continue ignoring the consequences of what we are doing, and making other people pay the cost of negative externalities (pollution, exploitation of workers, etc.), while maintaining previous habits and lifestyle. We were not able to truly understand what are the consequences of our behaviour or what it means to further it.

#### **2.4 Who gains and who loses**

The private and the financial sector are the ones more obviously deriving huge profits from the grabbing of natural resources.

But they're not the only sectors winning. As previously mentioned, in some not too rare cases the arrival of capital for the exploitation of resources often promotes and enhances the phenomena of corruption and bad governance, and the mafias and / or corrupted local elites make huge profits. And those who receive indirect, but still tangible, benefits from natural resources grabbing are unmistakably citizens of the global North who adopt a lifestyle which, as we have seen, is not only environmentally unsustainable, but it is also possible only because others are pushed into poverty.

Who is constantly suffering the cost and the impact of this over-exploitation is the local population living in the territory where resources are physically located. Natural elements are misappropriated or exploited with no regard whatsoever to their regeneration cycle, and also the environment is being polluted. Negative externalities resulting from the exploitation fall onto the local (i.e. those living in the area) and / or indigenous (i.e. the original population, present since before the colonisation) population. Through natural resources grabbing, local communities are being denied the opportunity to take advantage of the very resources that have always been the basis of their livelihood systems and that they have contributed to maintain over time. The economy on which communities depend undergoes profound changes and is destabilised. For example, the same territory that was previously sufficient for the livelihoods of an entire community is now scarcely sufficient only for a portion of it, forcing the other part into poverty or to migrate to urban areas. On them is being forced an economic model that instead of promoting the well-being of people, it exacerbates their weaknesses.

Finally, two other subjects are adversely affected by this process, the first one being the environment, or nature as such, which undergoes a dramatic degradation because investors usually take advantage of low levels of environmental protection in the state that is home to natural resources; and the future generations, who may see seriously compromised their right to live in a safe and healthy environment. Under these circumstances, speaking simply about natural resources grabbing is simplistic compared to the complexity of the dynamics set in motion by this process. We think it is correct to speak rather of grabbing development. If the access and the democratic and participatory management of natural resources by local communities (the global South as well as the global North) are the necessary

conditions for their self-development, such self-development is denied by public or private actors who grab. Local communities are deprived of their rights (to food, water, health, to live in a healthy environment), their livelihoods, their land and they cannot decide for themselves and choose what kind of resources to use or how.

But grabbing exists because it is required by the current economic, financial and social system, a system promoting unsustainable lifestyles.

### 3. How to break this vicious circle? Their answer

The answer they give us is '**green economy**'. From the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June in Rio de Janeiro a conference was held to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the historic United Nations conference on environment and development that took place in 1992 in Rio itself. The document that has been discussed and approved, "*The future we want*", shows us the way forward: the green economy. But what appears to be the panacea for all ills is not a new economic paradigm, but it seems rather to be the old one striving to look different by going 'green' and using technology to supposedly optimise our consumption patterns. And what is even worse, is what the economy is likely to paint itself in another colour: the blue economy. In this regard, very clearly the vision proposed by the European Union shows that, once again, it has not been able to give up the old paradigms and the concept of growth:

[The Council]CONSIDERS an inclusive, green economy as a means to achieve sustainable development globally; UNDERLINES that greening the economy is essential to promote long term equitable growth, green and decent jobs, resource efficiency and sustainable consumption and production, human health and wellbeing and hence eradicate poverty, providing benefits for all citizens and offering win-win opportunities to all countries, regardless of the structure of their economy and their level of development; EMPHASIZES that an inclusive, green economy offers an opportunity to create a positive, inspiring new global model of growth that not only reverses negative, environmental trends but drives future development and job creation; and RECOGNISES in this context the need to consider the concept of the "blue economy", which extends the principles of the green economy inter alia to the conservation and sustainable use of marine resources;<sup>11</sup>

Are we sure that energy efficiency brings about real resource savings? Let's think about mobile phones. The very first models were remarkably big and heavy; now they weigh very little and in fact the amount of natural resources needed to manufacture them has decreased. It would seem indeed correct the argument that links a lower use of resources with energy efficiency. In reality, a variable is missing to conclude the reasoning: the rebound effect, that is the answers given by the system that counteracts the beneficial effects obtained by a technological improvement. In fact, if it is true that technology allows us to use fewer components in the production of a mobile phone, it is also true that the average life of a mobile is now gone down to 18 months, and also that recycling rates of mobile phones range from 1 to 15% depending on the country.

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<sup>11</sup> *Rio+20: Pathways to a Sustainable Future – Council Conclusions* – 3152th Environment Council Meeting, Brussels, 9 March 2012 [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/envir/128881.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/envir/128881.pdf)

Although since the '70s the scientific community has been trying to convince us about the impossibility of a linear economy, pursuing a perennial growth, this is what the green economy wants to do. Once again we face the unwillingness to see and deal with the limits of development.

#### 4. Our answer

Mani Tese believes first of all we must recover the lost ties: as we said, those between man and nature. A shift of the cultural paradigm must be promoted, and to do that we start, for example, by adapting the language. So far we used the definition 'natural resources', emphasizing that nature is available to us, providing us with inputs for the production in our economic system. But natural resources are actually **natural elements**, they are *the* nature. In other words they are part of **our common house, the Earth**, which has certain rights in itself, as such.

In fact, the planet is made up of a series of very complex relations between natural elements and the various beings inhabiting it, where men are just one component. As stated in the Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth in Cochabamba<sup>12</sup>, the land "is a unique and indivisible community, a self-regulated system of interrelated beings who claims, contains and reproduces all beings." Just as men is bearer of human rights, other natural beings are bearers of rights that must be specific to their species, and appropriate in relation to their role and function in the community in which they exist. The Declaration states that the rights of all living things are delimited by the rights of others, and all kinds of conflict must be resolved so that the health, integrity and balance of the earth can be maintained. The task of human beings is to live in harmony with the earth and their responsibility is to respect it. As can be read in the proposal that Bolivia presented at the Rio+20 Conference: "Just as human beings have rights, the Mother Earth Also has the right to exist, the right to maintain its vital cycles, the right to regeneration, the right to be free from structural alteration, and the right to relate to the other parts of the Earth system."<sup>13</sup>

Therefore the natural elements should no longer be regarded as single, fragmented resources available only for human beings, but as something that is interdependent and transcends the individual or individual group interests: they are **common goods**, and should be managed as such.

But the lost ties are also those among men. Increasingly aware of living in a globalized and interdependent world, Mani Tese aims at **supporting local communities**, both in the South and in the North, hit by the natural resources grabbing. First of all we want to give voice to those who do not have it, facilitating the dissemination of information regarding the abuses committed in the world. For this researches and documentation are needed and Mani Tese is indeed undertaking this kind of activities – but we do believe it is necessary to network with other NGOs that are doing the same kind of work. Secondly, local communities must be supported through empowering activities, which can be both the transfer of technical knowledge and the strengthening of their lobbying and advocacy capacity. The aim is to strengthen local governance, that we have analysed as often being fragile, thus offering civil society the opportunity to play a 'watchdog' role. Moreover the aim is to strengthen civil society's capacity to independently define rules regulating the access, control and management of natural elements.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://pwccc.wordpress.com/programa/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://therightsofnature.org/proposal-for-rio20-by-plurinational-state-of-bolivia/>

Finally, local communities can be encouraged through the collection, dissemination and promotion of best practices in the collective management of common goods. Aware that there is no single recipe applicable to all contexts, we do believe that common goods cannot be managed only in a public or private logic (especially where the 'public' is in fact an expression of the ruling elite's interests), or through instruments such as public-private-partnership (PPP). While in theory, the PPP should be the virtuous union of the two logics, in practice there is actually extensive evidence of how these management tools lead to higher costs for end users, but are not necessarily accompanied by an effective and efficient management and by the ability to preserve the goods managed. It is necessary instead to explore and support the bottom-up ways of common management, based on cooperation and reciprocity: an urgent need in the South, as well as in the North.

It becomes also important to find connections and communication tools capable of maintaining a balance between what is a necessary and proper decentralization, i.e. the adjacent and complementary knots (local communities that self-manage themselves), and the larger net. Models of governance, rather than of government, that may be able to weld time axes (the present with the future) and space (the different scales, nodes near and far): those are the objectives that the current system, the United Nations, cannot fulfill and therefore are in need of a deep reform.

The history of Mani Tese shows the role that an NGO can play: to be a true bridge between North and South communities, in order to analyze and promote awareness of the causes of imbalances and experiment tools and actions to reverse this state of affairs.

In fact, it is increasingly urgent to support and promote a lifestyles change in the global North, with the belief that it is necessary to adopt sober behaviours and to reduce our impact on planet earth: therefore the promotion of an effective reduction in the consumption of non-renewable resources, the reduction of waste, the change of an agricultural and distribution model favouring agribusiness rather than ecological agriculture on a small scale. If one of the categories of the underlying causes of grabbing is socio-cultural, then we must start from a profound change in the paradigm that sets the consumer at the center of society, and we must no longer believe in the myth of infinite growth (understood as infinite consumption), shifting rather to quite the opposite perspective: the degrowth.

But we believe that solutions cannot only be proposed from the bottom (changes in the lifestyle, pressure from local communities). It is also necessary a parallel structural change in the system, from the top. In this regard Mani Tese is implementing a series of advocacy activities, and is putting pressure on policy makers, on one side, and on the private sector on the other side, in order to fill the lack of regulation and controls described above. We believe that states and supranational bodies should adopt binding rules forcing the private sector to take responsibility for what is their impact on the territories, and to adopt tools that allow access to justice in the EU and beyond, for those who have suffered violations committed by companies.