109. Global Localisation: The Future of Food Production?

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With guest co-host, futurist, Ross Hill.

Future Sense is a podcast edited from the radio show of the same name, broadcast on BayFM in Byron Bay, Australia, at www.bayfm.org. Hosted by Nyck Jeanes and well-known international futurist, Steve McDonald, Future Sense provides a fresh, deep analysis of global trends and emerging technologies. How can we identify the layers of growth personally, socially and globally? What are the signs missed; the truths being denied? Political science, history, politics, psychology, ancient civilisations, alien contact, the new psychedelic revolution, cryptocurrency and other disruptive and distributed technologies, and much more.

This is Future Sense.

Nyck: On Future Sense, I am with myself, I think, Nyck Jeanes—yes, I am here—and Ross Hill, my special guest co-host this morning on this show, and maybe for the next few weeks too.

It's a great pleasure to welcome Helena Norberg-Hodge to the studio again, a well-known figure in this region. G'day! How are you doing, Helena?

Helena Norberg-Hodge: Good day, happy to be here.

Nyck: For those who don't know her, Helena, among many other things, has pioneered local movements globally through her organisation, *Local Futures*, written *Ancient Futures,* a book since translated into some 40 languages—that's pretty remarkable in itself—and created the documentary, *The Economics of Happiness*, about your time in Ladakh.

Interestingly, off-air, Ross mentioned that he'd been himself in Bhutan and that was an interesting story, talking about renewability, resilience, localisation, markets, trade—and we're going to touch into some of these topics here—mentioning the recycling of plastic in Bhutan, and your little tale about that which you had a great comment about. So what was that, Ross?

Ross : I was in Bhutan a couple of years ago and I met a recycling entrepreneur and he was starting this social venture to collect a lot of the rubbish, especially the plastics which had been taking over the area. He had a good business that was running; he was collecting a lot of plastic and the usual bottles and things, and he would compact them and then send them across the border to India where they had a bigger processing plant. As an entrepreneur, he

was looking at how can he grow his venture and scale what he's doing. So he was talking to the people with the larger plants and they said, 'well, the big plants process a lot of plastic, so you're going to need to collect three times as much plastic to justify getting the processing equipment for your own country,' and he said, 'well, we would have to use more plastic and waste more for that to be possible, and so that seems like going backwards.' Tthat's one of the interesting paradoxes and complications here. He couldn't do it locally in his own country because they weren't producing enough waste, and of course, the goal is they shouldn't be producing more waste.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: Well, I would say very definitely. This is also part of what's happened, is that we've been trained to think too much from the point of view of the needs of big business. The whole world is framing all its activity around how big business is framing the environmental issues, including recycling plastic, rather than talking more about producing much, much less plastic, which in turn is linked to strengthening more local economies where you don't need nearly as much plastic. But that's a real threat to big business.

Nyck: Now, we have you here today because of what I mentioned a couple of times—the *Local Futures Convention* that you're producing yourself: *Local Futures and the Economics of Happiness and New Economy Network Australia* (NENA), at the Byron Community Centre, Friday, the 20th to the 22nd—and on that topic you just mentioned, there are three themes of the festival. The first one is understanding the dominant economic system and global market and its impact on democracy and local economies. Just expand a little bit on that. I mean, that's a good example, just used there, regarding plastic.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: Well, basically, I've ended up studying for the last 40 years or so, the impact of trade treaties that we just don't talk enough about that have given global monopolies more and more power over our governments. Our governments have been signing in black and white, 'we will not do anything that might reduce your profit-making potential. If we do something that would reduce your profits, you can take us to court', and these courts are kangaroo courts. This is something I think almost no sane person would embrace and still pretend that we have a democracy. We have to remember that these giants are also the giant media conglomerates. They are funding entire universities, so it's penetrating into all, I think, and we're seeing the world through the eyes of giant monopolies. That's why we're not dealing with climate change the way we should be.

Nyck: I mean, still a lot of people, while they're probably very suspicious of that structure that you're talking about, I imagine there's quite a lot of people who still don't actually believe how the tentacles of this global organisation actually reach into basically everything in our world. I guess this is part of what you want to bring more attention to.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: Exactly. Unfortunately, we need to bring attention to how those tentacles of the—it's like this invisible hand, but it's got tentacles in every arena. The most frightening thing is in how we frame the issues. For instance, the plastic, but also climate change, is being framed entirely in terms of blaming the individual, and we hear nothing about these arrangements between global monopolies and government to give them more freedom to take almost all production away from countries where labour is well paid into poor countries in the name of bringing up their standards. But no, they're creating huge monstrosities of slave-like manufacturing. So it's really important that we look at that big picture, and I think it's very important we do it without demonising or blaming anyone in particular—no particular business, no particular anybody. It's really the systemic direction: Do we want to keep going towards bigger, faster, more global, with ever-more waste, ever-more resources, or do we want to start transitioning towards more diversified, more self-reliant regional national economies? So when we talk about local, we're talking about moving towards strengthening the local, particularly around food, but generally even at the regional and national level, diversifying instead of monoculture.

Nyck: Going back to trade, you mentioned off air a term I hadn't heard before, and that's "insane trade". Can just expand a little bit? You've already touched on that, but just what that terminology means?

Helena Norberg-Hodge: Yes, well, what it means for us is, we have a little campaign and we have a little film on our website, which is a www.localfutures.org, and what we're trying to raise awareness about there is that countries are now routinely importing and exporting the same product. When it comes to food, which is something every person on this planet needs every single day—about three times a day, so we're talking about 24 billion times a day around the world—as people eat, we now have economic policies supported by our governments that separate us further and further from the source of that food. Now, if tomorrow around the world people were eating food from their region, no multinational would make money, but literally millions or billions of people would be making more money and benefiting. So it's that type of decentralisation we need to understand. But, first of all, it starts by understanding that literally the US exports a billion tonnes of beef, turns around and imports a billion tonnes of beef in a year; the UK export tonnes and tonnes of butter and milk in roughly the same quantity as they import. Biscuits, potatoes, water … Australia exports 20 tonnes of bottled water to England, the UK exports 20 tonnes of bottled water to Australia. This is going on with wheat ...

Nyck: It's a madness, isn't it? It *is* insane.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: It's totally insane, especially at a time when we're talking about climate change and we're witnessing the effects of climate change; and, even if nothing else, we know that we need to reduce fossil fuels. We know that, for a million reasons, not just climate change—the toxic effect across the board.

Nyck: It occurs to me just the fact that we still burn things in order to get somewhere is somehow ancient, really, when we think about it now. Have you got any comments on some of this, Ross?

Ross : Well, yes, I think it's fascinating because there's so much trade happening across the world and we're not really sure what's in all of those containers. You see them on the ship sometimes, and you're like 'what's going on in there?' And obviously, when you add up the numbers, it doesn't make sense a lot of the time, so I'm really curious to ask, in terms of the categories of products, it sounds like exporting water and importing water is a bit silly, whereas my iPhone was produced in China and assembled from parts across the world. Do these different categories make a difference? For technology, for example, does it make sense to centralise some of it? Whereas food, my breakfast came from up the road. I think that makes sense too.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: Yes. I think absolutely it makes sense. You see, this is also with technology. There is an efficiency of scale. With food, fishery, forestry, there is basically no efficiency of scale. In fact, the efficiency is 'the smaller the better'—the smaller, the more diversified, the better—and the really important fact is, anywhere in the world, if you take a piece of land one square metre or one square kilometre and you plant it with diversity, including some trees and bushes and ideally even animals in the cycle, and vegetables, etc, you will always be able to produce more than you can on a monoculture, so a monoculture could never compete.

The efficiency of industrial monocultures, which we've been told again and again is needed to feed the world, is that it removed people from the land using fossil fuels, machinery, chemicals, chemical fertiliser, so it's highly inefficient in an age of climate change and overpopulation. And I just want to add that we need to understand the difference between someone working on a small or highly diversified farm, and the difference of someone standing as a migrant worker or a slave in colonial times on some huge cotton plantation or soya plantation or acting like a machine. Then, at that time, when you have those enormous slave-like monocultures, then machinery seems like progress.

Ross : Yes, it was progress at the time.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: But not today.

Nyck: Yes, very good point. It brings up the question many people do ask about the relocalisation of food in particular, and the diversity of farming. I think it's fascinating that that sort of diversity on a small scale can actually produce more per hectare, more per area.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: Much more.

Nyck: But how many people are actually going to go back to the land to do that? I think it's a question that many people ask. Are we just going to be forced to do it?

Helena Norberg-Hodge: Well, I tell you, right here in the Shire, we have, again and again, more and more students from the permaculture courses, even from the Byron College here, and from other institutes, wanting work. They can't get it.

There is a new microtrend. I'm a master of observing small microtrends around the world. I call them *Ancient Futures Trends* because they're taking us back towards the earth, towards more reconnections, and more community.

Nyck: Indigenous cultures—some of the knowledge, the wisdom of those cultures.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: Yes, and the wisdom of being more deeply connected. There is a microtrend, and it's even true in China. One of our speakers at our conference is going to be this professor of agriculture who already, in about 2000, started a rural reconstruction movement in China. He could see the disaster of everyone leaving their villages and smaller towns to move into Beijing and the giant cities, and is trying to create really thriving economies in rural areas.

Nyck: How's it going? Is it working?

Helena Norberg-Hodge: It is working, but it's a small microtrend and he can't publicise it too much. He does have some support from the central government, but it's divided. They're doing both, you know, but there is support for it, so he has achieved quite a lot and it's very exciting. Unfortunately, he can't come now because of the virus.

Nyck: But you'll have them on the screen, because I know you've got Dr David Suzuki who will be dialling in, and also Charles Eisenstein, who's sat in the studio a couple of times when he was in Australia a few years ago. I really like Charles.

Fascinating stuff. We'll take a bit of a break here on *Future Sense* with Nyck Jeanes, and this week with Ross Hill. Our special guest this morning is Helena Norberg-Hodge, and we're talking about *Local Futures*. You can go to www.localfutures.org as Helena already mentioned, for the details about the conference and we will talk a little bit more about that when we come back.

Nyck: Thanks for your texts. I might mention this one; thanks to Mia who's written in: "I'm not sure I could be bothered growing all of my own vegies. I find herbs and citrus challenging enough, but would these micro-farms be like neighbourhood gardens? I would happily contribute dollars for someone in my street to do the labour."

Helena Norberg-Hodge: What we're talking about in the *Global Local Food* movement, which is growing around the world and is growing much faster than we think—and is for me, why I feel so much more hopeful than most people, because I see around the world a will from the majority of people to do things differently: to treat nature better, to want more community and connection. There's so much evidence. We just have blind leadership, particularly at national government level and big giant businesses that are just not close enough to the ground. So we're not talking about everyone growing their own veg. We're talking about re-establishing a balance between farming and the city, and in every aspect of our lives. We're going—and we don't see it—but the urbanisation is a direct consequence of allowing global monopolies to have so much power. It's linked to mass urbanisation where jobs are concentrated in fewer and fewer big cities, and in those big cities, the house prices shoot up to astronomical proportions, people can't survive, and then you have a few places like Byron and other desirable smaller places where they've become so popular for tourist reasons and very wealthy people want to retire, and they also have very high house prices. But if you go around most countries, you'll find that if you go away from those few centres, the house prices are a fraction of what they are in these few desirable places. So it's all to do with the economic driving towards globalisation. Localisation, as we're advocating it, is a decentralisation, and no, everyone does not need to grow their own food, but we do need to support the smaller farmers. This is why I helped to start the Farmer's Markets here in Byron, and at least that's supporting a few small growers. And yes, great, also, if people can grow in their gardens, and a really good idea, what you just suggested, is that people get together, even in the towns and cities, as they're doing, to help fund community gardens and that kind of thing for those people who want to do it. Right here in the Shire, we have a lot of young people would love to do this, but there is no money in it. Why is that? That's what localisation is about.

Nyck: Well, that's right, and as we already talked about: "insane trade", to use your terminology there. Maybe expand a bit on that, because, of course, that big trade, the scale trade around the world is subsidised, it's under-regulated, it's untaxed or little tax, and these things—these elements of government support—certainly do not apply to these rising local ventures.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: No, and I just want to say, in some ways, that's one of the most inspiring things for me, is to see around the world that everyone is operating under this system where virtually everything at the local, regional or even national level is squeezed with heavy regulations, and more and more bureaucracy and regulation, and heavy taxes—really squeezed. At the global level, the global players pay virtually no tax, and they have, not only no regulation, they are the ones who are now setting the regulation. They're telling

governments what to do, and amongst other things, they tell them to regulate at the national level. So we have this completely unfair playing field, which also means that they enjoy the freedom of flying things like macadamias from Byron to be cracked open in China, flown back again; apples flown from the UK to South Africa to be washed, flown back again; scallions flown from Tasmania to China to be peeled and flown back again; fish from Norway to be deboned ... every single day this insanity's going on.

I discovered it first in the 70s when I was living in and working in Ladakh and Bhutan, and I saw butter coming in from the other side of the Himalayas selling for half the price of local butter. As I started on a journey to understand this, that's when I saw this insane trade that favours the global traders at the expense of virtually everybody else.

When I went back to Sweden, my native country, at that time they were sending potatoes to Italy by road in big lorries, to be washed and put in plastic bags and sent back again by road. Now this is happening by air and across the world. Because the logic is, the giants that are freed up to do as they like and not pay taxes, their infrastructure is subsidised—the biggest ports, the biggest airports, it's all for them; the super highways, for them—and they then artificially come into your local economy and deliver the supermarket food at an artificially low price and destroy the local competitors. That's what we have to change. We've got to wake up and we have to start building the local.

Nyck: Have you got a comment on the madness of all this, Ross?

Ross : It's definitely insanity. One of the ironies of travel is that sometimes we will travel really, really far to learn some of these seemingly obvious things. I had a similar experience in Bhutan. I was shown the local market and then I was shown the imported market, and it's really interesting once you get to the edges of different societies. That's one of things I enjoyed going to Uluru in January as well, was once you go to a smaller town or group, things do change. So there was less fresh fruit at Alice Springs, right? It's far from where we keep all the fruit, and it's the desert, so you have different fruits that you would grow there. Similar in Bhutan. There's 700,000 people, so regardless of what they want to do, it's a small type of place and they're going to act differently.

But in complex systems, we will often see a wobble happen before a major change, and it will often wobble in completely the opposite direction before it reverses. I think that's been what's so interesting, especially in the last few months as we've had fires and illnesses and these different things which are large-scale events across Australia. You can't really avoid them, they've been very in your face, and when the shelf at the supermarket is empty, you do start to ask, 'where does this stuff come from?' and 'can we get some more?' It is interesting to learn where the essential items that we use every day come from.

Nyck: It's important also that in Australia—because, I guess, of retail space costs in Australia—that there's a very short storage of all that sort of stuff that goes into our supermarkets. I can't remember the actual amount of time, but it's not very long; as it is with

fuel supplies—we have six weeks of ordinary fuel supplies. Your Tesla might be okay, but it's not very long.

Ross : Exactly. It depends on the category, right? For some things, you can leave them on the shelf for a year and they're fine; for some things, especially food, you do want it to be fresh, so let's get the freshest food we can.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: But there, we just need to add another issue which was there for a long time now: big business, knowing that they make their megabucks through this 'insane trade' and monopolising, they have invested billions upon billions of dollars into how to make food transportable and have a long shelf life. That includes trans fats, it includes all kinds of things.

Nyck: All kinds of additives to the food.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: They are a disaster for our health, you know? Not only that, it is laden with high fructose corn syrup, which is also toxic to our system. There are really so many reasons why we want to support the local food movement that is growing and that is so inspiring. For me, there is almost nothing that gives more joy than seeing this new farmer's movement—these young people just going out and doing it—and they're doing it despite the lack of support and they love it, so just a little bit of help in that direction would make a huge difference.

Part of what we'll be talking about at the conference is how we can in this local area create a much more thriving local economy and have many more small independent businesses. They don't need to be co-ops; there's nothing wrong with private and there's nothing wrong with profit as long as it's at a scale that we can comprehend and we have the social and ecological parameters shaping business rather than business shaping the culture around the world.

What's happening is that what's being imposed is a global consumer monoculture. Monoculture is the essence of that global system and that means it's anti-life, it's anti-biodiversity.

Nyck: And of course, it impacts things like water, which is another issue, and, of course, the amount of stuff that's stuffed into the soil to supposedly produce better: pesticides and so forth; all of that.

We've got another comment—I'm not sure if this is the right spelling, it's always hard to tell with texts that come in—from one of our regular listeners, George. He says: "Wicking Gardens", I don't know, wicking, I'm not sure; George, if you're listening, which you are, you'll have to maybe text in if it's a misspelling, "are very low maintenance and could be a very easy way for anyone to grow food easily on nature strips and front yards. Great conversation,

Nyck Ross and Helena. Much love from George." So we'll see if he comes back with that. I thought maybe you knew what a wicking garden was.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: No, I'm not sure.

Nyck: Maybe we'll have to look it up. We don't have much time left now for today's conversation, but of course, you'll be back, and some of your other guests will be back on some other shows in the next week or so before the conference actually happens from the 20th to the 22nd in the Byron Community Centre, but I wanted to mention a recent interview of yours in the magazine *Paradiso* where this quote is from, just to take it to a bigger picture right now. You say: "The closer and more real we get, we see the whole movement is connected to an inevitable, spontaneous human reaction to loneliness and alienation; loneliness from other people and loneliness from plants, from nature. We need a turning towards nature, towards connection." This is really the value system change underneath this, isn't it?

Helena Norberg-Hodge: Absolutely. It is the essence of it. It's a value system, but also, really, it comes down to survival. I feel we've got such a win-win-win strategy which operates at all these levels of what would reduce our impact on nature—whether it's the plastic or the energy or the mineral use—and at the same time, we can literally become more productive. I mean, that's a miracle formula. We've been fed with basically a lie, which is that we need bigger and more: more technology, more genetic engineering to feed the world. It's absolutely not true. We need to allow these young people who actually want to farm now—and I can show you so many products that are emerging around this area that are happening on just, you know, thin air. I don't know how they're managing, but it's not nearly enough yet. It still probably only constitutes about 4% of the food consumed in this shire, so there's a lot more work that needs to be done.

I'm very excited about initiatives that set up local funds where local people come together to try to help move the whole economy in this direction; and when we talk about returning to nature and returning to community, we can see everywhere we look that this is something people long for. We can even see it in Hollywood films, like even *Avatar*, raising the status of the Indigenous. It's in the air. People want that reconnection, and I would argue that the biggest problem is a lack of awareness about how the economy operates. These invisible tentacles are pulling us intellectually and physically in the wrong direction, but people really want this; they're ready for it, and it goes totally across left and right boundaries, which is also so wonderful and so empowering.

Nyck: Absolutely true.

Ross : As someone who has just recently relocated to this region, where do I find this 4% that you mentioned? Where should I be shopping?

Helena Norberg-Hodge: At the Farmers Market. The Farmers Markets are definitely the best. We need more of those markets and we also need to understand how precious they are. They're very hard to manage, particularly because there's a lot of well-funded big business thinking. They say, 'oh, this is elitist, it costs more than the supermarket, it is only about privilege.' No, it's a miracle that we're able to do it because the other stuff is subsidised, and this is happening just out of the goodwill of people who want to try to do things differently.

Nyck: Now, "A wicking bed", and it is the right spelling, "is a vegie bed that waters itself from below. It's based on years of experience installing these beds in Melbourne." I won't go to the details of it, but you can go to www.wickingbeds.com.au for details. Thanks to George for that. That's pretty interesting. There's also things like syncretic farming, which is an interesting area, too—I don't know if you're familiar with that—as well as permaculture, obviously, which is well known in this area having emerged from here, in fact, years ago with Bill Mollison.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: Yes, and David Holmgren in the Melbourne area, who is a fabulous friend and colleague. He's not travelling very much, but maybe he could phone in as well. He's a really great person.

Nyck: Ok, we're going to have to leave it there Helena, but we'll have you back talking about this on various shows before the *Local Futures Convention* coming up from the 20th to the 22nd, and folks, you probably need to get your tickets for that soon.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: You do need to get them very, very soon if you want to get a seat in the auditorium—I think we only have very few left—but we're doing tickets at a much lower price where the conference is streamed into the upstairs room on a big screen.

Nyck: OK. That's good.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: And those tickets are extremely cheap. We so want people who are interested to come, so if someone can't even afford that, they should write to us at www.localfutures.org because we want any and everybody to come if they're interested.

Nyck: Fantastic. Thanks Helena for joining us here on *Future Sense*. We'll be back after a few messages.

We're going to go into space shortly for the last bit of the show. Thank you.

Helena Norberg-Hodge: Thank you.

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