

## Future-Ready Society Conference Series 2023: Panel Discussion on “The Future is Local?”

By Suhaila Zainal Shah

### The Future-Ready Society Conference Series

The [Future-Ready Society Conference Series](#) is a partnership between the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities and Tote Board. As part of this series, panel discussions serve to introduce novel ideas to spark dialogue across the people, private and public sectors. These discussions are a prelude to the annual flagship Future-Ready Society conference, which aims to explore future trends, emerging issues, and untapped opportunities along with insightful responses and solutions to address pressing societal challenges.

The series kicked off with a panel discussion titled "The Future is Local?", moderated by Dr Justin Lee, Senior Research Fellow and Head of Policy Lab at IPS. Two distinguished international speakers discussed economic localisation and commons-based peer-to-peer production as a means of mitigating the problems caused by the global economic system. A local policymaker and academic weighed in on the significance of these ideas for Singapore.

### Localisation as a Solution-Multiplier Leading to Systemic Change

Ms Helena Norberg-Hodge, founder of [Local Futures](#) and [International Alliance for Localisation](#), began the session with an assessment of the flaws of the global economic system.

Her argument centred on the unsustainability and adverse effects resulting from the current trade practices within the global economic system that is governed by the principle of comparative advantage. Noteworthy instances, such as the outsourcing of seafood processing and packaging from Alaska to China, followed by re-importation to American supermarkets, vividly illustrate the resource wastage of the system. She noted that wasteful global trade has exacerbated climate change and wealth inequality, while also imposing damaging monocultures on the environment, and adversely affecting the livelihoods of millions of small-scale producers worldwide.

To address these challenges, she advocated for a paradigm shift towards localised economies that fundamentally shortens the distance between production and consumption. Such economies would prioritise local food sourcing, circulation of money within the local economy, creation of substantial employment opportunities through local businesses, establishment of decentralised energy systems, and return to a human-scale economy that diminishes dependence on unaccountable distant corporations.

Future-Ready Society Conference Series 2023: Panel Discussion on The Future is Local?, Suhaila Zainal Shah, June 2023

Moreover, while systemic change is essential at the national level — involving policy reforms in taxation, subsidies, and regulations. Ms Norberg-Hodge also highlighted the significance of grassroots initiatives and bottom-up efforts in promoting localisation. The growing global local food movement serves as a powerful example of how producers and consumers can be reconnected so that food is produced sustainably while serving the community.

Overall, she argued that localisation offers an array of societal benefits, including reconnecting individuals with their communities, ecosystems, and the natural world and fostering interdependence, empowerment, and social cohesion. It also mitigates the negative impacts of global trade and emissions while promoting sustainability. She explained localisation as a "solution-multiplier" for the pressing challenges faced by the world today because each locality may emerge ideas others can use.

### **Shifting from Commodity-Based to Contribution-Based Economic System**

Mr Michel Bauwens, founder of the [Foundation for Peer-to-Peer \(P2P\) Alternatives](#), shared similar views on the need for system change but from a differing perspective.

Specifically, he advocated for a shift from a commodity-based value regime to a contribution-based one, where value is created through collaborative contribution to common pool resources. He emphasised that market activities should then be built upon these contributions, and the nature of the market — whether generative or extractive — determines its societal impact.

At the core of his perspective is the recognition of digital networks as transformative agents, capable of facilitating collaboration that transcends geographical limitations and fundamentally altering the dynamic between the global and local spheres. The advent of open technological infrastructures has enabled individuals to communicate, self-organise and collectively generate non-rivalrous resources without the need for permissions.

This shift has given rise to an innovative production model known as commons-based peer production, which thrives on P2P relationships in the creation and maintenance of shared resources that are freely accessible and reusable by all. Notable examples of this model include Free/Libre/Open-Source Software and Wikipedia, where vibrant communities collaboratively produce and sustain invaluable resources for the collective benefit of humanity.

Mr Bauwens noted the potential P2P knowledge sharing and collaboration to sustain our lifestyles and reduce inequality. This model also fosters a culture of localised production, empowering individuals and communities to collaboratively generate and distribute value in a decentralised manner, thereby revitalising local economies and invigorating societal progress.

The role of the state in facilitating commons-based initiatives and promoting the well-being of society and individuals was also discussed. He cited the Bologna's Regulation for the Care and Regeneration of Urban Commons in Italy as a prime example, wherein citizen coalitions were empowered to propose neighbourhood improvements, while simultaneously fostering collaboration between the city and its citizens through contractual agreements to provide essential assistance.

Ultimately, Mr Bauwens viewed history as a “competition between coordination systems and their elites” and that open ecosystems of collaboration represent a significant shift that can correct the failures of the market and the state.

### **Driving Change through Collaboration: Shifts in the Singapore Government’s Approach**

Ms Dawn Yip, Coordinating Director of SG Partnerships Office at the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, offered insights into the Singaporean context.

She acknowledged that the vision of reimagining global society presented by Ms Norberg-Hodge posed a direct challenge to the Singaporean model, which heavily relies on globalisation. While shifting away from this model may be challenging, she expressed enthusiasm for the vision and its potential to address pressing challenges, such as the loss of connection, mental wellness, and the formation of silos within society.

One positive development highlighted by Ms Yip was the Singapore government's shift towards collaborative governance, as exemplified by the "Singapore Together" initiative. This initiative aims to move beyond mere consultation and towards co-creation and co-delivery of policies and programmes. An illustrative example of this approach is the involvement of citizens and stakeholders in public policy discussions through citizen panels, with the government's role being more facilitative rather than directive.

Balancing top-down and bottom-up approaches is another critical aspect discussed. While the Singaporean government has traditionally been efficient and proactive in centralised actions, efforts are now being made to support and stimulate ground-up initiatives. This includes providing funding and resources for grassroots groups engaged in activities such as recycling, food rescue, and community libraries.

Lastly, Ms Yip emphasised the importance of system leadership, whereby leaders should possess a comprehensive understanding of the complexities within the overall ecosystem. She expressed hope that nurturing such leadership would help overcome the pressing challenges and crises of our time.

## Academic Perspectives and Key Works on Localisation

Dr Ijlal Naqvi, Associate Professor of Sociology and Associate Dean of Curriculum and Teaching at Singapore Management University School of Social Sciences, provided academic insights on the topic.

He elaborated on the importance of adopting a human-centred approach to foster flourishing and referred to the concept of “real utopias” by Eric Olin Wright and Archon Fung. This concept delves into governance models that incorporate perspectives from the ground level. To illustrate this point, he discussed notable examples such as participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and the developmental state model in East Asia, both of which emphasise the inclusion of ordinary people’s voices through feedback loops as crucial elements of effective governance.

The significance of community was also discussed, with Dr Naqvi citing studies that underscore the role of human relationships in individuals’ well-being. He went on to elaborate on the concept of “living at a human scale”, stressing the importance of deeply understanding and addressing people’s concerns to ensure effective service delivery.

He also drew attention to the growing interest in alternative economic models, such as “doughnut economics” and the work of economists including Stephanie Kelton, Mariana Mazzucato, Carlota Perez and Kate Raworth, who advocate for a more active role of the state in achieving social good and balancing economic and social sustainability.

As a final point, he underlined the imperative need to redefine success beyond the sole pursuit of profit, firmly emphasising the pivotal role of accounting in propelling alternative metrics for assessing and evaluating corporations.

## Highlights from the Question-and-Answer Segment

*Question: What is some advice on encouraging ground-up initiatives and fostering peer-to-peer relationships instead of relying solely on planned strategies?*

Mr Bauwens suggested a shift in thinking towards a trinity approach involving the market, government, and the Commons in stimulating social creativity and value creation. He highlighted the case of Shenzhen in China, where a culture of open-source collaboration and sharing of intellectual property among entrepreneurs has fuelled rapid growth and innovation. In contrast, he observed a decline in innovation in countries that heavily rely on intellectual property rights protection, suggesting that an open-source model could be a powerful development policy.

Ms Norberg-Hodge added that community bonds and collaborative spirit can have a profound influence on the development of innovative ecosystems. Building on the example of Shenzhen shared by Mr Bauwens, she pointed out that communities in places such as China exhibit stronger cohesion and community-driven approaches compared to those in the Anglo-world, which has shaped their approach to innovation and knowledge sharing.

Such insights emphasised the need for fostering stronger community connections and nurturing collaborative relationships to create a conducive environment for the development of innovative and vibrant ecosystems.

Dr [Suhaila Zainal Shah](#) is a Research Fellow at Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities.

\*\*\*\*\*

*If you have comments or feedback, please email [futureready@sutd.edu.sg](mailto:futureready@sutd.edu.sg). Additionally, to stay updated on the latest development of our project, we invite you to visit our website at <https://futurereadysociety.sg/> and sign up for our mailing list.*



© Copyright 2023 Institute of Policy Studies and Singapore University of Technology and Design. All Rights Reserved.

*You are welcome to reproduce this material for non-commercial purposes and please ensure you cite the source when doing so.*