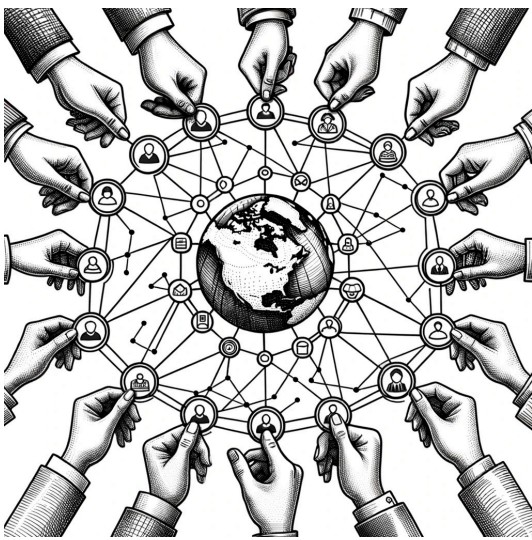


Decentralization: A Central Concept for Improving People's Lives

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'Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe'. *Abraham Lincoln*. I clearly remember the day I read this quote. I was completing my training in Permaculture Design at the Institute for Permaculture Research in Australia, 9 years ago... This quote still resonates each time I think about ways to change or improve processes. We need more planning... but we also need sound conceptual frameworks to guide our plans and designs.



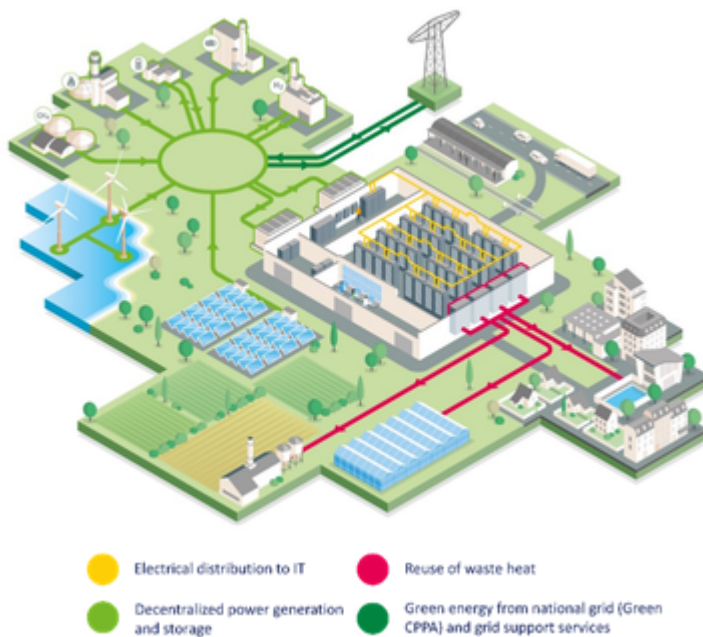
As individuals and societies, we face numerous issues threatening our lifestyles, and those of future generations. The most daring are Climate Change (CC), biodiversity loss, and the rise of autocratic governments.

Often complex, these issues usually have important feedback loops exacerbating their effects. For instance, CC leads to biodiversity loss, leading to more CC because ecosystem services decrease; biodiversity loss leads to resource loss, generating socio-economic hardship, leading to more resource loss, etc.

At a different level, human needs (energy, food, money, habitat, transport, education and governance) and the systems that provide them are characterized by a high degree of concentration, generating most of these issues.

For example, centralized energy production often induces pollution (GHGs, particles), electricity waste (cable size for transport), or environmental risks (nuclear fission). Centralized food production generates pollution, erosion, fertility, transport, processing and waste issues. Money and most of the financial power is in the hands of an extremely small fraction of humanity and inequity has been growing for the past 50 yrs. Habitat in megapoles is a concentration of waste, pollution, and stress. Transportation then is synonymous with congestion, pollution, waste of time, complicated infrastructures, etc. Centralized habitat may reduce transportation needs, but this is outweighed by distance to food production and partly solved by the internet and communications. Education is increasingly reserved for an elite, and more generally in terms of governance, one can argue that 'democracy' is a wrong terminology to characterize our western governments (concentration of political power in the hands of oligarchs, sense of false democracy, plummeting election participation rates, autocracy, and growing totalitarianism).

Decentralizing might thus be one of the key concepts to create innovative solutions to these issues. Particularly, decentralized systems based on circular bioeconomy may offer ways to improve people's lives.



While decentralization has been explored in economic, technological, political and social perspectives, it has rarely been conceptualized as a framework to tackle issues affecting human needs in general. For instance, decentralizing energy production with a system of microgrids of renewables (and particularly solar systems, the cheapest energy at the moment) may save at least 10 % of electrical waste (smaller cables needed). Similarly, localized food systems, including urban farms and community-supported agriculture, can address food security by reducing reliance on

long supply chains and enhancing access to fresh produce. Decentralization in agriculture supports local farmers, encourages sustainable practices, and fosters community resilience against global market fluctuations.

Decentralized financial systems, exemplified by cryptocurrencies and blockchain technology, is a reality. They offer alternatives to traditional banking systems, enhance financial inclusion, reduce transaction costs, and provide greater transparency. Individuals in underserved areas can also gain access to banking and investment opportunities.

Decentralized urban planning allows communities to design and manage their own living environments, leading to more effective and context-specific housing solutions. Local governance can address unique housing needs, promote sustainable development (local recycling, compost, biogas), and improve living conditions by involving residents in the decision-making process.



Regarding transport issues, the internet and telecommunications are key... The good news: it has already happened!

Decentralization in education promotes innovation, enhances cultural relevance, and allows for the adaptation of curricula to local contexts, ultimately improving educational outcomes.

Through web campuses or physically decentralized campuses (e.g. Beahrs ELP like minded programs at Innovation Hubs – UC Berkeley could inspire a global movement).

Finally, decentralized governance empowers communities to manage their own affairs, leading to more responsive and effective administration. By involving local stakeholders in decision-making, decentralized governance can enhance accountability, reduce corruption, and ensure that policies are tailored to the needs of the community, a move towards real democracy!

In summary, decentralizing from the current 'status quo' is urgent, but most sectors of the economy and human livelihoods are trapped in systemic lockdowns. However, to what point should systems be decentralized, and when do adverse effects of decentralizing outweigh the gains? In other words, what needs to be kept centralized, as we certainly need some degree of centralization, and to what point? And how should decentralization occur, relating to top-down or bottom-up strategies? In some areas, such as food systems and energy, grassroot movements are impulsing the change. Many questions remain, and they constitute as many exploratory areas of the concept, with very practical innovative applications.