

Development Dialogue

The ETC Century

Erosion, Technological Transformation and Corporate Concentration in the 21st Century

By Pat Roy Mooney

This issue of *Development Dialogue* consists entirely of a long essay by Pat Roy Mooney discussing three of the most decisive and fateful issues that societies around the world will be confronted with in the 21st century: Erosion (environmental and cultural), Technology (as future technologies transform society) and Concentration (of corporate power and class dominance) – in short: ETC.

Erosion includes not only genetic erosion and the erosion of species, soils, and the atmosphere – but also the erosion of knowledge and the global erosion of equitable relations. We are losing both our biological resources and our eco-specific knowledge of those resources. Ecological destruction increases the commercial importance of dwindling genetic ‘raw materials’. Paradoxically, this is occurring just when new technologies have the greatest need for (and capacity to utilise) the endangered biomaterials. A broad socio-cultural perspective on these challenges is needed, to come to grips with the problems. A United Nations Human Rights/Erosion Inventory is proposed as one way of tackling the situation.

Technology means, in this volume, the Pandora’s Box of new technologies such as biotechnology, nanotechnology, informatics and neurosciences. While some of these technologies lean heavily on biological materials, they also lend themselves to a widening array of old and new monopoly mechanisms. Nanotechnology, in particular, vitiates the relevance of biomaterials on the assumption that the world’s needs can be met through an infinite supply of manufactured molecules. In the race to control the new technologies and eventually distribute them, economic power once again seems to take the lead, while social perspectives, particularly in relation to the world’s poor people, are left by the wayside. In the light of these concerns, a proposal for an International Convention for the Evaluation of New Technologies is presented.

Concentration describes the re-organisation of economic power into the hands of high-tech global oligopolies. The interplay between vanishing bioresources, new life-controlling technologies and the emergence of privatised technocracies may drive tomorrow's social and political changes. The speed and the ruthlessness that characterise these developments give little space for broader human and social considerations, or, more surprisingly, for sound longer-term economic development. A Special Session of the UN General Assembly on Genomic Technologies – Conservation, Control and Use – is proposed.

RAFI, the Rural Advancement Foundation International, of which the author is the Executive Director, has formulated the RAFI law of technology introduction. It reflects in a nutshell the content of this essay: 'Erosion is created by Technology introduced in the context of corporate/class power Concentration. For every "Luddite" trying to establish social controls over the introduction of untested technologies, there is a more powerful "Eli-ite" using social controls to impose new technologies. Any major new technology introduced into a society which is not, by its nature, a 'just' society will exacerbate the gap between rich and poor.'

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The author of the *ETC Century*, Pat Roy Mooney, is well known to the readers of *Development Dialogue*. He has authored, or co-authored, three earlier issues of *Development Dialogue*, namely *The Law of the Seed: Another Development and Plant Genetic Resources* (1983), *The Laws of Life: Another Development and the New Biotechnologies* (1988) and *The Parts of Life: Agricultural Biodiversity, Indigenous Knowledge, and the Role of the Third System* (1996). All three volumes have been very well received by readers all over the world in both South and North. Pat Roy Mooney has worked, for more than 30 years, with civil society organisations (CSOs) on international development and trade issues related to agriculture and biodiversity. In this essay he widens the spectrum and deals with crucial issues beyond the areas he has dealt with formerly. Pat Roy Mooney is the Executive Director of RAFI (Rural Advancement Foundation International).

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