

# Positive ALTERNATIVES

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Interview

## Why is Local Self Reliance Important?

A Conversation with David Morris

*On February 20, 1998 Michael Closson interviewed David Morris of the Institute for Local Self Reliance, a leading proponent of self-reliant communities. (Mr. Morris can be reached at 612-379-3815 or you can visit the ILSR web site at <http://www.ilsr.org>)*

**Q:** When and why did you start the Institute for Local Self Reliance?

**A:** May 1st, 1974. We launched ILSR to take the concept of self-reliance, which at the time was largely pastoral, anti-technology and focused on self-sufficiency, and redefine it as a strategy appropriate to an industrial, urbanized, high technology age. We wanted to emphasize the community rather than the individual and autonomy rather than autarchy. And we wanted to emphasize the need for governance in the interests of building self-reliant communities, that is, the exercise of citizenship to create rules that channel human ingenuity, investment capital and entrepreneurial energy in directions that build strong geographic communities.

Local self-reliance is both a means and an end. It is a strategy and a goal. Its goal is to create communities that accept responsibility for themselves and build a significant internal capacity that will allow them to meet those responsibilities. Its strategy is to inject the issue of scale into public policy debates and to develop models of a self-reliant future from the ground up.

In the last 25 years we have made the case that humanly scaled systems are efficient, profitable, dynamic and sustainable. And we have addressed the fundamental conflict between our obsession with mobility and our need for community.

We talk about the need to devolve power not only in the political sector but in the economic sector as well. Our ultimate goal is to design rules that shorten the distance between those who make the decisions and those

who feel the impact of those decisions.

We talk about the ARC of community: authority, responsibility and capacity. Communities need the authority to build the capacity to meet their responsibilities.

**Q:** Give an example of the distinction between authority and responsibility.

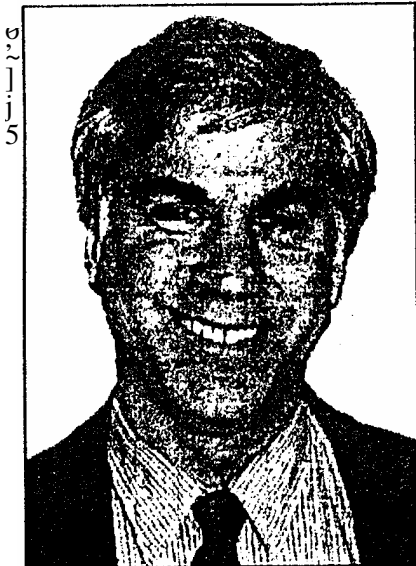
**A:** Let me do that by talking about a very prosaic issue: garbage. Garbage is a local responsibility, but the courts and Congress have been unwilling to allow localities to exercise much authority in this area.

Consider, for example, what happened in Michigan about ten years ago. The state legislature required its counties to accept responsibility for their own wastes. Each county had to estimate the amount of garbage it would generate in the next 20 years and identify a regional landfill with the capacity to handle that amount of garbage. In return for forcing counties to accept responsibility for their own wastes, the state also endowed them with authority over other people's wastes. They had the right to say no to other counties' and other states' garbage.

The US Supreme Court overturned the Michigan law, arguing that it interfered with interstate commerce. And Congress, which has the constitutional power to give

Michigan the right to legislate in this area, refused to do so.

What does this mean? By not allowing county residents to have authority, the Court and Congress have made it unlikely that they will exercise responsibility. Let's say a county in Michigan decides to preserve the life of its local landfill by maximizing recycling and reuse, and that it reduces by 90 percent the amount of wastes going to its landfill. Regrettably, because of the Court and Congress, the county's residents will not get the benefit of a longer-lived landfill. Instead, their dump will be filled up by other communities' garbage.



David Morris, Vice President of the Institute for Local Self Reliance.

Q: Let's make the capacity connection.

A: When I say capacity I mean what Thomas Jefferson meant when he used the word "property." Jefferson believed that you couldn't have a democracy unless you had the widest distribution of property. Now to us, stocks and bonds and

maybe a house. But to Jefferson, property meant the capacity to generate real wealth - a farm, the skills to farm and the equipment to farm.

That's what I mean by productive capacity. A rooftop solar electric power plant, a business owned by its workers, a universally high educational level - these are all forms of decentralized, democratic productive capacity.

Q: What are the prospects for moving in this direction?

A: Two planetary mega-trends are intersecting at this historical moment. One is the globalization of economies; the other is the localization of politics. People think that a high standard of living demands a planetary economy but they also believe that a high quality of life demands a sense of place and an opportunity to participate in the decisions that affect one's security and one's future.

Fifty-one of the largest 100 economic entities in the world now are corporations and not nations. But even as our businesses become larger, our nations are becoming smaller. We have twice the number of nations we had 50 years ago and within these nations there is an increasing demand for power by cities, states and regions.

These are two powerful, parallel and in some respects conflicting trends. But when you pick up the newspaper, you read reports only on one of them: globalization. The localization trend, if it is reported at all, is in another section of the newspaper under "human interest" stories. On the front page we read about the creation of a new

global bank with \$500 billion in assets. On the inside of the paper we read about a neighborhood trying to fight traffic or pollution. No wonder people think that globalization is an unstoppable and inevitable dynamic and localism is a trivial, marginal affair.

From the media coverage, one would think that local self-reliance is some antiquated, romantic, pastoral notion that if adopted would take us back three or four hundred years. That's nonsense, and ILSR is part of a worldwide movement that is arguing the other side of the case. The anger at mindless and invasive globalization is surfacing around the world. As people campaign to save the rainforests, or prevent giant dams or factory hog fanns, or to promote renewable fuels or recycling or a living wage, they come to understand the relationship of their local work. to global rules. The old slogan was "Think globally, act locally." In some respects the slogan

of the next century will be, "Think locally, act globally."/I

We need to create new rules that reinforce rather than undermine a sense of community.

At ILSR we accept the inevitability of a growing planetary exchange of certain goods and services, but at the same time we also insist that community and self-government should be the most important goals. We think you can have a global village and a globe of villages, planetary networks and local autonomy.

Q: How about the growing interest in sustainable development and sustainable communities? Can this reinforce the movement toward local self reliance?

A: Yes. It is interesting how the use of the term "sustainable" has evolved. In the late 1980s the Brundtland Commission coined the term "sustainable development." That Commission argued that economic development and environmental protection are not incompatible. That was an important breakthrough, but it ignored the issue of scale and authority. The sustainable development movement was headed up by heads of states and CEOs of major corporations. They believed in large scale systems; indeed, many believe the only agency capable of solving global environmental problems is the planetary corporation. Their job became to convince heads of political and corporate states to take environmental degradation into account and in this they are achieving modest progress.

In June 1992, at the Rio conference on global climate change, the phrase "sustainable communities" began to be heard more frequently than "sustainable development." This inevitably brought into the discussion of sustainability the issues of scale and community. The sustainable communities movement has expanded rapidly. Today, we hear about sustainable Seattle, sustainable Chattanooga and sustainable this city and sustainable that town.

Parallel to the sustainable communities movement is another movement that focuses on economic development and attracting mobile capital. This movement overlaps with the sustainable communities movement because both believe that for communities to become attractive to mobile businesses and professionals they must have clean air, few traffic jams, a good quality of life, accessible natural areas, etc. And both movements believe that communities should nurture business development from within rather than engage in the old-fashioned "smokestack chasing" economic development strategies of the 1970s and 1980s.

Both of these movements constitute a major step forward in promoting a self-conscious, coherent strategy for long term economic development at the local level.

**Q: But, what are they missing?**

**A:** The issue of ownership and the issue of authority. Neither school of thought has as a priority developing rules that allow communities significant control over the flow of commerce. Neither has as a priority establishing rooted forms of business or decentralized productive capacity. Even among those who are environmentally driven, there is no clear preference for an energy system fueled by the sunlight that falls on the community as opposed to, say hydrogen, which is brought from distant electrolysis stations via pipelines by a company called Exxon-Hydrogen. There seems to be a preference for clean fueled, electric vehicles but no preference for the organizational structure that manufactures that vehicle nor the scale of the manufacturing plant. In other words, these movements, and I confess to oversimplifying here, although localist in orientation, are not promoting local self-reliance.

**Q: How do we make a substantial shift in the direction of local self reliance?**

**A:** First, we must convince ourselves that humanly

scaled technologies, organizational forms and economics are practical, efficient, competitive and sustainable. The empirical evidence is strong, but much of it is not easily accessible. Second, we must reconvince ourselves of the benefits of citizenship. This second task may be the most difficult, for in America circa 1998 we have largely convinced ourselves that every time we exercise collective authority we muck things up. A growing number of us believe we should act only as individual consumers and investors. If you want to make a difference, vote with your money. Governance doesn't work.

But governance does work. Indeed, one can argue that we are where we are precisely because we created rules over the last century that channeled ingenuity and capital and energies in a certain direction. We make the rules and the rules make us.

Which brings me to ILSR's "New Rules Project." Politicians of every ideological stripe assure us that their ultimate objective is to build strong communities, but the rules they promote undermine that possibility. What would the rules be if we designed them as if community truly mattered? That is the question we are addressing.

**Q: Give an example of this.**

**A:** Let me give you several in the shape of three Constitutional changes that would forever change the scale of politics and economics in America. Three four-word amendments that could change the shape of our future. "Corporations are not people." "Money is not speech." "Waste is not commerce." The first would give communities the right to impose a different standard on planetary corporations than they do on individual citizens. The second would allow us to reinvigorate democracy. The third would move toward a zero emission, zero polluting society. One could argue, as I would, that if the Supreme Court had interpreted the Constitution as they should have, and if they had adhered to the will of the people, these amendments would not be necessary. But it didn't, and they are.

Simple propositions like these can make people aware of the importance of rules that are compatible with our values. We are quite familiar with the phrase, "the personal is political." Maybe we should also regain a sense of the obvious, "the political influences the personal." Humanly scaled, sustainable communities will not happen on their own. We need to give them, and ourselves, a helping hand.

The Institute for Local Self-Reliance (ILSR) is a nonprofit research and educational organization that provides technical assistance and information on environmentally sound economic development strategies.

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