

In his essay “The Problem of the Modern World” indigenous elder and academic [John Mohawk](#) says:



When land became a commodity and lost its status as provider and sustainer of life, Western civilization began its history of subjugation and exploitation of the earth and earth-based cultures. For nearly five centuries people have been coerced from their landholdings. The problem, in the English-speaking world, has its roots in the sixteenth century.

Mohawk is talking about the [Enclosures](#), the violent direct suppression of the indigenous people of Europe. Between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, masses of peasants were evicted from their holdings and their commons fenced off. The [Enclosures](#) gave land the status of a commodity, tradable within an expanding market system. Since the majority of people were denied access to the land and were forced to become wage labourers, human labor also became a tradable commodity. Land enclosure and commodification spread worldwide during colonialism and has continued up until this day as witnessed by massive land grabs in Africa and elsewhere.

As the Western form of “development” proceeds land values increase faster than the return to wage labor, a process called the [Law of Rent](#). As time goes on working people steadily pay ever more for house rents and mortgages. Thus we note that inequality of all kinds – economic, social, gender, race – persists within and among both “developed” and “developing” nations. Inequality is rooted in the “land problem.”

A [sweeping review](#) of the past five thousand years of living conditions in China, the Middle East and the Indus River Valley region of the Indian subcontinent yields a simple and basic perspective from which to view our current concerns for the several dimensions of inequality versus equality. When the commons – the gifts of nature – are fairly shared among all inhabitants there are periods of harmony, social stability and cultural advancement. When a few usurp the land and natural resources to the exclusion of the many, the inevitable results are social conflict, inequality, political repression, and eventual breakdown and collapse, often with concomitant soil depletion and other environmental destruction.

*What has destroyed every previous civilization has been the tendency to the unequal distribution of wealth and power.* [Henry George](#)

Because the appropriation and enclosure of land most often requires brute physical force, the male gender predominates over the female in the [power relationships](#) of Enclosure. When addressing issues of equality and inequality in their various forms, we had best keep in mind that ultimately every human being is dependent on the earth’s resources for survival. For us to regain balance and thus inhabit our planet with full sustainability, we must affirm the [fundamental and equal right](#) – indeed the birth right - of each person to Mother Earth. Fairly sharing the earth is part and parcel of responsibly caring for our planet’s domains of surface land, sub-surface resources, oceans and atmosphere. Our responsibilities FOR the planet’s well-being are inextricably bound together with our rights TO the earth and the earth’s right to biological and ecological integrity necessary to maintain life support systems.

How can we protect and restore the earth when the vast majority of human beings no longer have access to commons resources and instead must work their lives away in often boring and demeaning “jobs”? The neo-liberal economic system is incapable of creating [living wage](#) formal sector “jobs” for everyone. In the United States and other “developed” countries of the European Union and elsewhere, the middle class is rapidly shrinking. Most workers’ purchasing power is decreasing. A small group of elites reap the surplus of [economic rent](#). Corporate ruled globalization increasingly threatens governance by and for the people. Highly unfair and inequitable so-called “free trade” negotiations are bargaining away the rights of people and planet. Those working for social justice had best focus now on economic fundamentals, starting with the human right to the commons, to [Mother Earth](#).

If “[right livelihood](#)” forms of work are not to be found in the job markets, then men and women must assert their right to direct access to land from which to grow food and building materials for homes. As house rents and mortgages have become unaffordable, securing rights to directly access land as a human right will enable the ultimate in “sustainable production and consumption.” The labor of human beings should no longer be consigned to the service of landlords demanding exorbitant rents or to the demands of bank mortgages requiring decades of work that adds two, three or more times the cost of housing than the original price.

The equal right TO EXIST means the all should secure the capacity to self-employ with simple divisions of labor as in times past. It is appalling to hear many people in South Africa say that they were better off under apartheid than they are now under the shackles of neo-liberal economics. It is wrong that so many young people cannot find employment and thus cannot envision and build a viable future. It is a crime against humanity that [85 billionaires now have as much wealth as more than half the people on earth](#).

In a recent UNCTAD position paper titled [Wake Up Before It Is Too Late – Make Agriculture Truly Sustainable Now for Food Security in a Changing Climate](#) more than 60 international experts contributed their views to a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and the most suitable strategic approaches for dealing holistically with the inter-related problems of hunger and poverty, rural livelihoods, social and gender inequity, poor health and nutrition, and climate change and environmental sustainability. This *Trade and Environment Review* paper calls for a *rapid and significant shift from conventional, monoculture-based and high external-input-dependent industrial production towards mosaics of sustainable, regenerative production systems that also considerably improve the productivity of small-scale farmers*. The report contends that:

the required transformation is much more profound than simply tweaking the existing industrial agricultural system. Rather, what is called for is a better understanding of the multi-functionality of agriculture, its pivotal importance for pro-poor rural development and the significant role it can play in dealing with resource scarcities and in mitigating and adapting to climate change.

UNCTAD thus calls for nothing less than a “back to the future” or [permaculture](#) type of agriculture that can best sustain both people and planet. It is a little known fact that it was the small farmers in ancient Greece that created the basic structures of democracy for which the philosophers have been given credit.

A “[commons rent](#)” form of public finance can further both land reform for direct land access as well as provide a sufficient and [fair source of funding](#) for rural and urban needs for transport, sanitation, education, healthcare and other infrastructure and public services. Recent research by land economists has revealed that commons rent amounts to 20 – 30% of GDP. UNCHS (Habitat)’s founding documents ([Vancouver Action Plan](#)) contain much clarity concerning the importance of [land value taxation and other methods of claiming the commons rent](#) for the benefit of all while removing taxes on wage labor and productive capacities.

While there are a number of indicators for measuring the impact of “[equality bodies](#)” – agencies mandated to improve economic and social human rights - indices developed to replace GDP that include both human and environmental well-being might best serve the purpose of monitoring and charting the effectiveness of sustainable development goals. These include [The Happy Planet Index](#), [Genuine Progress Indicator](#) (GPI) and criteria for [Gross National Happiness](#).

*The equal right of all men and women to the use of land is as clear as their equal right to breathe the air. It is a right proclaimed by the fact of their existence. For we cannot suppose that some men and women have a right to be in this world and others do not. - [Henry George](#)*