

Allan Feldt and Raymond De Young
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PRINCIPLES and TECHNIQUES OF DECENTRALISM

An attempt to distill the arguments of major writers into a minimum number of common principles and to identify a number of techniques especially appropriate to the creation and operation of a decentralized society.

TEN PRINCIPLES

1. **MINIMIZE DEPENDENCY** - Establish and maintain an integration rather than a division of labor. The existence of trade means the system is unable to provide its own needs. It is not a sign of success or progress but of system inadequacy and dependency.

(Borsodi, Goodman, Gandhi, Huxley, Kropotkin)

2. **MAXIMIZE SELF-RELIANCE (Self-Sufficiency)** - Provide as many needs as can reasonably be met at the lowest possible level. Increase the self-reliance of individuals with respect to the family, families with respect to the local community, local communities with respect to the state, etc. Beware the tendency to create strong communities at the expense of its families and individual members. Increases in strength and self-reliance should be at the expense of higher system levels, not its subsystems.

(Aquinas, Jefferson, Kropotkin, Nyere)

3. **MAINTAIN COMMUNICATION AMONG SYSTEMS** - Some degree of continued contact and exchange with other system is necessary in order to prevent provincialism and to provide a basis for mutual support when needed. Therefore, while seeking to maximize self-sufficiency at each system level, establish some form of interaction with other nearby systems through seemingly non-functional activities such as joint ceremonies, intermarriage, ritualized exchanges, festivals, dances, house raisings, swap meets, song fests etc.

(Firth, Llano del Rio, The Farm, Twin Oaks)

4. **USE ONLY RENEWABLE RESOURCES** - Renewable natural resources should be used at or below the rate at which they are renewed. When nonrenewable resources must be used they should be accounted for as a debt to following generations who must be compensated by the creation of new capital goods of comparable value such as buildings, bridges, planting trees, digging canals, etc.

(Huxley, Malley, O'Brien, Schumacher)

5. UTILIZE APPROPRIATE SCALES - Critical thresholds exist below which self-sufficiency may be inappropriate or too costly. Consider the inherent levels of production associated with cows, kitchens, steel mills, brain surgery, etc. Higher levels of organization cannot be entirely avoided and some trade with them is necessary for some special goods and services. Distrust simplistic assertions about "economies of scale," however, and note that many large organizations are actually assemblages of smaller units. (Gandhi, Sale, Schumacher)

6. MAINTAIN CONTACT BETWEEN PRODUCERS AND CONSUMERS - Try to provide fabrication within two system levels of where goods are consumed and provide repairs within one system level. Consumers should be able to visit with producers and discuss questions such as the design, quality, and beauty of their products. (Aquinas, the Goodmans, Morris)

7. DISTRUST ECONOMIC RATIONALITY - Assumptions about human behavior and the ultimate equivalence of price, cost, and value are seldom true, especially in medicine, education, transportation, energy, land, agriculture, housing, housework, and recreation. Economic reasoning often provides a misinterpretation of the value and exchange of commodities and services. More generally, distrust planning based on any narrowly and precisely defined set of decision criteria.

(Aquinas, Bender, Borsodi, Gandhi, Nearing, Kropotkin, Schumacher)

8. COOPERATE WITH NATURAL SYSTEMS - Understand and work with natural ecosystems rather than opposing or seeking to overcome them. Respect all life including animal and vegetable. Harvest natural products only by necessity, at rates equal to their rates of replenishment, and with a sense of appreciation and humility. (Gandhi, Nearings, Rodale, Seymour)

9. TREAT LAND AS A RESOURCE - Land is not a commodity and should not be bought and sold by individuals. It should be leased or loaned by the community to those who will use it appropriately.

(Henry George, Chief Joseph, Robert Swann)

10. BASE FREEDOM UPON NON-DEPENDENCE - Increasing self-reliance increases autonomy and freedom. Higher levels of organization may guarantee or deny freedoms but true freedom derives from non-dependence. Decentralized systems may be weaker than centralized systems, but they cannot be conquered without imprisoning or killing every member.

(Gandhi, Jefferson, Tolstoy)

USEFUL DECENTRALIST TECHNIQUES

1. **LIVE SIMPLY** - High levels of material consumption lead to high dependence on other systems and uses time and energy that might be better spent on non-material benefits. Establish a reasonable minimum standard of living and avoid production or consumption beyond that necessary to maintain such a standard. Use excess time, materials, and resources to explore non-material ways of improving quality of life. (Bester, Elgin & Mitchell, Christ, Gandhi, the Nearings, St. Francis, Thoreau, Tolstoy)

2. **PROVIDE YOUR OWN SERVICES** - Each person should be responsible for cleaning up after themselves and taking care of their own property. Wash your own dishes, mend your own clothes, brush your own teeth! When personal services are provided by others they are usually performed by the least skilled and least powerful members of society. (Gandhi, Goodman, Tolstoy)

3. **LIMIT TAXES** - Government facilitates interaction among its subunits by providing roads, bridges, security, coinage, legal systems, etc. Therefore, its size and financial support should be proportional to the level of trade occurring among its subunits. If every level of government were supported only by taxes levied on trade among its subunits, its income and size would be limited by the amount of trade while the taxes levied would tend to minimize trade. Avoid taxes used for other purposes. (Malley, O'Brien, Tolstoy)

4. **BLEND WORK AND LEISURE** - With trade and consumption minimized, only about 4 hours of work a day are needed to provide for necessities and if the work is closely linked to personal needs and doesn't include services for others, it is less likely to become large scale or tedious. It begins to resemble recreation more than "work." Conversely, many leisure activities may be highly productive. (Arreteau, Bergmann, Frenches, Goodmans, Kincade, Zablonky)

5. **MAKE DECISIONS BY CONSENSUS** - Making sure that no substantial disagreement exists when making key decisions ensures that minority opinions are carefully considered. It takes more time but makes carrying out the decision substantially easier and more effective. Consensus is probably not appropriate for trivial decisions or for those requiring expert knowledge. Formal guidelines exist for basing meetings on consensus in contrast to parliamentary procedures.

6. **LIMIT INCOME RANGE** - While some differentiation in compensation may be necessary to encourage performance of some tasks, it is unlikely that the ratio of the highest to the lowest levels of income needs to exceed 10:1. Several communal business organizations have successfully adapted a maximum ratio of 3:1. (Huxley)

Additional Techniques:

Population:

- Birth Control
- Good nutrition practices
- Holistic and naturalistic medicine
- Self-responsible health care
- Home births & midwives, paramedics
- Physical Training such as Tai Chi Chuan, etc.

Organization:

- Barter Networks
- Information Networks
- Bioregionalism
- Consensus Decision Making
- Shared Time Jobs
- Mutual Aid Associations
- Farmer's Markets and Direct Sales
- Group Process & Criticism, Feedback
- Coops in Food, Housing, Banking, Health, Travel, Land
- Community Land Trusts, Municipal Land Corporations
- Non-violent Resistance & Civil Disobedience

Values:

- Voluntary Simplicity
- Buddhism
- Ceremonies/Symbolism - solstices, serapes, saris

Environment:

- Permaculture
- Vegetarianism
- Composting Toilets
- Private & Community Gardens
- Organic Gardening & Farming, Mulch Gardening

Technology:

- Solar Heating

Underground Housing
Owner Built Housing
Wind Power
Methane & Alcohol Fuels
Wood Heating
Personal Computers
Chain Saws
Homesteading
Low Head Hydro
Hydraulic Rams
Cable Plows
Low-till Agriculture
Automobiles & Trucks
Photo-voltaic cells
Craftsmanship Skills, e.g. Carpentry, Electrical, Plumbing
Alternative, Intermediate & Appropriate Technologies