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RADICAL ECOLOGICAL ECONOMICS AND COMMUNITY-BASED PATHWAYS TO SOCIOECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract. Radical Ecological Economics (REE) provides a more suitable framework for engaging and collaborating with communities in the Global South. Unlike conventional Ecological Economics, it expands both conceptual and methodological perspectives by incorporating social realities that are often overlooked despite their continued existence and resistance worldwide. The approach emphasizes three key dimensions. First, it broadens the concept of the social beyond a purely human-centered perspective, recognizing complex systems of organization, cultural and biological reproduction, identity formation, and struggles for autonomy led by revolutionary communitarian actors in response to historical forms of oppression. Second, it acknowledges the existence of socio-economic systems where resources and goods are not primarily allocated through market mechanisms. In these contexts, production is embedded within social relations, surpluses are generated and distributed in both material and non-material forms for the benefit of human and non-human communities, and socioecological processes are guided by longstanding worldviews that respect ecological limits. Third, REE is grounded in distinct ontological, epistemological, methodological, and political principles that embrace diverse realities and ways of knowing. As a result, it offers a comprehensive framework for understanding

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alternative social and ecological systems developed by long-standing communities that seek to create sustainable futures beyond the capitalist model while addressing the multiple crises affecting their societies.

Introduction. While alternative approaches such as ecosocialism provide important critiques of environmental degradation and capitalism, they often place less emphasis on the structural organization of dominant production systems. Drawing heavily on the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and critical political economy scholars, these perspectives primarily examine the evolution of capitalist markets and their impacts on social relations, highlighting how competitive economic structures can weaken collective well-being. Their analyses seek to uncover the contradictions embedded within capitalist production and explore possibilities for developing alternative socio-economic systems.

In contrast, Radical Ecological Economics (REE) emerges from extensive collaboration with communities that are actively creating alternative ways of living according to their cultural traditions, worldviews, and local realities. Developed through more than three decades of engagement with Latin American communities and participation in the "Territories of Life" initiative, REE focuses on identifying the root causes of contemporary socioecological crises while supporting community-based efforts to construct viable alternatives beyond dominant political and economic structures. Given the increasing severity of global environmental and social challenges, the exploration of fundamentally different pathways toward sustainability has become increasingly important.

The development of REE has been enriched through international collaboration and constructive dialogue within the broader ecological economics community. Over time, the framework has expanded to incorporate a wide range of environmental, social, and economic innovations aimed at facilitating transformative social change. Rather than remaining confined within conventional theoretical models, REE emphasizes practical experiences and community-based practices that demonstrate the potential to address multiple dimensions of socio-environmental crises simultaneously. It also critically engages

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with recent attempts within ecological economics to integrate social considerations into existing paradigms.

A central principle of REE is the understanding that human societies are inseparable from nature. This perspective, widely shared among many Indigenous communities, recognizes that human well-being depends on maintaining harmonious relationships with ecological systems. Such a view challenges the notion that nature should be treated merely as a collection of resources available for appropriation through markets, institutional mechanisms, or other forms of control. Instead, it emphasizes the interdependent and mutually beneficial relationships that sustain both human and non-human life.

Another distinguishing feature of REE is its recognition of collective organization as a fundamental element of social life. Many communities that inspired this approach rely on collective governance systems designed to protect territorial autonomy, strengthen resilience, and promote shared well-being. In numerous cases, these forms of communal organization take on transformative and even revolutionary characteristics by ensuring social inclusion, encouraging participation in collective responsibilities, and prioritizing the welfare of all members. Through these practices, communities establish foundations for social arrangements that move beyond the logic of capitalist development and create alternative pathways toward more equitable and sustainable futures.

2. The Social Dimension and Community-Based Organization in Radical Ecological Economics

A central contribution of Radical Ecological Economics (REE) is its expanded understanding of the social dimension within ecological and economic systems. While contemporary ecological economics increasingly acknowledges the importance of social and ethical considerations, REE argues that society should not be viewed as a homogeneous collection of individuals. Instead, it consists of diverse communities shaped by distinct cultural traditions, political institutions, historical experiences, and ecological conditions. Conventional economic approaches often reduce social realities to individual behavior and

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market interactions, overlooking the complexity of collective identities, social structures, and community relationships.

Many economic theories, including some strands of ecological economics, continue to rely on methodological individualism, which assumes that social outcomes can be explained primarily through the actions and preferences of autonomous individuals. However, this perspective neglects the fact that human beings are embedded within social, cultural, and ecological contexts. Individual actions cannot be fully understood apart from community relations, social institutions, power structures, class dynamics, gender relations, and cultural values. Consequently, reducing society to isolated individuals limits our ability to understand environmental challenges and social transformations.

The work of Karl Polanyi provides an important foundation for this critique. According to Polanyi, economic systems were historically embedded within broader social and cultural structures rather than functioning as independent spheres governed solely by market forces. The rise of capitalism transformed labor, land, and nature into commodities, subordinating social life to market mechanisms. This process generated significant social and environmental consequences by disconnecting economic activities from their social and ecological foundations. REE adopts this perspective by emphasizing that nature, culture, and human well-being cannot be adequately represented through market valuation alone. Instead, economic systems should be reorganized to prioritize collective welfare, ecological sustainability, and social justice.

From the standpoint of Radical Ecological Economics, society must be understood as an integral component of nature. Human communities continuously interact with ecological systems, and this relationship shapes cultural identities, productive activities, and social organization. Throughout history, Indigenous peoples and local communities have developed extensive ecological knowledge that enabled them to adapt to environmental uncertainty, manage natural resources sustainably, and respond to changing climatic conditions. Such knowledge demonstrates that environmental management is not simply a technical issue but a socially and culturally embedded process.

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A key organizing principle within REE is the concept of community. Unlike capitalist societies, where social relations are frequently structured around competition and individual gain, many Indigenous and local communities are guided by principles of reciprocity, mutual aid, collective responsibility, and shared well-being. Their governance systems often emphasize communal participation, rotational leadership, and collective decision-making processes. These institutional arrangements support social cohesion while maintaining strong connections with local ecosystems.

Examples of such community-centered worldviews can be found across different regions of the world. Concepts such as Buen Vivir in Latin America, Comunalidad in Mexico, Ubuntu in Africa, and similar philosophies in Asia emphasize the interconnectedness of individuals, communities, and nature. These perspectives challenge the notion of the isolated individual by highlighting that human existence is fundamentally relational and dependent upon cooperation with both human and non-human entities.

Therefore, REE proposes that communities should be recognized not merely as social units but as transformative actors capable of constructing alternative pathways of development. By prioritizing collective interests, ecological stewardship, and social solidarity, community-based systems offer practical foundations for more sustainable and equitable post-capitalist futures. Such approaches demonstrate that economic organization can be structured around cooperation, shared responsibility, and ecological balance rather than continuous accumulation and market expansion.

3. Socioecological Sustainability and Alternative Development Pathways

Building upon the recognition of communities as central actors in socioecological transformation, Radical Ecological Economics (REE) further emphasizes the importance of developing alternative pathways to sustainability. Unlike conventional economic models that prioritize continuous growth, capital accumulation, and increasing consumption, REE argues that long-term prosperity depends on maintaining balanced relationships between human societies and ecological systems. Sustainable development, therefore, should not be measured solely through economic indicators such as gross domestic product or income

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growth, but also through social well-being, ecological integrity, cultural resilience, and collective empowerment.

A fundamental principle of REE is that ecosystems possess biophysical limits that cannot be ignored without generating environmental degradation and social instability. Industrial expansion, excessive resource extraction, and unsustainable consumption patterns have contributed to climate change, biodiversity loss, land degradation, and growing social inequalities. These interconnected challenges demonstrate the limitations of development models that separate economic activities from ecological realities. Consequently, REE advocates for production and consumption systems that operate within ecological boundaries while ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities.

Community-based management practices provide important examples of how socioecological sustainability can be achieved. In many Indigenous and local communities, natural resources are governed through collective institutions that promote conservation, reciprocity, and long-term stewardship. Such systems often integrate traditional ecological knowledge with adaptive management strategies, enabling communities to respond effectively to environmental uncertainty and changing conditions. These practices illustrate that sustainability is not merely a technical objective but also a social process rooted in local knowledge, cultural values, and collective responsibility.

Another significant contribution of REE is its emphasis on plural forms of value. Mainstream economic approaches frequently evaluate nature according to market prices and monetary benefits. In contrast, REE recognizes that ecosystems provide cultural, spiritual, social, and ecological values that cannot be fully expressed through economic metrics. Forests, rivers, agricultural landscapes, and biodiversity contribute not only to material livelihoods but also to identity, social cohesion, and the continuity of cultural traditions. Recognizing these diverse values allows for more comprehensive and inclusive approaches to environmental governance.

The transition toward sustainable futures therefore requires institutional transformations that strengthen local participation, democratic decision-making, and

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environmental justice. Policies should support community autonomy, encourage cooperative forms of production, and protect ecological systems from excessive exploitation. By integrating ecological limits with social equity and cultural diversity, REE offers a framework for constructing resilient societies capable of addressing contemporary environmental crises while promoting collective well-being.

Ultimately, socioecological sustainability within the REE perspective is not simply a matter of environmental protection. It represents a broader transformation of economic and social relations aimed at creating systems that prioritize life, cooperation, and ecological balance over unlimited growth and accumulation. Such an approach provides a practical foundation for achieving both environmental sustainability and social justice in an increasingly uncertain world.

4. Implications for Green Economy and Environmental Policy

The Radical Ecological Economics (REE) framework has significant implications for the development of green economy strategies and environmental policy design. Unlike mainstream green economy approaches that often focus on technological innovation, market-based solutions, and efficiency improvements, REE emphasizes structural transformation of economic systems and the redefinition of development priorities. In this perspective, environmental policy should not be limited to mitigating ecological damage but must address the root socio-economic causes of environmental degradation.

A key implication of REE for green economy policy is the rejection of purely growth-oriented development models. Economic growth, when pursued without ecological limits, tends to intensify resource depletion and environmental stress. Therefore, policies must shift from quantitative growth objectives toward qualitative improvements in well-being, equity, and ecological balance. This requires redefining success indicators beyond GDP, incorporating measures such as ecosystem health, social cohesion, and distributive justice.

Another important policy implication is the strengthening of community-based governance systems. REE highlights that local communities and Indigenous peoples are

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often more effective stewards of natural resources than centralized or market-driven institutions. Environmental governance should therefore decentralize decision-making power, allowing communities to actively participate in managing forests, water systems, agricultural land, and biodiversity. Such participatory governance enhances both ecological sustainability and social legitimacy.

In addition, REE supports the integration of traditional ecological knowledge into formal environmental policy frameworks. Indigenous and local knowledge systems provide long-term observations and adaptive practices that are crucial for addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource management challenges. Recognizing and institutionalizing this knowledge can improve the effectiveness of environmental planning and increase resilience to ecological uncertainty.

Furthermore, REE challenges the dominance of market-based environmental instruments such as carbon trading or ecosystem commodification. While these tools aim to internalize environmental costs, they often fail to address underlying inequalities and may reinforce existing power structures. Instead, REE promotes cooperative, solidarity-based, and commons-oriented approaches that prioritize ecological integrity and collective well-being over profit-driven incentives.

Overall, the implications of REE for green economy and environmental policy suggest a shift from technocratic and market-centered solutions toward more holistic, participatory, and justice-oriented frameworks that align economic activity with ecological limits and community needs.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined the Radical Ecological Economics (REE) perspective as an alternative framework for understanding the relationship between society, economy, and nature. The analysis has shown that REE moves beyond conventional ecological economics by emphasizing the centrality of community-based organization, cultural diversity, and socioecological interdependence.

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The discussion highlighted that mainstream economic approaches often rely on methodological individualism and market-centered logic, which are insufficient for addressing complex environmental and social crises. In contrast, REE conceptualizes society as an integral part of nature, where economic processes are embedded within ecological systems and shaped by collective social relations. This perspective allows for a deeper understanding of sustainability that includes not only environmental protection but also social justice and cultural continuity.

The paper further demonstrated that Indigenous peoples and local communities play a crucial role in developing alternative models of governance and resource management. Their practices, based on reciprocity, collective responsibility, and ecological knowledge, offer viable pathways toward more sustainable and equitable forms of development.

Finally, it was argued that REE provides important implications for environmental policy and green economy strategies by challenging growth-centered paradigms and promoting community-based, participatory, and ecologically grounded approaches. By integrating ecological limits with social and cultural dimensions, REE contributes to the development of transformative frameworks capable of addressing the interconnected crises of the contemporary world.

In conclusion, Radical Ecological Economics represents not only a theoretical critique of dominant economic systems but also a practical orientation toward building post-capitalist and ecologically sustainable futures rooted in collective action and ecological responsibility.

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