

When everyone is affected, who is the community?

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Jeanette Fitzsimons 28 Aug 2015

What would a sustainable community look like, supposing one existed?

It requires quite a lot of imagination as it is so far from anything that exists today. At this stage of the journey, sustainability is something we can measure in relative terms – we are getting closer or further away but the end state is still something of a mystery.

A sustainable economy has been described as stable, but dynamic. There is no room, on a finite planet, for the overall flow of materials and energy use to increase; but within the overall picture things are constantly changing – some things grow, others shrink.

Materials and energy flows actually need to *decrease* if we take note of the Global Footprint Institute which calculates that we had used this year's increment of resources and environmental capacity by 13 August – six days earlier than last year, and months earlier than when measurements began. They term this "Earth Overshoot Day" and the date occurs earlier every year. Since 13 August we have been living in environmental overdraft, and will until 31 December. We already need 1.5 planets to provide sustainably what we consume – but there is only one so we are stealing from our children by depleting their resources.

A sustainable community in a nation like ours would use a lot less stuff than we do, but a lot more carefully and efficiently in order to extract more human happiness from it. (It would be different in Tanzania or Bhutan, who are so poor they need to use more, but also more efficiently.) Part of using less stuff more carefully is sharing capital goods – cars, machinery, workspace – in our case even a house cow which feeds three families and a calf. This suggests that we need to build *community*, before – or at least at the same time as – we can build sustainability. I suspect Tanzania and Bhutan are a lot better at this than we are.

So: what is a community? No doubt there are accepted definitions in the Psychology literature but I didn't go looking for them. I reckon it goes like this:

People know each other in a community. They are geographically near enough to each other to share land and water and work together. A community has boundaries, shared interests and at least some widely shared values. It has the ability to unite against external threats, real or perceived.

Most of us don't live in a strong community and I suspect many of us never have.

I hadn't, either in several cities or in small towns, until 25 years ago. Since then I've had the good fortune to live in the Kauaeranga Valley just out of Thames

which meets those criteria pretty well. I'm going to elaborate a bit on this as it explains what comes next.

The valley stretches along a 21 km no exit road, bounded by steep hills on each side with a few short side roads. There are about 140 houses – maybe 300 people - and most of us know most people. The focus of the community is the 100 year old hall, owned by the community. This gives the council some difficulties because there is no legal entity representing the community and no money to fund it but we have an elected hall committee which manages to keep up the maintenance and the gardens with constant improvements in plantings, BBQ area, fence for children, etc. *We* know who owns the hall, even if the council can't work it out. As in most communities a relatively few people do most of the work, but the working bees are always fun so people don't complain. And the workers change over time, as people age or move in and out of the valley.

The hall is used for regular pot luck dinners, concerts with visiting musicians, weddings, funerals, parties, political meetings, yoga classes. They are well attended, but there are some residents who never take part and no-one suggests they should have to.

A wave of people chose to make their homes here in the seventies, wanting a more sustainable way of life. A few extensive farms gave way to a lot of small holdings. Those people have aged and their kids left home and had their own kids and now there is a new wave of young people coming here with families. There are a lot of small horticulture projects – olives, citrus, lavender, feijoas, chestnuts, small groups of livestock, a few horses. Some people work electronically from home. The hills each side are gradually regenerating to bush and the upper reaches of the valley are DOC land with several campgrounds and walking tracks. Everyone lives close to the river which they value very highly. Everyone lives with the result of the upstream activities of others.

We have a history of getting involved after disasters. I recall gatherings to clear and make safe the site of a house fire ready for rebuilding; a working bee to restore an orchard smothered with debris after the river changed course in a flood; fifteen people who joined us in several working bees to replant in natives the 5 hectares of our regenerating forest, burned when a neighbour's fire got out of control. And as the hay bales get heavier every year that you exceed 70 there is usually someone to come and help us pick them up.

Many of the people here were involved in the 1980s in the Coromandel-wide movement to stop large-scale industrial gold mining in an area of high ecological and tourist values and helpful legislation was passed. However there are loopholes in the law and the miners are back, exploring and prospecting, hoping for a law change if they find something, which they know they will.

About 3 years ago we learned that Newmont had been operating soil resistivity testing from a neighbour's farm, mapping the underground electrical characteristics that would show where the gold was. To cut a quite complex story very short, about 50 of us went looking for their secondary site early one

morning and eventually cornered two utes and six Australian contractors in an intersection.

We explained that we did not allow mining in our valley – an area of high rainfall, steep unstable land, high recreational values and a river which supplies Thames' water. Gold is mined because it has high value as a backing for currency but has little intrinsic value. The industrial uses which are important could be supplied from large stocks already at the US Federal Reserve. The decisions would have been more complex if we had been dealing, for example, with a mineral which could cure cancer.

We allowed them to leave the valley, under escort, then called a meeting in the hall to report to the whole community and plan next steps. With just six hours' notice from delivering leaflets to all the letterboxes, 70 people turned up. This organising was possible because of the small and known geographical area; the networks of personal friendships in the valley; and the mostly shared values system. Four of those attending did not feel they had enough knowledge to oppose the mining, and hoped there might be jobs from it. They were not criticised and remained part of the group. It was relatively easy to get agreement, after discussion, on a set of principles:

- we opposed industrial gold mining in the valley and saw ourselves as guardians of the place where we live
- we were committed to non-violence and would not threaten or harm people in the course of this opposition
- we would attempt to block the miners without impeding the rights of other people to go about their normal business (remember this is a no-exit road)
- we would respect all opinions in the community and not allow the mining to divide us

The meeting was divided on whether we were opposed to property damage and whether we committed to using only lawful means of protest. We held a further meeting to discuss this. It led to a really useful discussion about the meanings of non-violence, civil disobedience, and the difference between people and property. We never reached a common position except to agree that individuals would follow their own moral compass in deciding how far to go in interpreting non-violence and that we would not criticise each others' decisions.

The farmer on whose land the resistivity testing was set up, and who no doubt was well paid for it, was in a difficult position. The mining company asked him for rights of trespass from his land so they could remove us when we occupied the site. But he replied "I'm not going to have you calling the police on my neighbours". From then on it was all over for Newmont and we have never seen them back. I think it was important that we continued to include that farmer in the community and no-one openly criticised him for allowing the miners in.

We held a vigil with rostered two hour shifts for a few weeks watching traffic in the valley to see if the miners' utes returned, having found a different site. We have seen nothing since.

I could not claim that our valley is a sustainable community. Single person vehicle trips into Thames are still the norm. The council still sprays the roadside with Roundup, though many residents are committed to using no sprays. Biodiversity is threatened with wild goats and pigs and invasive weeds. Lifestyles are still on the whole more than one planet can support, though there is little ostentatious consumption.

However I would argue that the preconditions for a sustainable community are here, more than in most places. They are physical actions, like local food production, solar power systems, biodiversity conservation; but they are most importantly social: personal networks, sharing of resources and labour in emergencies; a shared valuing of the river, the land, the bush and a clean environment; and a caring about neighbours even when their values are different.

The Transition town movement throughout the world aims to build sustainable communities. Transition towns exist in city suburbs and small towns. They plant community gardens and fruit trees for all to share. They foster renewable energy – home insulation, grid-tied solar power, high efficiency wood stoves, car pooling, cycling, even community owned wind turbines as in Blueskin Bay, north of Dunedin. In cities they lobby for better public transport. In the process of working together on all this, they build communities.

Their expressed aims are both to avoid actions that cause climate change, like burning fossil fuels and transporting goods long distances; and building resilience to the climate change and oil prices rises we know are coming. But eventually they find how hard it is to be sustainable in a deeply unsustainable world.

We in the Kauaeranga Valley contributed only marginally to the record storms and droughts of the last decade which have seen our crops and pasture die for lack of water, the roofs blow off our houses, our timber plantations blow over, and floods which have swept away fences and covered our land with debris. But we do contribute our share, by being part of a society which values the convenience of massive use of fossil fuels, and cheap food from overstocking and depleting soils.

As long as Fonterra burns more than half a million tonnes a year of coal to dry milk powder and our vehicles have no fuel economy standards and so average only half the fuel efficiency of the European fleet, New Zealand's greenhouse gas emissions will continue to rise. As long as Shell insists on drilling in the Arctic to feed our fossil fuel habits and tropical forests are felled to grow palm oil for our processed foods and palm kernel to feed our dairy cattle, global temperatures will continue to rise and the storms, floods and droughts will get worse.

Everyone alive today, and all our children and grandchildren are and will be affected by climate change. All of us, unless living a subsistence lifestyle in Africa, contribute to a greater or lesser extent. In general terms, those who have contributed least will suffer the most.

If the community then is everyone, including those not yet born, and they live many thousands of km apart, speak hundreds of different languages, don't know each other, and have very different values and beliefs, how does one organise to make this community sustainable? It doesn't meet any of the criteria I set out at the beginning of this talk.

For 25 years, since nations came together at Rio and signed an agreement to limit greenhouse gases and protect forest sinks, representatives of (more or less) democratically elected governments have been meeting several times a year to advance the agreement, quantify obligations, and set up measuring and reporting systems, to protect us from devastating climate change. In 25 years they have achieved pretty much nothing, while ice has continued to melt, temperatures and sea levels to rise, oceans to acidify, and millions of hectares of forest have been felled.

The values that underlie this frenetic activity leading to a mind-blowing lack of action are clear: economic growth must be paramount and we must ensure that others bear more of the load than we do. The talks are run like trade negotiations. We are competitors, each with our national advantage to pursue, trying to ensure that we come away from the talks having preserved our position and demanded more of everyone else. Whenever one of them gives in or agrees to the special treatment we have been demanding it is a notch on our belt. It is clear where our values are when we put the minister of trade negotiations in charge of climate negotiations.

In this moral climate building a sustainable global community with shared values that cares for those who will be first and most affected seems impossible.

Many people say we have to wait for better technology to help us reduce greenhouse emissions. Better electric cars, or carbon capture and storage so we can go on using coal, or better applications of solar energy. I profoundly disagree. What is standing in the way of a safe climate is not technology but our mindsets and values. The question is one of psychology, not engineering.

Climate change cannot be addressed while leaving everything else the same. Climate change is not the problem, it is a symptom of the problem which goes much deeper. It is just the first example of our overstepping the limits of the planet's resources and environmental capacity.

For several generations now we have measured our success as individuals by what we own and consume. Nations and ministers of finance measure their success by how big the economy grows. All our economic and political life is geared towards producing and consuming more stuff.

Co-operation is hard enough at a local community level. But climate change demands no less than global co-operation – with people we don't know, will never meet, and might not like if we did. People our current economic system has trained us to compete with.

While citizens are divided, unorganised and fragmented the fossil fuel corporations and their big customers are united and very well organised. They and their think tanks have created a dominant paradigm of economics that all of us buy in to at least to some extent some of the time. In the absence of united mass citizen action with clear goals and political power, governments listen to the corporations.

So a lot of effort goes into finding economic solutions to climate change that will be more profitable than fossil fuels. Clean technology; Green Growth. This tries to preserve the economic growth paradigm while shifting investment from high carbon to low carbon technologies. Of course a sustainable future will need sustainable technologies but if the goal of endless growth and the values of the marketplace are unchanged our waters will continue to be polluted, our soils and fisheries depleted, wildlife driven to extinction.

Lord Nicolas Stern and his colleagues have done a great job of economic analysis showing that climate change will seriously damage “the economy” and that changing the way we do things now will leave us economically better off, but it hasn't changed anything.

The dominant paradigm has taught us to think as individuals rather than members of society; to compete rather than co-operate; to be mistrustful of sharing; to maximise trade rather than local production; to assume that every year we have a right to earn more than the year before; to accept the wastefulness of economies of scale; to value money more than wellbeing. It is this paradigm that has to change if we are to become a sustainable global community that can live well, within the limits of the planet.

You will be familiar with the large body of literature now that shows that people are not motivated by facts and logic, but by emotion and values. Every time we appeal to economics or self-interest as a reason for acting on climate change, we reinforce the values of self-interest and utilitarianism. When we appeal to people's love for their grandchildren we tap into the real human motivator of protecting what we love. They are our link with the future and they enable us to see beyond our own lifetimes, into a future we are creating where they will be short of fresh water and food, pushed back from the coast by rising seas, plagued by ever intensifying storms and extreme weather events, coping with high tides of refugees.

While love is clearly a better motivator than fear, I don't accept the argument that our messages on climate change must be unflinching positive. It is too late for that. If we just point out that there is a better way of life, then it's Ok to put it on hold for a while. Love of our grandchildren is a powerful motivator precisely

because we fear for their future. We know the future will be very grim indeed if we don't act.

We feel some guilt that we are the peak generation – no future generation will be able to consume as much as we have, or will have the freedom and opportunities we have had. We see it already with the struggles young people have today with student debt and unaffordable housing and lack of job opportunities. These are not an accident, but a logical outcome of the way our generation has run the economy. I think fear of negative outcomes is constructive as long as the message starts with love of what we want to protect.

While things are without doubt getting worse and faster, there are some signs of hope. The global community *is* organising. In a way that would have been impossible before the internet, we now have global days of action when hundreds of thousands – most recently even millions - turn out around the world to demonstrate to governments that this matters to them. People in NZ now are planning a huge mobilisation at the start of the Paris talks, 28 November, which will coincide with marches in most overseas capitals. We are telling our negotiators that we are watching them and we have the power to change governments if they let us down.

There are global campaigns to divest from fossil fuel companies and many churches, universities, pension funds and even international banks are doing so. A good case can be made that these are very risky investments as the world will eventually act on the knowledge that 80% of these fossil fuels must be left in the ground if we are to have any hope of avoiding catastrophic climate change. However we are no longer ashamed to appeal to them on the grounds of morality as well as profits.

We have more personal contact with our international neighbours. Pacific peoples come here on speaking tours about how their islands are starting to disappear under rising seas, and ask for our help. This raises the central issue of climate justice and strengthens our ability to think beyond ourselves because we can form personal relationships, however brief, with our visitors. It is ironic that cheap air travel, itself a significant contributor to climate change, has made it possible to understand more of our impacts on the rest of the world, and to relate to people in other countries as people rather than statistics.

There are successful actions around the world that have stopped coal mines, oil pipelines, tar sands development, coal seam gas exploitation, fracking. As Naomi Klein points out in *This Changes Everything*, they are more often than not led by indigenous people who have the advantages of living in strong communities. Klein refers to the phenomenon as “blockadia”. The outstanding NZ example is Whanau Apanui asking Greenpeace for logistical help, and together chasing the Petrobras oil drilling ship out of their waters in the Raukumara basin around East Cape.

There are people at all levels of society working for change. Fighting for a stronger international agreement at the annual talks. Popularising the science so

people will understand. Introducing legislation in national governments to set energy standards and climate change targets. Inside industry working for cleaner production. In local and regional government. In churches and educational institutions. Particularly in schools. In communities pioneering co-operative housing which reduces resource use and builds community. In ngos spreading climate change information and organising campaigns.

This is how the work for a sustainable world community starts, but it has a long way to go. Many of these initiatives are unsuccessful at this stage. Many people don't realise they are part of a global action to preserve a future for humanity. And we are all, at times, sucked in by the consumerist culture that predominates. As George Monbiot said, *"Faced with a choice between preserving a future for humanity and a new set of matching tableware, most people will opt for the tableware"*.

Arguments will break out about whether it is more important to work at local or national or international level; whether to try to change business from the inside or change governments to regulate it better; whether to work on better technology or popularise the good technologies we already have; the role of non-violent direct action vs writing articles; whether to work for political change or just focus on changing oneself. The answer is that all of that is needed.

Trying to change politics while maintaining one's own consumptive lifestyle is hypocritical. Hoping that if everyone just lives a little more sustainably, using some solar energy and recycling our rubbish it will all be OK is naïve. Just as in our valley different people play different roles in maintaining our community, there are different roles in the global movement and they all matter as long as we recognise some are not more important than others. As Naomi Klein says – and I could quote her forever because it is a very, very important book – *"to change everything, we need everyone"*.

What we need most of all though, and this is where psychologists will have further insights, is to strengthen our shared values and language of co-operation for the common good; of valuing human wellbeing and climate justice and community interdependence ahead of individualism and competition and huge profits for a few; so that our learned values of self-interest, competition and greed will gradually wither away.