



Sustainable Community Movements: A brief overview

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Executive Summary

This paper discusses some recent movements that actively promote and support sustainable local communities. By “sustainable communities,” I mean *neighbourhoods, towns, villages and rural communities who have decided to collectively explore alternative ways of living and developing that reduce natural resource use, protect the environment, and meet essential human needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own essential needs.*

Much attention has been paid in policy circles to supporting community-led, asset-based development and promoting “resilient” communities. But community-led resilience for what? Sustainable communities are those who have decided to DO something with their assets and resilience, to create a liveable future for themselves and their descendents.

What are the main sustainable community movements today?

The sustainable community movements discussed in this paper include Transition Towns, Community Land Trusts, Community Supported Agriculture, Community Gardens, Community Economic Development, and Ecovillages/Envirotowns. They can be seen as a continuum (see Figure 1 below) ranging from those which are more past-oriented (*Self-sufficient ‘Communities’*) to those that are present-oriented (*Participatory Whole Community Initiatives*) to those that are more future-oriented (*Pioneering ‘Green’ Communities*). The *first type* tends to focus on survival by building on the past in harmony with nature. They see themselves as lifeboats or arks. The *second type* is about coping with change by building community capacity and resilience, essentially to maintain the present way of life. The *third type* is focused more on changing and adapting to a different future reality, by experimenting with alternative lifestyles, new systems, and innovative technology.

The paper focuses particularly on Transition Towns and Community Land Trust movements, and how these are currently manifesting themselves in New Zealand. I’ll also discuss a case study of each type in this country.

What concerns drive them?


“At best, it will take decades to reach an international consensus around the need for a new approach to energy security and climate change mitigation – but by then, for tens of millions, it may well be too late. Our current [population] growth rates will only worsen the situation. Like it or not, we will have to deal with these...challenges now.”
Dick Smith (2011:85)

The big three issues concerning these movements are *climate change, peak oil (resource depletion) and economic contraction*. Others are:

- Access to safe, healthy food.
- Taking responsibility for the globe & future generations by reducing over-consumption and living more sustainably.
- Social and spiritual renewal: reinventing ‘community’ and redefining wellbeing.

What are they doing about their concerns?


- Networking, information sharing, awareness raising, educating and lobbying.
- Creating ‘energy descent plans’ and adopting alternative energy sources to reduce reliance on fossil fuels (insulation, efficient appliances, car pooling and community transport).
- Raising and distributing food cooperatively and ‘locally’- producing healthy, nutrient-rich food; re-learning ‘lost’ skills and methods.
- Encouraging greater economic self-sufficiency through use of local currency, time banks etc.

What issues are they facing? *Accusations of elitism*


Claims of Western, white, middle class family exclusivity. These movements tend to share broadly similar cultural perspectives, intellectual resources (education, knowledge and information access), material resources, influential networks and contacts. They have difficulty broadening their outreach to the disadvantaged and young urban professionals.

 *Top-down governance*












In their enthusiasm to grow and effect change while maintaining focus of purpose, some of these movements have become over-reliant on a few gurus and activists. They have tended to adopt centralised structures, information dissemination (e.g. national websites) and top-down control of priority-setting, values, methods and memberships which restricts local innovation.

 *Economic & political dominance of the growth paradigm*

The major barrier to 'transition' these movements are facing is the fact that policy makers and economists are stuck in growth-oriented concepts, models and solutions instead of sustainable economics. As some commentators have noted (e.g. Smith, 2011), this classical worldview is based on invalid assumptions about cheap energy, zero or minimal costs for despoiling the natural environment, manageable population growth, and the promise of technological 'rescue'. Movement activists are divided on whether to become more politically involved. There is no doubt their cause would be aided by more political and philanthropic support at the national and international levels. There seems to be an implicit consensus that rapidly growing the number of local sustainable community initiatives (especially if networked together) will eventually create a momentum for change in personal lifestyles, as well as in government policies and economic institutions.

 *Back(wards) to the future?*

Some projects are founded on the belief that solutions to the critical global issues affecting the way we live and the survival of future generations are to be found (1) locally and (2) in the rural, pre-industrial past. Critics have warned that escaping to small, self-sufficient rural communities is not feasible for much of the world's population. It seems an even more dubious approach to reject modern technology and innovation in favour of rediscovering 'lost' ancestral beliefs and agricultural practices, given the likely impacts of climate change, environmental degradation and population explosion.

Contents	<i>Page number</i>
Executive Summary	2
Introduction	5
Contemporary Sustainable Community Movements	6
 Transition Towns	6
 Community Land Trusts	9
 Community Supported Agriculture	10
 Community Gardens	12
 Ecovillages	13
 Community Economic Development	13
Sustainable Community Movements in Aotearoa/New Zealand	14
 Transition Towns NZ	14
 Community Land Trusts	14
 Other sustainable community initiatives	15
Two Case Studies	18
 Transition Valley 473	18
 Koanga Institute's Wairoa Community Land Trust	19
Conclusion	21
Want to learn more?	22
Bibliography	23

Sustainable Community Movements

by

Dr Terrence Loomis

Introduction

In 2009 the International Energy Agency predicted that “after 2012 we will enter the ‘energy gap’, an era when the demand for oil and gas exceeds the supply without massive – but as yet unidentified – oil discoveries” (Smith, 2011:82). In five years we’ll need the equivalent of Saudi Arabia’s annual oil production just to fill the growing gap. Declining phosphate supplies have caused prices of natural and synthetic fertiliser to rise 1000 percent in the past 30 years. Costly inputs, water shortages and competition for remaining arable land have contributed to a doubling of food prices in the past decade, and they’re expected to increase at least 50% over the next decade. Food security is becoming a global issue, as is equitable access to resources.

‘Green’ thinking and lifestyles are becoming progressively mainstream. Growing numbers of people who don’t consider themselves ‘tree-huggers’ are concerned about climate change, environmental degradation, and resource depletion¹. They recognise these issues will have serious impacts on our lives and those of our children, and that it’s time to walk the talk and not leave it to scientists, academics and politicians to sort out. That includes thinking globally and acting locally not just as individuals and families, but joining with friends and neighbours to find ways of living together more sustainably.

A number of sustainable community movements have emerged recently, particularly in developed Western countries. By “sustainable communities,” I mean *neighbourhoods, towns, villages and rural communities who have decided to collectively explore alternative ways of living and developing that reduce natural resource use, protect the environment, and meet essential human needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own essential needs.*

In this paper, I discuss some of the prominent movements advocating more environmentally responsible lifestyles and experimenting with how whole communities can respond to the big social, economic and environmental issues confronting mankind. These movements include Transition Towns, Community Land Trusts, Community Supported Agriculture, Community Gardens, Community Economic Development, and Ecovillages/Envirotowns. Some emphasise consciousness-raising, political lobbying, and holding workshops to promote their ideals. Others focus on practical projects or whole community initiatives for change. Almost all share the notion that the modern industrial economy and agricultural system are broken (or soon will be), and that the solution is to organise into the small scale units. Some Transition Towns advocates envision a global network of local initiatives eventually transforming lifestyles, markets and government policies. Most (though not all) are sceptical about, if not hostile to, utilising modern technology to respond to the big issues of our time.

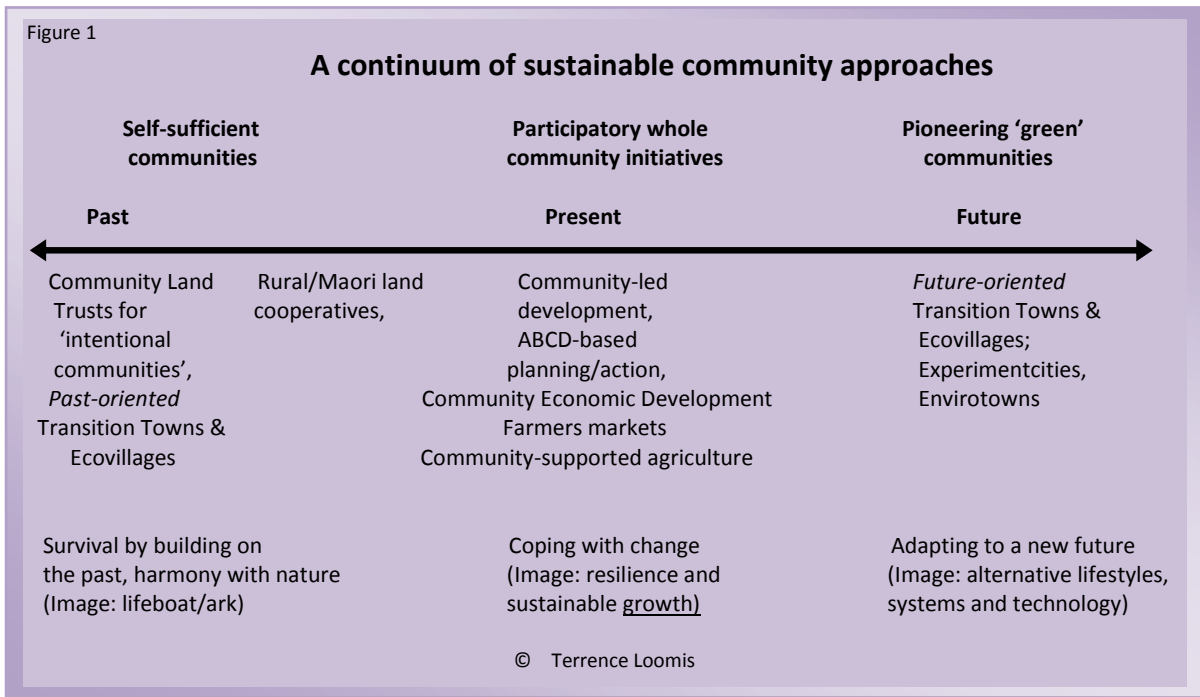
The various sustainable community movements discussed in this paper can be seen as a continuum. They range from those which are more past-oriented (**Self-sufficient Communities**) to those that are present-oriented (**Participatory Whole Community Initiatives**) to those that are more future-oriented (**Pioneering ‘Green’ Communities**) (see Figure 1 below).

¹ Including Prince Phillip, on the occasion of his 90th birthday. BBC Television interview, 14 June 2011.

Self-sufficient Communities tend to focus on survival by building on the past in harmony with nature. They see themselves as lifeboats or arks.

Participatory Whole Community Initiatives tend to focus on coping with change by building resilience, essentially to maintain our present way of life.

Pioneering 'Green' Communities are oriented more toward changing and adapting to a different future reality, by experimenting with alternative lifestyles, new systems, and innovative technology.



There are too many movements to cover them all in detail. I want to focus on Transition Towns and Community Land Trust movements, and how they are manifesting themselves in New Zealand. I'll also look at case studies of each type in this country.

Contemporary Sustainable Community Movements

Transition Towns

Description

The Transition Towns (TT) movement has its roots in Permaculture (human settlement design and agriculture practiced in harmony with nature), but it has expanded to meet wider challenges besides producing healthy food. Permaculture designer Rob Hopkins and his students at Kinsale Further Education College in Ireland are credited with starting the movement, by developing an action plan for the town of Kinsale for 'transitioning' to a sustainable future. The action plan, which covered energy production, health, education, economy and agriculture, was eventually adopted by the Town Council (Wikipedia, 2011). Hopkins subsequently moved to Totnes, England in 2005 to pursue doctoral studies. As part of his studies, he worked with colleagues to refine the concept and methodology of TT, and apply it to Totnes. Since then, the TT movement has spread rapidly. Today, there are over 350 TT local community initiatives around the world including the UK, Ireland,

Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the US, Italy and Chile. The *Transition US* website claims 90 TTs in the US and growing fast. *TT Australia* lists around 30 initiatives at present.

According to reporter Sarah Lewis of the Guardian newspaper, “The idea behind transition towns is simple: if you have no faith that governments will take meaningful action on climate change and peak oil, then you can come together as a community to do something about it” (Lewis, 2008). The Transition Towns movement aims to equip communities to confront the **triple challenges** of (a) climate change, (b) peak oil (resource depletion generally) and (c) ‘economic contraction’ resulting from the former two. National TT networks concentrate on building local resiliency and helping communities plan to confront these challenges.

The strategies and tools that Transition Towns projects use include:

- raising awareness of the need for more sustainable living and ecological preservation
- reducing energy usage (e.g. through adopting “Energy Descent Plans”)
- reducing reliance on long supply chains dependent on fossil fuels for food and other necessities (e.g. by producing and exchanging healthy local food in ecologically sustainable ways, or introducing ‘local currency’)
- reducing wastage by waste recycling, repairing rather than discarding items etc.
- promoting spiritual renewal – encouraging a change of mindset about ways of living, fulfilment, wellbeing by “rebuild our relations with ourselves, others and the natural environment”
- partnering with local councils, businesses, and central government (e.g. the Scottish government funds local TT initiatives).

Some Transition Towns advocates argue that as the movement matures and more projects get underway, the focus on consciousness-raising may need to be broadened to include other local change initiatives. Rob Hopkins tweeted (19 May 2011) that TT Totnes has turned its attention to promoting *economic regeneration* and *social enterprise*. The TT movement in some locales is beginning to link up with the Community Economic Development movement, particularly in the UK.

Organisation

TT projects are usually members of a network under a national coordinating team and a central website. Most countries seem to have a founding ‘guru’ or activist who has played a key role in fostering the movement. National TT movements in Ireland and Northern Ireland, the US, Australia and New Zealand seem to have followed the UK model. Communities or local groups aspiring to be part of the movement must go through a certification process to become an “official” transition town. A Guidebook originally written by Rob Hopkins sets out 12 steps to transition. The Transition Ireland and Northern Ireland website for example contains a link on how to register your local initiative for the certification process. Seminars and training workshops are offered by the coordinators, and the resource tools are also available. The Transition US website also sets out seven ‘guiding principles of transition’ that prospective members are expected to follow:

1. Positive Visioning
2. Help People Access Good Information and Trust Them to Make Good Decisions
3. Inclusion and Openness
4. Enable Sharing and Networking
5. Build Resilience
6. Subsidiarity: self-organization and decision making at the appropriate level
7. Inner and Outer Transition

Some TT community projects have a distinctive back-to-the-past feeling, particularly in countries where small rural groups predominate. **Transition Ireland and Northern Ireland**, for example, emphasises building local resilience by recovering 'lost' knowledge and skills, achieving harmony with the earth through Permaculture practices, building packed earth houses, making tools and dishes, composting, seed saving, etc.

Other projects have a distinctive flavour of post-industrial, technological adaptation more in line with Envirocities and Experimentcities² in Europe. The village of Am Rundling outside Berlin is a celebrated case that has been in existence for several years. The name means 'round village', which is literally the way this innovative village is laid out – in a circle of 20 homes. The homes are built of earthen bricks, with photovoltaic solar panels on all the roofs. The energy generated not only supplies the homes, but any surplus is fed into the national grid making extra income for the villagers. The houses are equipped with heat exchangers, and for supplemental heat they burn wood pellets instead of logs in super-efficient woodburners. Rainwater is gathered from each homes roof into an underground tank, and recycled for drinking and cooling homes in summer. Plants and vines are planted around the buildings and on the roofs. The villagers have established a community garden and a food co-op. The homes are equipped with modern communications technology, and the villagers have built an activities centre where visitors can come and learn about Am Rundling's green experiments (c.f. the Formosa News at www.englishnews.ftv.com.tw).

Issues and challenges

The TT movement, perhaps because of its growing popularity, has experienced problems and attracted criticism³. For one thing, the movement is seen as being too white, middle class (or middle class drop-outs) and based in developed countries. Rob Hopkins himself notes in his PhD that failure to 'engage those from more disadvantaged backgrounds' has been a problem in the Totness project.

Other criticisms include:

- failure to consult and engage with existing green movements, resulting in their alienation
- being overly centralised, with a leader/guru to whom national organisations and local projects defer regarding approach, values, methods and tools (e.g. members are urged to sign up on Twitter for regular blogs and updates from Rob Hopkins)
- engaging with the state and acting within rule of law [sic!], meaning change is not possible beyond a certain point (at least according to some activists).

The TT movement has many of the attributes of a millennial movement. Promotional hype warns of looming crises which 'transitioners' can confront by rediscovering their spirituality, reconnecting with one another and the earth, and "unleashing the collective genius of those around us" (TransitionTowns NZ website).

The TT movement tends to dismiss any prospect of finding/creating alternative energy sources and other advances through technological innovation (there are exceptions, like Am Rundling). We need to get ready for a drastically reduced energy future, insecure food sources, and more modest lifestyles.

² The Experimentcity network across Europe seeks to encourage development of cooperative, environmentally friendly and affordable forms of housing for the future.

³ See for example a critique by the Trapeze Popular Education collective (<http://www.trapeze.org/>) in the UK entitled "The Rocky Road to Transition".

One of the biggest unknowns for the TT movement is whether their change strategy will work. That is, whether an expanding network of small community self-sufficiency projects will actually make a difference in confronting the major global challenges of our time. The Transition Towns Network (UK) website says TTs are a “social experiment on a massive scale”. Projects do seem to have a local awareness-raising effect, at least initially. And Rob Hopkins’ says “We are all in this together - it's a challenge that calls for us to come together on an unprecedented scale, rather than fracture down further and further. Rebuilding our communities is going to be pivotal in the next 10 to 15 years”(Lewis, 2008). But ‘transitioners’ haven’t been big on advocacy campaigns or lobbying politicians. The question is whether these localised initiatives can be sustainable on their own, given the inevitable impacts on them of climate change, environmental degradation, population growth and migration.

Community Land Trusts

Description

The roots of the Community Land Trust (CLT) movement go back much further than TT. Their original purpose has only recently been picked up again in the West as a basis for establishing local sustainable communities. The idea of community land ‘trusts’ or collectives dates from the Middle Ages. In their modern guise they are said to have originated in India after the last world war, when a disciple of Ghandi’s led a land redistribution movement for rural peasants with the cooperation of wealthy landowners (c.f. Lindsay, 2001). It eventually became known as the Gramdan (Gift of the Village) movement. Many CLTs in North America, the UK and Europe have been inspired by similar ideals of cooperation, stewardship of the land, and personal renewal. In these countries, the CLT model has been used primarily to provide affordable housing for those who otherwise wouldn’t be able to buy a home. The trusts are non-profits who obtain land from a local authority, a private firm or as a charitable gift.

Lindsay notes (ibid, p. 8),

“Rules which govern the home’s resale price and eligibility, guaranteed by the lease, ensure that the home remains affordable for future generations and will be available to those who need it the most. Community ownership of the land, through the CLT, defends both the individual and the community from the threat of the loss of the land.”

Community land trusts have become particularly popular in the UK in the last quarter century, as a means of fostering urban renewal and providing affordable housing for the disadvantaged. They often start out as non-profit community initiatives that seek to partner with local authorities and business interests to develop suitable, low cost housing. In the US, “Residential land trusts” emerged during the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, as a means to reverse rampant poverty particularly in the rural South. Similar to the UK, these trust were mostly about providing affordable housing for low income residents. Residential community land trusts are now widespread in the United States. The Institute for Community Economics in 2004 reported nearly 120 community land trusts of varied sizes in 30 states, the District of Columbia and five Canadian provinces.

A second type is the conservation land trust, established for purposes of preserving sensitive natural areas, farmland, ranchland, water sources, cultural resources or notable landmarks forever (Conaty, 2008; Brewer, 2003). This type of trust has become particularly popular in the UK, Europe, Canada and the United States (over 1500 at latest count), but are also used in places like Mexico, Australia, and New Zealand (e.g. the QE II Trust).

More recently, CLTs have been used as a basis for establishing small, self-sufficient agricultural communities, which brings them closer to their Indian roots. Community land trusts for sustainable

small-scale agricultural production are part of a broader land tenure concept that Giesler & Daneker (2000) call “third sector property”. According to these authors (ibid, pp xiv-xv), third sector property has a number of common characteristics:

- Land tenure is neither public nor private, but a new type in which ownership rights are shared.
- The primary purpose of third sector property is to meet broadly defined social and individual needs, not accumulate monetary wealth.
- Property value is retained ultimately by the collective ‘owners’ while recognising the individual user/occupant’s right to benefit from their capital investment and improvements.
- Control of property is primarily local.
- Decentralized management of property is most likely to distribute benefits fairly and remain democratic as long as civil liberties are safeguarded.

Such models balance economic and social values, including fair access to property, secure tenure, permanently affordable land and housing, resilient communities, farming lifestyle opportunities, open space, natural areas and ecological integrity. They allow more members of society to access and use land

An increasing number of rural communities and projects in the US, Australia, Canada and Scotland are experimenting with the CLT model. There are even a few projects in the Third World, like Voi Township in Kenya (c.f. Jaffer, 2000) where former peasants and pastoralists implemented a modified community land trust model to provide land for communal housing and gardening.

Organisation

The CLT, regardless of its purpose, is usually governed by a board elected by members of the trust community, which has a charter that sets out the aims and by-laws of the trust. One of the roles of the board is to manage the various activities and claims of members in an equitable way. The CLT provides lifetime leases to members of the community, thus providing security for building or other activities for people who may not otherwise be able to afford secure tenure. Typically the CLT guarantees to buy back the leasehold with any improvements at what the board establishes as fair value. The economic (and environmental) values of the improved land are thus retained within the community (c.f. Wikipedia, 2011).

Issues and Challenges

As with any community organisation, the CLT need to maintain a proper, formal and transparent approach to its activities. The board is accountable to the members of the community and must ensure they are kept informed and consulted on all matters or discord can arise. The CLT must also operate in a ‘business-like’ manner to manage financial operations and ameliorate risks for the community. Large mortgage payments or unforeseen costs of developments on the land can sink the CLT.

Community Supported Agriculture

Description

The CSA movement is an extension of the farmers’ market concept. But instead of simply purchasing food products from local growers at a weekend market, a group of individuals (CSA members) pledge support (subscriptions) to a particular farming operation. The farmer receives needed operating capital at the beginning of the season, and members receive a constant supply (in principle) of produce throughout the growing season. In this way growers and consumers share the risks and benefits of food production. CSAs are in effect farmer/consumer cooperatives, not just about the farmer and his/her operation. These cooperatives typically use a system of weekly

delivery or pick-up of an agreed allocation of vegetables, fruit, and sometimes dairy products and meat. CSA farms are usually small, independent, labour-intensive family farms which would normally have to compete with large-scale food producers and supermarket chains.

Community-supported agriculture began in the early 1960s in Germany, Switzerland and Japan as a response to concerns about food safety and the urbanization of agricultural land. In Europe groups of consumers and farmers formed cooperative partnerships to fund farming and pay the full costs of environmentally sound and socially equitable agriculture. Many of these ventures were inspired by the economic ideas of Rudolf Steiner and experiments with 'biodynamic agriculture' by Trauger Groh and others. The idea took root in the United States in the 1980s. Coinage of the term "community-supported agriculture" stems from the Great Barrington CSA that Jan VanderTuin co-founded with its proprietor Robyn Van En. At the same time Trauger Groh and his colleagues founded the Temple-Wilton Community Farm in Wilton, New Hampshire. Since then, community supported farms have spread rapidly throughout North America — mainly in the Northeast, the Pacific coast, the Upper-Midwest and Canada. For example, in 1995 there were 6 subscription farms in the Minneapolis/St Paul area; today there are 80. North America now has at least 13,000 CSA farms of which 12,549 are in the US, according to the US Department of Agriculture. CSAs range size from a handful of families to several thousand members (c.f. Wikipedia, 2011).

Organisation

In its most structured form CSAs have:

- a transparent, whole season budget for producing a specified wide array of products for a set number of weeks a year
- a common-pricing system where producers and consumers discuss and democratically agree to pricing based on the acceptance of the budget, and
- a 'shared risk and reward' agreement, *i.e.* that the consumers receive what the farmers grow even with the vagaries of seasonal growing.

Pre-season subscriptions eliminate marketing costs and give the farmer financial security to plan for the coming season. Some CSAs have developed to the point where they can employ local staff rather than rely solely on volunteers, who help the farmer, administer the CSA and educate the local community about environmentally responsible farming.

CSAs have gone through three stages of development. Initially they appealed to an environmentally conscious minority who wanted to live in a more sustainable way in harmony with nature, and wanted to support local small farmers who shared (and practiced) their philosophy. They tended to be very 'orthodox' in approach (e.g. use of biodynamic methods) and restrictive in their membership. In the next stage, new CSAs entered the field with more relaxed membership criteria appealing to mainstream middleclass families interested in obtaining safe, healthy, locally-grown food. In the latest stage, established and new CSAs are beginning to promote themselves as pioneering responses to big issues like climate change, food security and problems with the global economy and agricultural production systems. CSA advocate Maryruth Priebe (2011), for example, argues that:

"The large-scale farming system in North America is broken. Not only does it spit out unimaginative monoculture style produce, it requires intensive use of chemicals and water, pollutes our environment, and concentrates wealth (and jobs) in the hands of a small few. One of the best ways to *revitalize our agricultural system is to go back to the small-scale farming system of our ancestors* [emphasis added]. Community Support Agriculture (CSA) is a fantastic way to do so... . CSAs are also a way of obtaining food using lower food miles, resulting in a smaller greenhouse gas emissions footprint".

Issues and Challenges

CSAs aren't for everyone. They require the commitment and time of members to make them work, which many are prepared to give because they share the concerns and values behind the CSA movement. There are, however, some common challenges that CSA producers and consumers face:

- Farmer producers have to raise a diversity of crops and animals to ensure CSA members have a variety of vegetables and animal products weekly, rather than specialising in a few crops that may bring the farmer more lucrative returns on the commercial market.
- Members are dependent on the seasonable availability of produce from their farmer partner as well as sharing the risks from natural events (storms, diseases, pests) with no guarantee of return of deposit if things go wrong. CSAs aren't as convenient as supermarkets.
- Members are under pressure to help with farm work and CSA activities because of the 'communal' values and expectations around membership, and/or to help maintain lower production costs and mitigate risks.

Community Gardens

Description

Quite simply, a community garden is a piece of land gardened collectively by a group of people. The land may be owned by an individual, or leased from a local authority or private company. The practice of communal gardening is still widespread in the developing world, and dates back to prehistoric times. What's 'new' about the community gardens movement in the developed world is that it is primarily an urban phenomenon, a reclaiming of urban space by a group of neighbours committed to growing their own healthy, safe and affordable produce. In the process advocates say they are helping to address environmental degradation and reduce the community's reliance on fossil fuels.

Community gardens are not the same thing as the private allotments in the United Kingdom or the Kiwi quarter acre family gardens. They are cooperative enterprises. In North America, community gardens range from "victory gardens" where people grow small plots of vegetables, to large "greening" projects to preserve natural areas. There are non-profits in many major cities that offer assistance to low-income families, children groups, and community organizations by helping them develop and grow their own gardens.

Community gardens encourage food production by providing gardeners a place to grow vegetables and other crops. They improve users' health not only through increased fresh vegetable consumption, but by providing a satisfying exercise, a stronger sense of community and connection with the natural environment (see Wikipedia 15 June 2011).

Organisation

Community gardens are public entities in terms of ownership, access, and management. They are usually owned in trust by local governments or not for profit associations. Land use by community garden groups is typically by lease agreement with the owner, though there are instances where land is simply permitted to be used by an informal agreement. They are managed and maintained with the active participation of the gardeners (members) themselves, rather than tended by a paid staff.

A community garden may be divided into individual plots or the whole garden tended collectively, depending on the size of the garden and the members involved. Open or closed-gate policies vary from garden to garden. There is no single model for how to organise a community garden. However, community garden groups or associations share at least five elements in common: (a) land on which to grow produce (and livestock where conditions suit), (b) gardeners or people willing to learn

gardening, (c) seeds, plants and stock, (d) tools and equipment of various sorts, and (e) some sort of organisational arrangement.

Ecovillages

The idea of Ecovillages has been around since at least the 1970s, but the projects were widely dispersed and unrelated to one another. It wasn't until 1991, when the newly established Gaia Trust in Denmark commissioned a global review of sustainable communities that there was an impetus toward an international movement. The Gaia Trust report found that although there were many interesting Ecovillage projects, a coherent model of the ideal Ecovillage did not yet exist. There was however a broadly shared vision that these projects could help change mindsets, lifestyles and policies if they were linked together in a global movement (see Wikipedia, 2011).

The Gaia Trust followed up the report by convening a meeting of eco-community representatives to discuss strategies for further developing the Ecovillage concept. That led to the formation of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN). In 1995, the first international conference of Ecovillage representatives was held in Findhorn, Scotland. The movement has grown rapidly since that conference.

The Global Ecovillage Network's aim is to support and encourage the evolution of sustainable settlements across the world. Their motto is "connecting communities for a better world". The network does this through communication services, establishing national and international partnerships (e.g. with the UN and ECOSOC) and through networking and project coordination. GEN also provides conference speakers and helps disseminate tools and information. Recent publications by Christian (2003, 2007) on how to establish or find an Ecovillage in your area are a case in point.

Community Economic Development

Community Economic Development (CED) is a recent adaptation of conventional community development practice. It is often facilitated by independent consultants calling themselves "social entrepreneurs," whether they operate for profit or in a non-profit capacity. They work with local community groups, district councils and the private sector to deepen, expand and localise development, usually by promoting the Third Sector as an untapped source for social enterprise and employment.

Community Economic Development typically involves building *social enterprises* that are embedded in the social economy. A social enterprise can be a local nonprofit initiative that utilises community 'assets' in a new way. For example, a group of unemployed Aboriginal women establishes their own handcraft weaving business. Or a youth group in inner city Chicago establishes a trash recycling business operated from a community hall. Or the social enterprise can be a partnership involving government agencies, small to medium enterprises, large corporations and/or charitable foundations if they all have a mutual interest in the success of the enterprise.

Some CED practitioners adopt a more holistic (integrated) approach to community change and development, which is more amenable to linking up with sustainable community movements (see Wikipedia, June 15, 2011). Community economic development from this perspective is about using local resources to enhance economic opportunities while improving social conditions and protecting the environment in a sustainable way. Often CED initiatives are implemented to increase opportunities for communities who are disadvantaged. The aim in this broader form of CED is to promote the economic, social, ecological and cultural well-being of communities in a balanced way. Canada has been at the forefront over the past couple of decades in experimenting with the CED approach, notably with government support and involvement.

Sustainable community initiatives in Aotearoa New Zealand

Transition Towns NZ

The TT movement in New Zealand is an offshoot of the UK movement. It has incorporated much of the same purposes, structure and methodologies. The movement is about supporting local initiatives to strengthen community resilience in order to cope with crisis and manage change. The big issues they address are similar to other national movements: less cheap abundant energy, changing climate and a changed social, environmental and economic environment. The New Zealand coordinators maintain that the focus should be not on dealing with looming risks and threats, but on envisioning “the world we would like to see for ourselves, our children and our grandchildren” and identifying steps to achieve that future world (cf Transition Towns New Zealand website).

The New Zealand TT website lists some 65 initiatives in New Zealand, most of which are in the North Island:

Auckland	14
Upper North Island	18
Lower North Island	8
Wellington	11
South Island	14
<hr/>	
Total	65

Not all of these projects are officially registered as ‘Transition Towns’ yet, or are progressing toward ‘transition’ following TT guidelines. Quite a few started in 2008 with meetings for awareness-raising and recruitment, but some have yet to take concrete action. The more active groups have established a steering or coordinating group. These groups plan and organise activities, maintain communication among members, promote TT in their area, and build relationships with local authorities, institutions (schools etc) and businesses. Some of the larger groups have established ‘focus area’ sub-groups that take responsibility for dealing with specific issues and implementing projects such as community gardens, food exchanges, energy saving, and alternative transport.

There are some standout examples of active local groups, such as Motueka, rural Dunedin, and Grey Lynn 2030. Wellington inner city has a large membership that for the past couple of years has been organising seminars and disseminating information, undertaking food & resource mapping, and establishing food exchanges. A couple of local groups have been single issue initiatives, like, Transition Towns Kapiti which has concentrated on protesting against the proposed new motorway in their area.

Community Land Trusts

Land trusts have been used primarily for conservation purposes in New Zealand. The QE2 National Trust is perhaps the best example. The trust helps private landowners (including farmers, family trusts, lifestyle, and private institutions like schools) to protect significant natural and cultural features on their land through open space covenants. Features protected include landscapes, forest remnants, wetlands, grasslands, threatened species habitats, and cultural and archaeological sites. The trust has a particular interest in supporting covenants that protect the biodiversity of an area (see QE2 National Trust website).

The Housing New Zealand Corporation (HNZC) has investigated CLTs particularly in the UK, as a possible model for increasing the stock of ‘social housing’ owned by not-for-profit organisations and Maori groups. There are a few social housing providers in the sector operating as trusts but not

CLTs. However, the Whaingaroa Affordable Housing Trust near Raglan has carried out a feasibility study on adapting the CLT model to housing on Maori land.

The CLT model has only recently begun to be experimented with in New Zealand as the basis for establishing small, self-sustaining agricultural communes and villages (e.g. see below the Koanga Institute's Wairoa community).

Other sustainable community initiatives

Community Gardens

Community gardens have a reasonably long history in New Zealand dating at least from the 1980s. They have become more networked around common ideals and methods, and so are now effectively a movement. Most main centres and some small towns throughout the country have community gardening groups. Many of these community gardens are operated by informal groups of neighbours who raise produce together. However, the Good Magazine website lists close to 50 formally-established community garden organisations throughout the country. Some of the well-established organisations have been around for many years, have their own websites and support multiple garden sites.

Operation Green Thumb in Wellington is an example of the latter. OGT is a non-profit organisation supported by Wellington City Council and funded by Lottery Grants, the Community Trust of Wellington and the Nikau Trust. It has been around since 1994. The organisation helps people who are unemployed, on a benefit, retired or on a low-income to access land to raise low-cost food. They administer and support over 100 plots in 9 gardens sites. Five are in Council housing complexes and four are public gardens: Owhiro Gardens in Brooklyn run by Mokai Kainga Maori Centre, another in Kilbirnie, St Matts Taita, and Tawai Park for residents of the Trentham area. OGT also supports other garden projects around greater Wellington and Upper Hutt. They encourage gardeners to be as organic as possible and not use chemical sprays.

Community gardens can be transitory operations, depending on how secure their access to land is and how much outside support they require. Local groups often operate gardens on council or private land that is temporarily available, until it is required for other uses. Groups like Operation Green Thumb have established a relationship with the Wellington City Council that allows them to provide more secure tenure for gardeners, particularly for tenants of Council housing.

Besides local councils and the Lottery Board, various community and charitable trusts also support community garden initiatives. Some like EcoMatters Environment Trust also provide information and the services of a knowledgeable community gardens facilitator to help people establish a garden or find an operating garden in their area. The Sustainability Trust of Wellington supports a network of four community gardens, providing tips, advice and a regular newsletter.

Ecovillages

The concept of Ecovillages dates back to the 1970s when the first demonstration communities were established. The idea didn't really take hold in New Zealand until the new millennium, when a group of friends in Auckland founded the Cohousing and Ecovillage Association of Aotearoa/New Zealand Auckland. The group established a website (www.converge.org/evcnz) as an information depository and a networking tool for the Ecovillage movement. More recently, the Canterbury Ecovillage Network (CEN) was established. CEN is a loose network of people who are interested in

creating ecovillages and intentional communities in the Canterbury area. Prior to the Christchurch earthquake, there were around 35 members in the network but no community projects had actually been established yet.

Over the past decade, several groups in different locations throughout the country have embarked on the process of establishing Ecovillages including:

- ✚ Otamatea - a rural lot development Ecovillage project west of Kaiwaka, Northland .
- ✚ *Awaawaroa* - a rural lot development Ecovillage project on the south coast of Waiheke, Auckland Region.
- ✚ *Earthsong Eco-Neighbourhood* - a co-housing project of 32 rammed earth townhouses with an environmental focus in urban Waitakere City.
- ✚ *Kohatu Toa Ecovillage* - 6 house sites within the Ecovillage and a seventh site which is Koanga Gardens. The community is dedicated to living simply, protecting and enhancing the environment, and developing a self-reliant economy.
- ✚ *Otanui Farm Village* – a Hawkes Bay project, under development.
- ✚ *Anahata Community* - a new intentional community at the northern boundary of metropolitan Auckland (on the former 'Centrepoin't' site) for people who want to learn to "live in harmony with one another and with the natural environment in a way that is sustainable for present and future generations".
- ✚ *Silkwood Park* - an Ecovillage and centre for alternative healing and the arts situated in Nelson on the Tasman Bay coastline.
- ✚ *Proutist Ecovillage/ Community* - a community of Proutist adherents established on the outskirts of Nelson. They have established a charitable trust to own the property.
- ✚ *Te Manawa Ecovillage* - A community of five families in the Motueka Valley near Nelson on their own lots sharing a sustainable, communal lifestyle. Lots are serviced with spring fed water from the property and power is generated from one of two creeks on the property. The community is administered by "Te Manawa Ecovillage Ltd" and each landowner is shareholder/director.

Some villages have been established with the domestic and international eco-tourism market in mind. These include Braemar Ecovillage near Nelson, Kawai Papakura Ecovillage in South Auckland, and Mistletoe Bay Ecovillage in Queen Charlotte Sound. The latter is an interesting example. The Mistletoe Bay Trust was formed in 2003 as a result of the Department of Conservation looking for alternatives to managing the Mistletoe Bay Reserve and Campground in Onahau Bay, Queen Charlotte Sound. After negotiating a Control and Management Agreement with DoC, the Trust developed plans to create a sustainable Ecovillage facility that would showcase Mistletoe Bay and New Zealand together as a leading venue for conservation, education and sustainability. The facility offers an experience that is unique in New Zealand, where visitors young and old will learn hands-on how to live sustainably in a coastal ecosystem. The trustees are volunteers with a passion for a

sustainable future and a commitment to keeping the local ecosystem protected and available for everyone to enjoy.

Ecovillages typically embrace philosophies like bio-dynamics and Permaculture. The latter is guided by the imperative of “going home and gardening”. But as Peter Scott (2004) points out, that has led to ongoing debate about whether such self-sufficient local ‘communities’ are a withdrawal from the world or a demonstration. Some advocates suggest the world needs a million such villages. They will become a catalyst for global change through ongoing promotion and ‘diffusion of innovation’. But Scott refers to Trainer’s critique (1995) that, in a global economy, going home and gardening is not enough. He reminds us that all the great gardens in the world won’t help in the event of a major monetary meltdown, climatic disaster, or war born of resource shortages. Mayur (1995) similarly argues that Ecovillages seem to be an act of isolated self-indulgence. He questions what we gain by reinventing quaint villages for a few hundred Western people when 1.3 billion people in the developing world do not even have homes.

Envirotowns

This is a concept similar to TT that got its start in Europe, and has recently been picked up in the Canterbury region. The Lincoln Envirotown Trust has been the catalyst for the first local initiative in Lincoln, followed recently by others in the district. Lincoln Envirotown Trust is a charitable trust founded in 2006 and dedicated to fostering a community-owned process for sustainability in Lincoln. The Trust grew out of a sub-committee of the Lincoln Community Committee. They have developed a sustainability action plan for Lincoln Township, and work in partnership with Selwyn District Council, Lincoln University, Landcare Research, Waihora Ellesmere Trust, Environment Canterbury, Plant and Food Research, local schools, businesses and other organisations to implement the plan.

The Trust’s objectives are:

- To promote the long term environmental sustainability of Lincoln Township with the understanding that this is also the basis for social, cultural and economic sustainability in the future
- To educate about and raise awareness of environmental sustainability issues and to provide information about how to achieve environmental sustainability
- To provide appropriate opportunities for personal and community decision making to ensure that the environmental, social, cultural and economic sustainability of the Lincoln Township is promoted; and
- To act as a role model for other communities wanting to progress towards environmental sustainability.

There projects and services to date have included a State-of-the-Town report, planting native vegetation, educational workshops and courses for adults and children (e.g. energy efficiency), public and private consultation sessions, establishment of a sustainability centre, carpooling, a local "Zero Waste Street Challenge", and establishment of a Community Garden.

The Lincoln envirotown has been a catalyst to similar initiatives elsewhere in the Selwyn District, including Leeston Envirotown, Prebbleton Enviro Village, Rolleston Envirotown, Springston Enviro Community, and West Melton Enviro Community.

Community Economic Development

The Community Economic Development (CED) movement is well-established in places like Canada and the UK, but only recently emerged in New Zealand after a national conference in Waitakere City in early 2010. A second conference was held in April 2011, also in Auckland. To date the focus of the movement has been on promoting the Third Sector as an untapped source for local

development, supporting social entrepreneurship, encouraging community 'social enterprises'. As yet there are few linkages with existing green projects or sustainable community movements across the country.

Two New Zealand Case Studies

Transition Valley 473 (TV473)

This Transition Towns project has been organised by a group of residents from North East Valley, Opoho, Dalmore, Liberton, Pine Hill, Normanby and Mt Mera in North Dunedin. The 'Initiating Group' came together out of concern over the effects the coming climate, energy and economic changes will have on residents of the Valley, and the need to map out a 'transition journey'.

To date, they have held public meetings, scheduled a series of film nights on greens issues, promoted the TV473 project idea through the media, promoted energy saving (particularly the Government's insulation retrofit scheme) and made submissions to the local authority's Long-term Council Community Plan.

The TV473 Initiating Group has established two sub-groups to undertake action on:

- food and gardening
- transport

Other focus area groups in the future will be organised to deal with:

- local economy and currency
- housing, particularly improving old houses (including the Government's Retrofit scheme)
- energy

The *Food and Gardening subgroup* has been active the past 2-3 years. One of the main developments has been working with a local primary school and the Ministry of Education to establish the NE Valley Community Garden. The community garden grew out of the NE Valley Community Development Project, which was partially funded by the Ministry of Social Development. The idea for a community garden idea was raised at a community planning exercise, which involved local residents in identifying key concerns, organising activities and suggesting initiatives to address these.



The NE Valley Community Development Project was able to obtain money from a Southern DHB healthy eating fund to establish a community garden and hangi pit for public use. The 'garden group' managed the site and oversaw gardening activities. Initially children, students, parents, and the elderly were to be the primary targets. As planning proceeded and negotiations with the school board took place, it became clear that access and use of the garden would need to be restricted to the people who developed and did the gardening. Any surplus would be distributed to community events, the needy and/or foodbanks in the Valley. School children, parents and staff can receive produce if they take part in the garden group.

The community garden group organises regular working bees to develop the garden and expand their membership. They also have partnered with a local organic seed exchange and a local organic food store to organise seed exchanges. They arranged training sessions on gardening, bee hives, and fruit tree growing and established a fruit tree orchard in conjunction with the community garden. The group is presently looking for space to establish a community orchard.

The *Transport sub-group's* aim is to promote and encourage land use and transport options which are not fossil fuel dependent. They have held discussions about arranging access to more public transport in the valley. Earlier this year, they organised a public meeting on how to slow traffic in dangerous areas along the main highway. Following the meeting, the group has liaised with the district council and transport planners on these issues, and made submissions to the Dunedin City Council's annual plan.

The Transport sub-group has organised a series of bike repair days where people can get their bikes fixed and learn how to repair their bikes. They have also widened their scope to try to involve people with other alternative 'transportation' interests like walking, electric vehicles, and even mobility scooters.

Koanga Institute's Wairoa Community Land Trust

Koanga Gardens and the Koanga Institute have a long history of promoting and practicing Permaculture, heritage seed saving, and ecologically responsible community living. Originally based in Northland, the founders Kay Baxter and Bob Corker had been looking around the country for a place to re-locate the Institute and establish an 'intentional [i.e. planned] rural village community'. In late 2010 they located an isolated 35 hectare property near Wairoa that suited their purposes, and several families have already joined the nascent settlement.



Their vision is to put Permaculture into practice by following biodynamic principles (beyond simply 'sustainability'), simple living, self reliance, individual enterprise and community based economic development. The founders see the need to build resilience into their lives and the community as the world goes through dramatic changes. Initially the community will have a settler population of 25-30 people. There will be provision for both clustered and non-clustered housing, and clustered sites for 'cottage' industry.

The village community will be organised and administered on the basis of the Community Land Trust model. The CLT will own the land through a Trust deed, and be managed by a Board of Trustees. There is no indication how Board members will be chosen, but it is likely the two founders will play a key role and leadership generally will be an 'organic process' (an extension of the Permaculture

approach). Requests for lease of land for housing or production will be presented by *members*⁴ to the Board of Trustees, who will make the decision based on the purpose statement in the Trust deed and any other policies that have been adopted. There will be agreed protocols for consulting Trust members. This arrangement is partly a reaction to the experiences of some Ecovillages in New Zealand, according to Bob Corker, have struggled to reach decisions and progress because they've had loose membership criteria, all members are on the governing board, and they operate by consensus.

For this reason, the founders propose establishing what they call 'gatekeepers' to guide decisions on membership and community administration. These are rules applying to leases that have the effect of enforcing ethical positions that the directors have taken. For example house size, type of building materials, energy generation and use, water use, soil stewardship and commitment to growing nutrient rich food). The rules will also help screen applicants, and "hopefully ensure there is more congruency in our vision" (Bob Corker, 'Discussion' section of the CLT website).

Initial development of the land and village will be done by a purpose-formed development company, under contract to the Community Land Trust. This stage may take up to 2-3 years involving purchasing the land, setting up the Trust, obtaining resource consent, constructing the infrastructure, marketing, economic infrastructure, and the settling process. Resident community members will be expected to conform to the conditions of their house site lease, including paying an internal rate which will cover a share of the external rates as well as a share of maintenance of common infrastructures (roads, water, power reticulation, community facilities and reserves).



The community village's self-sufficiency will not just involve gardening and energy-sharing, but also community economic development. The plan is to springboard off the existing Koanga Institute operations (seed collecting and an education facility) for employment for some members. In addition to these opportunities, settlers will be encouraged to pursue their own self-employment activities, or work with in new 'business ventures'. For this reason, membership applications will be vetted so settlers with the skills and expertise the community is likely to need are given priority. Bob Corker has noted, in reply to a query from a potential settler (see Comments section of the CLT's website), that it is important to create an investment fund and push forward with local economic development and infrastructure (including a 'business centre' in a renovated sheering shed). He notes that several Ecovillages in New Zealand have stalled on this point, returned investment capital to the landowners, and have stagnated as a result.

A key issue the Koanga Institute's village community has yet to resolve is whether they are an isolated survival enclave or a demonstration of what it means to be a sustainable community for others to replicate. The organisers indicate they've purposefully chosen an isolated rural area unlikely to be affected by external developments, but that the community 'won't be isolationist'. On

⁴ At this stage, the founders envision that 'community' membership could include non-residents as well as residents.

their website (www.communitylandtrusts.co.nz) that they invite new settlers who wish to "be the change they wish to see in the world". However, an online exchange between Bob Corker and a prospective settler indicates some ambivalence on this point.

Prospective settler: Why is the Koanga village project so insular "especially if one is to offer a model of more sustainable ways of doing things? The Transition Town movement philosophy, for example, is about facilitating new ways of building resilience into a local community rather than withdrawing into the isolation of a lifeboat."

Bob C: "Personally Kay and I are not Transition Towners. We believe that investing into existing infrastructure and the associated culture is counter-productive (this includes the arts, schooling, medical facilities etc). We are far better off to invest in our own art, our own education and our own health. As we've said before *we are lifeboaters, not TT's*, and we fully appreciate that most people won't be attracted to our position. However we are open to supporting TT's in their dreams where all parties feel it is useful" [emphasis added].

This exchange highlights the dilemma facing the Koanga Institute's CLT of trying to be a demonstration of the "change they wish to see in the world" and at the same time an isolated, self-sufficient lifeboat. They plan to host educational visits, workshops and training sessions for interested outsiders so presumably they envision other such lifeboats coping as best they can with the ravages of climate change, resource depletion and economic crisis.

Conclusion

This paper reviews some of the prominent movements promoting environmentally responsible lifestyles and experimenting with how sustainable communities can respond to the big social, economic and environmental changes impacting our world. Some of these movements emphasise consciousness-raising campaigns, political lobbying, and training workshops to promote their ideals. Others focus on practical projects or whole community initiatives demonstrating sustainable options. Almost all share the notion that the modern industrial economy and agricultural system are broken (or soon will be), that a time of 'transition' is upon us, and that resilient, innovative local communities are at least part of the solution. Some advocates of Transition Towns and Ecovillages envision a global network of these local initiatives eventually transforming lifestyles, growth-fixated economies and government policies. Most (though not all) are sceptical about modern technology being able to rescue mankind from the crises ahead. These movements are fairly recent in origin, and all have their teething problems to work through. To their credit, they seem to be comprised people who are committed to 'walking the talk' regarding what it means to live responsibly and be a sustainable community.

Want to learn more?

Here are some links that provide information, tools and contacts with New Zealand and international organisations and projects.

Transition Towns

www.transitionnetwork.org/ - website of the TT movement in the UK, including a directory of projects, news, forums and resources.

www.transitionus.org/ - website of the TT movement in the USA, including a director of projects, news, resources and training assistance.

www.transitiontowns.org.nz – website of the New Zealand TT movement, with a directory of projects, upcoming events and resources.

www.transitionaotearoa.org – a social networking and blogging website, linked to Transition Towns New Zealand.

Community Land Trusts

www.QE2.org.nz - website of the Queen Elizabeth II National Trust, including a directory, news and events, and how to set up a conservation covenant.

www.cltnetwork.org - website of the National CLT Network in the USA, including a directory of CLTs and their websites, CLT toolkit, CLT reader, a model ground lease and research reports.

www.communitylandtrusts.org.uk – website of the National CLT Network in the UK, including a directory and a step-by-step guide to setting up a CLT.

www.communitylandtrusts.co.nz – website of the Koanga Institute’s Wairoa Community Land Trust.

www.otamatea.org.nz – website of Otamatea EcoVillage in Northland.

Community Supported Agriculture

www.ecovian.com/csa - information, guides and a directory of CSA’s in the USA and Canada.

www.transitionaotearoa.org – site lists several working groups including the “Community Supported Agriculture Investigation Group”.

Community Gardens

www.communitygarden.org – website of the American Community Gardens Association

<http://good.net.nz/magazine/community-gardens> - site providing news and events, a magazine, a list of community garden projects in New Zealand, etc.

www.ecomatters.org.nz – website of the EcoMatters Trust providing news, information, advice and assistance with establishing a community garden

Ecovillages

www.gen.ecovillage.org – website of the Global Ecovillage Network, providing news and information, conferences and training seminars, and links to ecovillages around the world.

Envirotowns

www.lincolnenvirotown.org.nz - website of the Lincoln Envirotown Trust, with information, a monthly online newsletter, meeting announcements, links to advice, and a list of services and projects.

Community Economic Development

info@communitywaitakere.org.nz - a source of regular bulletins about news, conferences, seminars and events regarding the CED movement in New Zealand

www.ced.org.nz – website of the CED movement in New Zealand, including proceedings of the second CED conference in Auckland in April 2011.

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