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The Power of Community

Academic researchers may use the jargon of social capital and social cohesion, but others around the world talk of the community they live in. It may be those living in a city neighbourhood who organize a local cultural event or festival, or who simply meet daily in the local park. It may be a farming, fishing or forest community, full of people who share the reality of living with nature around them. That's life, and those researchers, studying social capital and social cohesion, are discovering what so many people already know – the power of community.

There are perhaps three key inter-related approaches to transforming society and the world toward a sustainable and resilient and just future – first, convincing people, lots of people, that change is needed; second, convincing the world's political leaders of that same necessity, and third, lying somewhere between the individual and the state, drawing on the power of community. It would not be right to claim that the third of these is more important than the other two, but it would be true to note that as one of the three crucial routes to a better future, the role of community needs greater emphasis than it has had to date.

This brings to mind the famous statement by anthropologist Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.” In our modern age, the “small group” may well span the globe, and may well be able to change thinking at the level of the United Nations. But in the end, change is a multi-scale phenomenon. Change happens from the individual to the local community to the global, and each of those levels has a major role to play. The role of community is especially important to highlight since so many groups of “thoughtful, committed citizens” start their initiatives together, at a local level, in a single community. (The wide range of these local initiatives is currently being documented in the Community Conservation Research Network – see www.CommunityConservation.net for further information.)

Emergent properties. Picture the neighbourhoods in your city, or your particular cultural group in the city, or the entirety of your small village. Multiply that to a million, or a hundred million, small local communities around the planet. What if these communities are building their local solutions, as well as finding ways to learn from one another, in a wonderful dynamic manner? Small is beautiful. Emergent properties reflect the magic that can ‘emerge’ from this complex web.

Collective action. That's the term used by Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom in describing the capability of people to come together to solve ‘commons’ challenges – to figure out how to live sustainably in their communities, avoiding over-exploitation of the Earth's resources. Collective action is not always successful. Not much in life can claim that level of success. Instead, particular qualities of the community are needed to produce long-term sustainable solutions – qualities like leadership, and equity, supportive government policy that gives local people control over local resources, and yes, social capital and social cohesion.

Back to the jargon. The wide range of human relationships in society, and in community, are referred to, by some researchers, as ‘social capital’ – the idea being

that this 'capital' can be drawn upon to enhance human well-being. A key element of social capital is the social cohesion that binds society, and community, together. Social cohesion is higher in a tight-knit closely-interacting community – just like those that organize the events and festivals mentioned earlier. With strong social capital and social cohesion, the sky is the limit in what communities can undertake – provided, typically, that they have higher-level support from governments to take on actions that may push beyond the community mandate.

So what does this talk of communities imply in the search for a New Development Paradigm? The key point is the clear necessity to effectively tap into the power of community. There are two big actions coming from that point. First, a New Development Paradigm must explicitly draw on the strengths that lie in communities, that can support leaders seeking to move forward, that can implement the approaches coming from wise governments, and that can network with other communities, providing the emergence we need in order to succeed. Second, since not all communities worldwide are in a strong state, it is crucial to promote governmental policy measures that help to build community strength and enhance social cohesion – this will help build the well-being of communities, build openings for local stewardship, and build the partnerships needed in the movement toward a New Development Paradigm.