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Towards localisation

A report on the 2008 **Go Local** conference



New ideas for sustainability

Transition Towns, localisation and the role of the social entrepreneur are concepts now familiar to more people following the May 2008 **Go Local** conference in Brisbane.

Probably the first large conference in Australia called to discuss localisation and Transition Towns, Go Local raises the profile of the Transition Initiative idea among Australia's change agents.

About the author

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More on localization and sustainability at:
www.pacific-edge.info

This is a report on the two day, May 2008 **Go Local** conference, held in Brisbane.

The report does not attempt to be comprehensive because it was not possible to participate in all of the Open Space and other workshops on offer. Those attended, which inform this report, were chosen on the basis of their relevance to the emerging Transition Town or Transition Initiative methodology of social change that is starting to attract attention in Australia.

First, a little background

New and existing terms were used at the conference to describe the types of initiatives people are undertaking around the country and the roles involved in them. Understanding these will make clearer the main learnings coming from the conference.

A **social entrepreneur** is an individual who makes use of the business model for goals other than profit. Although profit making can be part of social entrepreneurship, other goals are paramount, such as the social or environmental. Judy Wicks, a US restaurateur who addressed the conference, is a businesswoman and social entrepreneur who uses some of her profits to support social enterprises that have been developed from her food business.

A **social enterprise** is an initiative, based on the business model of operation or that of the NGO (non-government organization), not-for-profit or community group structure that has social goals to its operation.

Presentations and dialogue at the Go Local conference included the role of social enterprise and social entrepreneurship in the emerging **transition town** or **transition initiative** model of social change. Both of these ideas stem from the pioneering work of UK sustainability educator, Rob Hopkins, first in Kinsdale, Ireland, and presently in Totnes in the UK (Transition Town Totnes <http://totnes.transitionnetwork.org>).

Transition town refers to a community-based strategy of preparation for the anticipated impacts of global warming and the peaking of the global oil supply, after which the price of anything making use of oil (such as our food system) is expected to continually rise as demand for oil outstrips supply. An output of a transition town strategy might include a report such as an 'energy decent strategy' that proposes measures for adapting to a situation of higher prices and reduced supply of fuel and goods.

In his manual on setting up and managing transition town initiatives, *The Transition Handbook* (2008, Hopkins R; *The Transition Handbook*; Green Books, Totnes UK. ISBN 978 1 900322 18 8), Hopkins proposes 'transition initiative' as a more accurate description as initiatives are taking place in locations other than towns. That term has been adopted in this report.

One of the tactics for adapting to a future with more expensive fuel and products is that of sourcing as many needs as possible from the region. The process is called '**localisation**', sometimes '**relocalisation**', however opinion suggests localization as the more accurate term because relocalisation implies return to local sourcing that may not have been present in the past. Sometimes, the word 'regional' is used in place of 'local' in regard to localization. There is no overall definition of what makes up 'local'. It would mean different scales for different places.

Localisation is not unlike the idea of bioregionalism, originally a US concept, that was popularised during the 1990s by the permaculture design movement.

Food and water supply, energy and a preference for locally owned business and services are some of the social infrastructure that may be capable of localisation. An aim is to improve the viability of the local economy and create livelihoods based on, as far as is practical, the servicing of local needs.

Improved local economic self-reliance strengthens communities and provides a degree of buffering against changes occurring in the global economy as well as those likely to come from global warming, peak oil and their potential impact on regions, cities and towns.

The desired outcome of localization and transition initiatives is increased community resilience in the face of change, whether that change stems from political or economic factors or from broader environmental change.

The transition initiative strategy is sometimes described in terms of building **resilient communities** as this is regarded as an easily understood concept.

The conference

The Go Local conference was organized by the Ethos Foundation, a sustainability-directed organization employing the social enterprise/social entrepreneurship model.

The estimated 250 attendees came from along the East Coast, from Townsville to Melbourne. They included a diversity of people from community organisations — some already engaged in transition activities, such as those from the Sunshine Coast — as well as people from local government, the community financial sector, permaculture associations, school educational garden projects, small business and consultancies as well as the otherwise interested.

The conference was held at the Riverside conference centre at New Farm, on the banks of the Brisbane River. Although it was the first called specifically on localization, it can also be regarded as the second localisation conference in Australia, the first being the food-themed Feeding Our Future conference in Lismore in March 2008.



Local food production is an important part of the localisation process.

Indonesian guavas from Doug Bailey's urban food forest in Sydney.



Food Connect's Robert Pekin.

Food Connect is Australia's largest CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) enterprise.

A personal aside — discovering Ethos

My journey to the Riverside conference centre started a couple months earlier and a couple hundred kilometres to the south, when Lismore City Council and Southern Cross University invited me to make a presentation on the social, environmental and economic value of local food systems to the **Feeding Our Future** conference in Lismore. That, probably, was Australia's first major conference to address localisation.

A few days after receiving the invitation, I was contacted by Kali Wendorf, editor of the parenting magazine *Kindred* (which has a substantial sustainability focus — www.kindredmedia.com.au). Kali wanted an article on community food gardens for the upcoming edition and invited me to join a panel at a Byron Bay seminar to discuss Cuba's experience of post-peak oil adaptation (which occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union) and food production with visiting Cuban urban agriculturist, Roberto Perez.

On the panel with me were a local organic farmer and Robert Pekin from Brisbane's innovative local food system, Food Connect CSA (www.foodconnect.com.au). CSA means Community Supported Agriculture, essentially a subscription farming set-up linking city eaters directly to farmers in the region). Robert and my paths would cross a number of times over coming months.

The Byron Bay seminar was organised by the publisher of *Kindred*, TROPPO (a local organic farming agency) and the Ethos Foundation. And that is how I met Ken McLeod, from Ethos.

It was the following morning that we met at the Riverside Café in Brunswick Heads, on the banks of the curving, shallow river, twenty minutes up the highway from Byron Bay. The proprietors of the Riverside try to cook with as much locally grown and processed food as they can obtain. That isn't always easy, however, and others were later to echo their comment. Our meeting was scheduled as a morning tea but extended to over four hours to encompass lunch and beyond.

There was much to discuss — the idea of US restaurateur, Judy Wicks, speaking at UNSW for Randwick City Council's sustainability program and a proposed conference in Brisbane to be called Go Local.

That conference sounded promising. At last, it seemed, the idea of localisation and transition initiatives was about to go national.

Inspiration: The restaurateur from Philadelphia

It was the threatened demolition of a row of old brownstone apartment buildings that got Judy Wicks interested in the area. Alerted to urban issues, she read Jan Jacob's *The Life and Death of Great American Cities* and learned about walkable neighbourhoods and other planning initiatives that could humanise the cities.

Buildings saved, Judy opened the White Dog Café in one of them and, later, the Black Cat Gift Store. Black Cat deals in local arts and crafts as well as craft goods imported under Fair Trade arrangements.

Judy made a start as a social entrepreneur when she started White Dog Enterprises. Now, she runs a mentoring program for local high school students interested in a career in the restaurant business, buys her restaurant's food from local organic farmers — including meat products from humanely-kept farm animals — and, rather than keeping her food sources to herself to give her a competitive edge, she has brought other restaurateurs together in a joint buying scheme called the Common Market.

Judy's initiatives have been taken only after thoughtful consideration. The thinking that led her to buying wind energy and installing solar water heating for the café came about only after, on a hike in the woods, she saw the effect of drought on a place she loved.

It was similar with the treatment of staff. She tells of how, when initially hearing of the idea of a living wage, she resisted it as unaffordable. She describes how, upon walking into the café kitchen, she looked at the people working for her and realised that they, too, needed enough money to pay rent, clothe themselves and do all the other things that make up life. A living wage was introduced immediately.



Judy Wicks

Judy's aim in focusing on local food is not only to operate the café as a successful business and create a livelihood for herself and her staff, but to stimulate the local economy.

Judy's lesson is that there is a real role for small, locally owned business in the move towards sustainability. If we talk about viable local economies, she points out, then we have to include business, as it is through businesses that most transactions within the local economy take place. That was a notion accepted by the Go Local audience and, for some, it was a new idea.

New ideas and a positive example were Judy's legacy to Go Local.

Inspiring and innovative: Go Local's main messages

Distilling the main messages from the Go Local conference was not easy. As stated in the introduction, selection of the information presented here is based on its relevance to transition initiatives.

Following is a summary of the main ideas to come from the conference.

Message one:

There is a need for models

There is a need to develop models of the systems, schemes, tools, technologies and ideas that we propose as part of a sustainable future. They need to be easily accessible to the public so they can see that they are safe, practical and desirable.

Demonstration sites are needed. As well as fulfilling a public educational function, they are locations where ideas can be prototyped and trialed to at least the proof-of-technology stage.

Examples exist

As in other things, the conference found that the future is already with us in microcosm — there already exist versions of the models we need to propagate and multiply in our towns and cities.

Northey Street City Farm

Located on the banks of Breakfast Creek in the Brisbane suburb of Windsor, Northey Street City Farm is such a model. It offers:

- community food gardening
- a Sunday morning organic grower's market
- a schools program
- community education — workshops, accredited permaculture training and more
- celebrations
- the Chai Café
- the Growing Communities consultancy, a social enterprise set up to stimulate school and community gardening
- a place where the public can visit, walk around and meet
- labour market training
- an organic permaculture nursery selling direct to the public.

CERES

Located in East Brunswick, Melbourne, CERES offers:

- community allotment gardening
- community chicken keeping
- the CERES organic markets
- training programs for migrants and the labour market, some of it based in the commercial, organic market garden which sells produce at the CERES markets
- the Urban Orchard project for the exchange of excess home grown fruits and vegetables via swap or sale at the organic market
- a substantial schools' program
- celebrations, such as the annual return of the kingfisher event
- the CERES organic café
- a childcare facility
- and a great deal more.

Both of these community enterprises utilize a social entrepreneurial methodology and are only two of other similar, but more modestly scaled social enterprises around the country.

Community gardens

A number of community food gardens have assumed a role in sustainability education, making them appropriate models that could be replicated and multiplied as transition hubs in our towns and cities.

The gardens can be regarded as the training grounds of a cadre of educators who, in the event of a crisis that threatened the viability of the urban food supply, would go out to assist new community food gardens and scale-up community-based urban agriculture.

Message two: Business has a valid role in sustainability

Perhaps it was the inspiration brought by Judy Wicks, perhaps it was the fact that some present were already using the business model in their work or worked with consultancies providing sustainability services. Whatever the reason, the notion that business — both for- and not-for-profit — has a role in sustainable development and transition initiatives was one whose time had come.

Validating the idea was the need to develop viable local economies as a necessary component of resilient communities.



Participants at Go Local: Gilbert Rochecouste and Amadis Lacheta from Village Well, a Melbourne-based consultancy providing participatory processes and sustainability-focused consultancy services to business and local government

Message three: The time of the social entrepreneur has come

The idea of the social entrepreneur — the individual, group or organization making use of the business model for social as well as business goals — permeated the conference.

The role is well established and has a track record of successful use.

Demonstrating that use of the business model in a social entrepreneurship role need not be the sole province of for-profit enterprises is Melbourne's Cultivating Community, the CEO of which is Ben Neil.

Cultivating Community is an incorporated community association contracted to Victoria's Department of Human Services to provide community garden and food related support to public housing tenants.

A staff of around 15 assist people on housing estates to set up and manage community food gardens. The organization has started two food cooperatives on housing estates and currently operates a total of six school-based educational and affordable garden-to-kitchen projects.

At present, Cultivating Community is setting up a number of new community gardens on public housing estate grounds and is building a second wood-fired brick oven adjacent to one of the gardens. The ovens provide the core of a community kitchen and are of a scale that can bake numerous loaves of bread or other foods at once.

In terms of the social business model, Cultivating Community is the service provider and the community gardeners and others associated with its food initiatives are its clients. A difference is that the organisation's funds come from a state government allocation rather than from the clients (who are often economically marginalized people). In contrast, other social enterprises present at Go Local raised their own funds.

Message four: Resilient communities are the aim

The term 'resilient communities' kept coming up over the two days of the conference and some there appeared to be familiar with it in relation to Rob Hopkin's transition initiative idea.

The notion of resilient communities can be summed up as communities that have some built-in resistance to the deleterious impact of external forces. In the transition initiative model, this resilience is achieved through the local supply of as many needs as can be met, based on the local availability of knowledge, skills and resources. This is the process of localisation.

The transition process

This is achieved through the starting of a transition initiative project that engages the public, local government and business in the collaborative development of what has become known as an energy descent plan. The plan describes how needs could continue to be met in communities affected by peak oil and global warming.

At the conference, someone suggested that an alternative name to 'energy descent plan' would give the thing a less-negative sound and be more appealing. 'Community resilience plan' was offered as an alternative.

Whatever the term, the strategy devised by a transition initiative process would be beneficial even in the absence of global trends such as peak oil because it brings together people in a common endeavour and benefits local economies.

According to Rob Hopkins, the process is a substantial undertaking spanning six months to a year before the initiative is even launched. That period, from start-up to launch, is one during which the educational basis of the initiative is established. This is done through the showing of relevant videos and their discussion, and through organising conferences, seminars and similar events.

Clearly, the initiative calls for a high degree of organisational capacity. It also calls for participatory skills to bring people together rather than the managerial approach employed by organisations, including some environmental groups.

In its public events, the transition process makes use of participatory and self-directing structures such as Harrison Owens' Open Space and the World Café processes.

Sunshine Coast the first

Australia's first recognised transition initiative is taking place on the Sunshine Coast where it has established the Sunshine Coast Energy Action Centre (www.seac.net.au) as the transition organisation. It is about to complete the region's energy descent action plan.

That done, the group may then be in a position to advise others setting out on similar initiatives.



Sonya Wallace and Janet Millington from the Sunshine Coast Energy Action Centre

Way to go

Transition initiatives provide a useful umbrella idea that incorporate permaculture design, sustainability and environmental education.

All going well, they may emerge as the leading idea for community-led sustainability action.

*Message five:***There is an urgent need to scale-up**

The 'cottage industry' approach to installing sustainability technologies is too little, too late, according to a number of conference participants. Rather than one-at-a-time, we need to install technologies such as solar hot water and photovoltaic panels on a larger scale at a more rapid pace, and make them available at lower cost than they are at preset.

Once again, the role of social entrepreneur is being deployed to achieve this in a number of innovative schemes managed by some of those that attended the Go Local conference:

- **Beyond Building Energy**, based in the Byron Bay area, is a not-for-profit social enterprise that imports photovoltaic panels by the container load from China for installation on the roofs of homeowners participating in their Solar Neighbourhoods scheme. The homeowners sign up for lower-cost access to the energy technology. Beyond Building also deals in home and business energy efficiency and environmental footprint reduction (www.beyondbuildingenergy.com).
- **Redlands Sustainability Cooperative** is a social enterprise planning to act on global warming through a for-profit structure based on member's funds (shares) supplemented by investment capital and grants. The bulk purchase of photovoltaic panels and solar hot water systems, as well as the bundling of household and business energy efficiency technologies (insulation, lights, water savers, energy/water audits etc), will bring these things to members at reduced cost.
- **Sustainable Maleny** is a community-based organization planning a bulk installation of solar water heaters using regional suppliers. A Maleny Town Farm for food-based education and the demonstration of food production ideas

spanning home gardens to market gardens as well as allotments for community food gardening; a Sustainability Centre to demonstrate and educate about sustainable living and technologies; and a Maleny Action Plan based on the energy descent plan mode are planned. Sustainable Maleny is now trialing electric motorscooters with a view to a bulk buy of the vehicles (www.sustainablemaleny.org).

More, faster, cheaper

What these schemes have in common is a structure to increase the installation of renewable energy technologies at a lower cost and at an accelerated rate. Their approach can be summarized as more, faster, cheaper. This stands in contrast to the present cottage industry approach of one-off installations.

The initiatives impressed many at the conference, most of whom had no knowledge of them.

And so permaculture?

Interesting to many at the conference with a background in permaculture design was a comment from one of those involved in the bulk buying schemes.

He told the audience that, while he supported permaculture ideas, permaculture has no means to achieve its goals. That is, it has a vision but lacks the processes, the steps and strategies that are necessary to bring those ideas to fruition. This is in contrast with the bulk buying and other schemes that are the means to the installation of sustainability technologies on the scale that is needed.

In this person's view, permaculture is focused on the cottage industry scale while global events necessitate schemes that will achieve more, in regard to sustainability, in less time, on a larger scale and at an affordable cost.

His was not an attack on the permaculture design system, rather a pointing out that those involved need to move beyond the one household at a time scale if they are to substantially address the environmental and resource issues we face.

Go Local: An ideas feast of workable models

Go Local was an ideas feast that offered a range of models for transition initiatives. And these were not just new models. They included many that have existed for years in addition to Beyond Building Energy, Redlands Sustainability Cooperative and Sustainable Maleny.

John Champaign – around The Bend

John — well known in permaculture circles and an active permaculturist and localiser in the Bega area of South Coast NSW — described he and his team's efforts towards creating a sense of local place.

One of their achievements is the new, local news magazine, *Sustainability*. Also noteworthy is the new ecohamlet known as The Bend, a landsharing enterprise that will include affordable housing and food production. Situated on the outskirts of Bega, the settlement is well placed, close to services and sources of goods, in the event of a peak oil-caused fuel price increase.



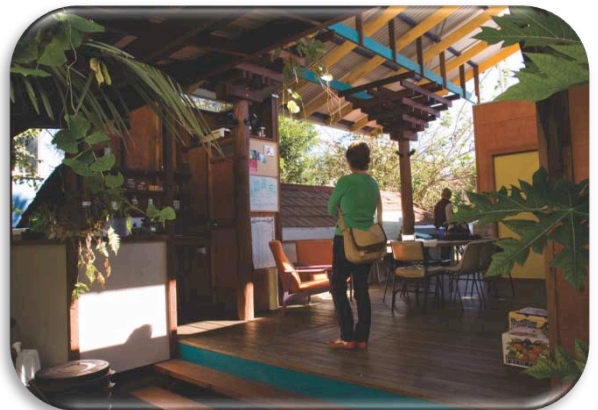
John Champaign

Spiral Community Hub

Spiral is a not-for-profit community enterprise structured as a community workers' cooperative based in West End, Brisbane.

With a focus on community-owned economic development, Spiral includes among its enterprises:

- **SOS — Simple Options for Sustainability** — publication of the Kurilpa Ethical Consumer Guide that showcases examples of local community, small and sustainable business
- **community gardens** — the Davies Park Community Market Garden and Paradise Park Community Garden serve as labour market training venues for Spiral clients
- **Eco-building** services — following the conversion of a traditional West End commercial premises to a resource efficient, climatically adapted building, Spiral is considering offering a design and build service
- **microfinance** — spiral is involved in savings and credit groups and community enterprise development, and is considering a microfinance working group to explore options in the Inner South



Inside Spiral Community Hub's community facility

- **Sustainable Gardening Services** — in partnership with Sustainable Gardening Services, a social enterprise providing landscaping, revegetation and garden maintenance services, Spiral provides employment to refugees and migrants as a transitional strategy to settlement in Australia
- **Justice Products** — Spiral's fair trade shopfront.

www.spiral.org.au



Spiral Community Hub's Justice Products shopfront

Sustainable Futures consultancy

Established by planner, Peter Cumming, the consultancy offers the Sustainability Health Check program to local government.

The aim is to develop internal practices and boost capacity in sustainability related areas.

Peter is a long-time permaculture designer who, with Robyn Francis, designed the Jalanbah Ecovillage at Nimbin, NSW

www.sustainablefutures.com.au

MECU

MECU is a credit union that provides banking and financial services and that has economic, environmental and social responsibility in its values.

mecu.com.au



Sustainable Future's Peter Cummins

Local food in Brisbane — online

Present at Go Local were people from a couple of online, local food initiatives in Brisbane.

www.brisbanelocalfood.ning.com is an initiative based on the social networking model where participants can post photos, resources, services, products and other information.

www.cityfoodgrowers.com.au is a website where, for a \$25 annual fee, participants can join an online marketplace that connects local food sellers and buyers, link with gardening networks, notify events, obtain organic growing information and access a vegetable and herb database.

A note for attendees of the 2008 Australian Permaculture Convergence

For those involved in the permaculture design system, especially those present at the 2008 Australian Permaculture Convergence 9 (APC9) in Sydney, it may be worth mentioning a few observations about APC9 and the Go Local conference.

There were similarities and differences.

The demographic

Like APC9, the age range of attendees at Go Local spanned the early 20s to the 70s.

In general, Go Local participants were educated and socially engaged. They included teachers, local government staff, one or two from state government, a couple working in community media, Internet and online service providers, consultants working in community development and sustainability, a few working in finance and many engaged in the community sector.

Their home towns and cities were along the East Coast, plus a single participant from Armidale, NSW.

Regional clusters from which participants came included:

- Melbourne, which was well represented
- Brisbane — well represented
- Wollongong, NSW — one participant
- Sydney — two participants (as far as is known)
- the Northern Rivers district of NSW — also known as the Rainbow Region — with people from Lismore and the Byron Bay areas
- Sunshine Coast — well represented
- Townsville — a single participant (working in local government).

Affiliations

Permaculture was represented although it provided far from the majority of participants.

It is difficult to classify participant as to their involvement in sustainability, community

development, food and transition initiatives. Many were already involved in activities that would be compatible with transition initiatives, some voluntarily but a reasonable number by way of their livelihoods. For the most part, these people would be familiar with permaculture but operate outside permaculture networks.

This raises questions about permaculture's niche in the wider sustainability nexus. While those within permaculture's core following probably see themselves at the forefront of sustainability education and action, that is perhaps not a universally shared perception.

As for actual transition initiatives, permaculturists are in the leadership. The Sunshine Coast transition crew definitely had a presence at Go Local. It is interesting to consider this in light of Rob Hopkin's statement in *The Transition Handbook* that permaculture forms the philosophical core of transition initiatives although it is a difficult concept to explain, the idea of transition being simpler to get across.

Go Local — the structure

The conference was fully catered and was a blend of presentations, planned and Open Space workshops, with plenty of time for the informal networking that is a valuable part of such gatherings.

Having a keynote speaker — Judy Wicks — worked well because she brought valuable insights and inspiration from her years of experience in supporting local enterprise.

The conference spanned a full two days. The venue — the Riverside conference centre — was central and easily accessible by bus and river ferry.

The organisation of Go Local is a credit to the Ethos Foundation's Ken McLeod and Sally McKinnon.