

Community development in a fractured future

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# Community development in a fractured future

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## Abstract

This article explores the implications for community development in a near-term future context of some degree of ecological and societal collapse. The extreme likelihood of near-term future collapse is well known to most climate and environmental scientists but generally not acknowledged by mainstream academic literature and mainstream media. Community development has an important role in preparing communities for a difficult future and will be vital in supporting community solidarity amid fracturing state capacity for social-care provision. The challenge of a future self-protective neoliberally informed global hegemony becoming more punitive is also explored.

## Background

The backdrop to this article is the threat of harmful anthropogenic change and a looming environmental global catastrophe if the gap of action between knowledge of what needs to be done and what is being done is not rapidly closed. The current sociopolitical climate suggests that this gap is unlikely to close before irreparable harm is done (Bendell, 2018; Bender, 2003; Emmott, 2013; Hansen, 2009; Jamail, 2019). Hence, I do not aim to convince the reader that bad times are coming, but rather presume that a difficult future is coming for much of the world and move forward with this as a foundational assumption.

Some care in positioning this article is needed because it espouses an often-unpopular view of the future that tends to attract sanction and resistance. In addition, the article is not able to offer a succinct, clear pathway into an uncertain future that will be very different in diverse geopolitical situations. Instead, the purpose of the article is to raise questions and challenges for the community development profession with some initial thoughts about the terrain community development may need to negotiate in the future. This does not make for a comforting read but instead takes the reader into a dialogue of dissensus with certainty about the future.

A great deal of information is available about what the future is likely to bring in terms of environmental catastrophe. What is much less commonly discussed are the social implications and the likelihood of some degree of societal collapse. This is not information that is commonly pulled together as a predictive series of discourses by academics or the mainstream media. In a sense, what seems to be missing are the articles and research that commence from a position that states: We know things are likely to be very bad in future, and therefore we need to consider the implications for those of us living now and what life may be like in a resource-poor world experiencing unsurprising social unrest and potential societal collapse. As Bendell states:

I am aware that some people consider statements from academics that we now face inevitable near-term social collapse to be irresponsible due to the potential impact that may have on the motivation or mental health of people reading such statements. My research and engagement in dialogue on this topic, some of which I will outline in this paper, leads me to conclude the exact opposite. It is a responsible act to communicate this analysis now and invite people to support each other, myself included, in exploring the implications, including the psychological and spiritual implications. (2018, p 4)

Following Bendell's argument, it seems important take up the difficult challenge of writing and presenting information in a way that does not pretend that all will be well in an uncertain, but very likely difficult, future. While this piece is underpinned by a well-supported view of a future of difficult societal and environmental predicaments it also needs to be acknowledged that this is only one possibility. However, the likelihood of partial or total societal collapse as a possibility is well supported by scientific literature as detailed in (for example) two authoritative and well-researched reports, by Beddington (2008) and Motesharrei et al. (2014). Both reports were undertaken by teams of researchers sponsored by both governments and academic institutions. Both reports (one from the United Kingdom, the other from the United States) reach the conclusion that some degree of societal collapse is very likely in the near future. Beddington suggesting 2030 as the mostly likely year when the current global civilisational status quo reveals itself as untenable and begins to fracture. What both reports fail to do is to speculate about how the public should manage the information that collapse seems almost inevitable, or, how communities might adapt to a resource-poor and socially fractured future.

Arguably, in academia (Bendell, 2018) very little is written that starts from the position of bluntly naming collapse as a real possibility facing

global societies in the near to mid-term future. More particularly (as Bendell asserts), not a great deal is written that both admits to the real possibility of collapse and then explores what life may require of us in those circumstances. Typically, the possibility of collapse operates under the glamour of a late-modern science- and progress-driven hegemony as an immediate galvaniser of 'hope-filled' searches for fixes for current crises. In discussing the tendency for Western states to hope and search for techno-solutions to issues such as climate change (rather than the quieter and less hope-filled business of reflecting on what the future may be like and what it will require of us), Lynch states:

The problem with hoping for a technological solution to climate change is that it is often insufficiently critical of the ways of life that have wrought havoc on the rest of nature. It is easier to hope for a wild geoengineering solution than face the reality that billions of people need to change their daily habits in order to lessen the immense suffering appearing on the horizon. This hope cruelly prevents us from confronting the deep structural challenge of rethinking the way that some humans relate to nature. Obviously not all people experience this world in the same way, and it is a further tragedy that those who have contributed the least to climate change will be among those who experience its consequences earliest. (2017, p, 3)

What is also not much named in environmental literature are the historical often-harsh state responses to resource depletion (Davies & Lynch, 2002), and that changing modes of governance in more draconian directions are also likely to be a feature of the coming decades. These are not popular discourses and stand in contradiction to a more common 'hope-filled' public discourse that with enough effort the future may be rescued from our current abuse of the collective environment (Roberts, 2015).

My argument throughout this piece is that there are possibilities that community development as a profession moving into an unknown future needs to consider. This paper might be considered as sitting within the apocryphal tradition of gloomy hopeless predictions of awful things to come. However, what I argue through this piece is that hope needs refiguring. Not as hope that the worst can be staved off, although this does remain a possibility. But instead, that what will emerge from encounters with difficulty amongst different geopolitical realities will be creative, diverse, and represent new possibilities for community. In discussing the dangers of hope and the utility of an apocalyptic perspective, Lynch makes the following point:

Rather than investing in technological salvations that will allow us to prolong a way of life that is destroying the rest of nature, we can embrace pessimism. In abandoning hope that one way of life will continue, we open up a space for alternative hopes. (2017, p, 5)

I assert that the community development profession could have an important role to play in supporting new emergences of community solidarity and support in future challenging times. With reference to Ife (2013) in particular, community development as a profession has an ethos of resisting calls for the

kinds of xenophobia, nationalism and anti-science rhetoric that unfortunately characterise the current United States response to the rapidly changing environmental conditions, making devastating wildfires and increasingly harsh weather conditions somewhat of a climate inevitability. Arguably, nation-states dominated by neoliberal approaches, with the concomitant divestment of service capacity to the private sector, are poorly equipped to manage the sorts of challenges that climate change and pandemics bring (*Scientific American*, 2020; Borunda, 2020).

What is also argued through this piece is that a global move to more equitable (and potentially greener) forms of capitalism (such as the Mondragon approach) (Heales et al., 2017) is unlikely to obtain a significant timely global grip in a context of neoliberal policies (and their beneficiaries) maintaining effective hegemonic control of the global economy into the near to mid-term future (Mayer, 2016; Piketty & Goldhammer, 2014). A range of authors (Davies & Lynch, 2002; Neale, 2019) also argues that the typical response of capitalist states under threat of diminishing resources is to move towards a more fascistic and controlling governing approach and it seems a reasonable prediction that to varying degrees this will be the case in a resource-depleted future.

## About community development

Community development can be slippery to simply define. In examining the role of community development in an uncertain, difficult future it is perhaps sensible to first clarify what I mean by community development before moving on to further discussion.

## Initial definitions

In my personal approach to community development I draw strongly on the work of Jim Ife (2013). While community development is always about increasing relations of trust and connection within and between groups, in my opinion, without a structural analysis of power and the capacity to name and resist oppressive forces, community development is at constant risk of political co-option. I agree with Ife that, along with increasing trust, connection and equitable resource access, community development is also a process of active resistance to the social and environmental fracturing that accompanies a global neoliberal hegemony. At a more practical level (in discussing community development and social capital), Claridge (2018) differentiates between bonding, bridging and linking. 'Bonding' is the connections of solidarity that grow between people in similar situations either geographically or in terms of personal circumstance. Claridge adds notes of caution that if community development operates simply to strengthen internal bonding within existing communities this, first, has the potential for exacerbating xenophobic responses to other groups. Second, Claridge warns that promoting internal

bonding alone does little to establish the kinds of connections between diverse communities that create opportunities for mutual solidarity and increased access to resources. Claridge defines 'bridging' as the connections between different communities, who, while not necessarily sharing the same characteristics, can establish relations of solidarity, information sharing and support. Going further, Claridge defines 'linking' as the social capacity for managing differential power relations. This might be understood as a developed capacity for community groups to effectively 'speak up' the vertical ladder of power to funding bodies and government. Linking is perhaps the place where community development as a practice moves beyond establishing relations of solidarity toward active advocacy for resourcing and empowerment. As Claridge argues, linking is a critical capacity for the empowerment of communities and is frequently a role undertaken by NGOs. I would argue that, in what Neale (2019) asserts is likely to be a future of government significantly more draconian than our current liberal democracies, the capacity to maintain and develop dialogues within (and to) hierarchies of power will be even more critical.

## The matter of business

In considering community access to resources, it is also important to factor in relations between community, business and the state. Community development is not well served if business (either local businesses – and/or larger conglomerates) is not considered. However, this needs to be approached with some caveats. Business and the economic structures within which business takes place are integral aspects of community, and without bridging into this area critical opportunities for resourcing and empowering community groups are, of course, lost. That said, the 'businesses' of community development do not take place in a political- and economic-context-free zone. As we (Kenkel & Prestidge) argued in 2015, between the 1970s and 2015 there was significant shift in approach to governance by NGOs, including community development organisations. This shift might be characterised as a replacement of management through 'flat-structure' internal democracy, toward management via 'hierarchical' governance board, manager, employee structures that somewhat mimic the employer/employee class power relations found within the private sector. In our view the movement of NGOs toward more efficient and business-orientated hierarchical approaches was (and is) a distinct feature of the NGO landscape in Aotearoa, and carries the risk of diminishing a practical commitment to social justice and equity of voice. This risk of diminishment operates both in the outward-facing work of community development organisations and in the degree of real democracy enabled within their internal structures. Promoting equity of voice and equity of access to resources and services are what authors such as Ife (2013) view as core functions of community development and, in my opinion, without these core functions community development becomes an industry at risk of serving the interests of ideological state actors rather than the needs of local communities.

Fursova (2018) warns of the risk of a neoliberal hegemonic creep tempting community development organisations away from addressing issues of equity and social justice toward service provision undertaken within a business framework. Describing where the community development sector is sited in Canada, Fursova states: “I locate community development as situated inside a larger area of the non-profit sector, and the non-profit sector as immersed in the hegemonic discourse of neoliberal capitalist development” (2018, p. 4).

Fursova also argues that a continual risk for community development is co-option into operating as an arm of the state, serving the interests of the state, not necessarily local communities. This risk is particularly the case given the systematic state withdrawal from welfare provision under neoliberal conditions (Ife, 2013).

### **A small personal example of how community development can be encouraged to become an arm of the state**

Some years ago I was looking for material for teaching a new community development course and discovered a well-put-together online guide for community development, with an accent on how communities could help themselves. At first glance this seemed an excellent instructional template for community groups. On closer reading I realised the guide was completely free of any recognition of structural inequity within society and appeared to have deleted any reference to the role of community development in assisting communities to understand and resist oppressive power structures. The guide also operated as a push toward the creation of local businesses so that individuals could move off benefits. What was particularly egregious about this template for community development was that it specifically targeted Māori communities. The enthusiastic, future-focused style of the guide failed to acknowledge the role of colonisation and the long-term failure of the Treaty of Waitangi to deliver wellbeing for Māori communities and the subsequent (all too frequent) marginalisation of Māori communities. Unsurprisingly, this template of instruction for community development had been developed by a government ministry and was actively promoted by and to people who (I suspect) had little recognition of the inherent and subtle neoliberal agenda. Unfortunately, I cannot now cite this document, but it is not hard to find similar items online.

In contrast, Ife (2013) provides a description of key principles of community development that I personally resonate with. I am particularly drawn to his commitment to social justice and his recognition of the critical role of human rights. I am also drawn to his notion that full humanity is only achieved in community, as this operates as an effective counter to the pervasive (Kenkel, 2005) neoliberal discourse of individual self-sufficiency as a social ideal. Ife states:

At a general level, there are some community development principles that apply universally and can be seen to be necessary in any approach

to community development, whatever the cultural, social or political context. These are the subjects of earlier chapters, namely: *the idea and experience of community as being necessary for people to achieve their full humanity*; the principles of ecological sustainability, diversity, holism, balance, *interdependence* and so on; the principles of social justice and human rights, including an analysis of oppression (e.g. class, gender, race/ethnicity); the principles of change from below, bottom-up development, valuing local knowledge and skills and so on, and the principles of the importance and integrity of process, consciousness-raising, empowerment, participation and cooperation. (Ife, 2013, Kindle location 4472, my emphasis)

The International Association of Community Development (IACD) offers a more succinct definition that echoes many of the sentiments of Ife:

Community development is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes participative democracy, sustainable development, rights, economic opportunity, equality and social justice, through the organisation, education and empowerment of people within their communities, whether these be of locality, identity or interest, in urban and rural settings. (2020, p. 1)

## Looking to a difficult future

The following two statements indicate a troubling future may be coming:

The Anthropocene represents the beginning of a very rapid human-driven trajectory of the Earth System away from the glacial–interglacial limit cycle toward new, hotter climatic conditions and a profoundly different biosphere. The current position, at over 1° C above a preindustrial baseline, is nearing the upper envelope of interglacial conditions over the past 1.2 million years. More importantly, the rapid trajectory of the climate system over the past half-century along with technological lock in and socioeconomic inertia in human systems commit the climate system to conditions beyond the envelope of past interglacial conditions. *We, therefore, suggest that the Earth System may already have passed one “fork in the road” of potential pathways, a bifurcation taking the Earth System out of the next glaciation cycle.* (Steffen et al., 2018, p. 2, my emphasis)

We are the first generations born into a new and unprecedented age – the age of ecocide. To name it thus is not to presume the outcome, but simply to describe a process which is underway.... Those who witness extreme social collapse at first hand seldom describe any deep revelation about the truths of human existence. What they do mention, if asked, is their surprise at how easy it is to die. (Hine & Kingsnorth, 2009, p. 1)

I introduce these quotes because I believe it is important to ground the work in both the well-founded assertion that unstoppable physical processes affecting our world are already underway and that ordinary communities will need to manage what seems likely to be devastating environmental and societal change. Best scientific evidence is that even with heroic efforts some degree of environmental collapse, sea rise (IPCC, 2018; Kolbert, 2014; Mann & Kump, 2009) and (potentially) societal disruption will happen in our near futures. It is for me a horrible thought that the time has passed when efforts to halt climate change and environmental degradation could have been fully successful. Arguably, the current challenges are not simply amelioration of environmental crisis or blunting of social impact. The challenges are also to begin thinking and planning for a different future where communities face new and potentially harsh predicaments.

An example of predicaments the future is very likely to bring are that within a few decades some heavily populated parts of the world will experience days or weeks of summer humidity and heat so lethally hot for humans that six hours exposure will mean unavoidable death from organ failure (Raymond et al., 2020). This is sometimes called the lethal wet-bulb phenomenon: a combination of temperature and humidity so high that the human body cannot maintain surface skin temperature under 35° C even if wrapped in wet cloth with a fan going. The consequence of exposure to these conditions is death within six hours.

A few places around the world have already hit these levels but so far for periods of only two to three hours (lethal temperatures and humidity first recorded in 2019 on the Indian subcontinent). A tiny increase in global temperature will take us over the line and make such conditions a summer norm for days and weeks in several vulnerable countries with populations in the hundreds of millions. Best predictions are that this is likely to occur within a mere few decades. Extrapolating from such occurrences, this will mean either the movement of hundreds of millions of people from environments that have become potentially lethal, or the death of those populations. These are not apocalyptic horror fantasies, they are what well-researched hard data tells us the future is likely to bring. This kind of information is easily accessible for anyone wishing to make the effort to find it. That such information is not at the forefront of public news suggests something (to me) about how poorly the cultures of the West are doing in facing the likelihood of hard predicaments coming.

Hard science and poetic literature both have something to offer in how we adjust to what is likely to be coming. First, the hard sciences (which are only beginning to stop understating the challenges to come) are important in informing society about what is likely to happen in the future. Second, the arts, poetry and literature may be important in cultural processes of discovering and speaking to how we must live differently in a different future. Hine and Kingsnorth (2009) argue that humanity at this point in history is not in the position of having an ecological crisis to resolve, but instead in the position of needing new cultural tools to face inevitable future predicaments that will need to be managed and endured.

This article discusses some future likelihoods that are painful to consider. This is, however, an article about hope. Not hope that we can fully avert future

environmental and societal catastrophe, but instead hope that as communities face the coming predicaments they will find collective solidarity and wiser, more cherishing, ways of living with the environs that sustain us. Community development perspectives could have a potential key role in this transition to a new sanity.

As briefly discussed, the usually unmentioned backdrop to discussions of our shared future is that the world has already passed an ecological crisis point of no return and there is very little chance that relatively near-term ecological catastrophe can be averted (Jamail, 2019; Beddington, 2008, 2015; Hamilton, 2017; Smith, 2013). These are hard truths that the Western world is perhaps only just beginning to face. Bendell argues that while it is well understood in the scientific community that catastrophe is at this point basically unavoidable, the academic world of science produces few writings that commence from this understanding (2018).

Authors such as Hine and Kingsnorth (2009) assert that the greatest cultural challenge for the current generation is to find ways to stare into the abyss of coming unavoidable difficulties and collectively and individually consider how to appropriately respond. We find ourselves in the strange situation where academics and writers who supposedly have the task of being the critics and conscience of society seem to operate according to an unspoken convention of never bluntly naming the situation. This is a major problem for society as it is difficult to plan for and consider future predicaments that are unnamed and generally unacknowledged. Bendell (2018) describes “implicative denial” (p. 16), in which a proportion of people who are aware that human-induced environmental change is potentially catastrophic busy themselves with activities such as environmental campaigns as an alternative to stopping to consider the real implications of what is known to be coming. As a located practice, community development cannot afford to wait for academia to give up its collective dithering and find the courage to speak socially unpopular truths. Nor can we afford the luxury of solely diving into environmental activities that, while worthy and effective in their own right, can also act as ways to avoid considering the wider implications of what we are beginning to know will happen in future.

The risk of not facing these harsh realities is that we then become silently complicit in how the rump end of neoliberalism continues to take the world’s resources for a small number of people while continuing to blame individuals for structural and environmental problems thoroughly outside of individual control (Piketty & Goldhammer, 2014; Harvey, 2013; Smith, 2013).

## About green resistance movements

There is a great deal to be admired and learned from variously the mainstream green movements, activist positions such as Extinction Rebellion (2020) and Naess’s deep green (2009) push for an understanding of the world and consequent policy approaches that are more ecocentric than anthropocentric. That said, and for the purposes of this article, my own position is that while these movements are admirable and worthy in terms of the damage they may

be able to constrain, another useful perspective on them might be in terms of how they assist in preparing the general population for facing and managing a future likely to be very different from now.

Barber (2014) makes the important point that while food abundance in the West via outlets such as supermarkets is somewhat of a grace point in human history, in terms of most Westerners being able to easily access food, accompanying this is the invisibilised vulnerability of food production and delivery processes being completely dependent on a fossil-fuel-economy mode of production and delivery via trucks, trains and air transport. Barber makes the point that most Western cities contain only enough food to feed the population for three days. As he argues, this kind of extraordinary vulnerability to disruptions in chains of delivery is not visible to the average citizen. Arguably, we find ourselves in a situation where food production and supply are more vulnerable than they have ever been, with an accompanying lack of awareness on the part of most people of that vulnerability. My own position on the current Green Resistance is that, as worthy as their efforts are to resist damaging impacts on our shared environments, what needs to accompany this is disseminating an awareness that as global communities we face enormous vulnerabilities likely to impact at the personal and local community level. To name this in a colloquial way: much effort is given to resisting change, little is given to advance accommodation of inevitable change.

## Regarding the future

The harsh reality is that without some unlikely change of heart by those controlling the global economy we are in for some forms of societal and ecological collapse within the next 15 years. Predictions put 2030 as when the perfect storm commences (Beddington, 2008, 2015). As Hine and Kingsnorth (2009) argue, the Western world needs to begin the process of saying goodbye to the attractive fantasy that science, progress and some greener version of business as usual will save us. Arguably, a greener business-as-usual is not likely to prevent accelerating climate change (Loewenstein, 2015). Community development can either be at the forefront of lifting this beguiling and harmful 'all-will-be-well' veil and actively respond to the social implications of what is coming, or collude with the fantasy and by doing so be an active source of social harm.

## The unfortunate perfect storm

The perfect storm is the current hard-wired dominance of a neoliberal economic system committed to endless growth with no off-switch, controlled by a self-protective hyper-rich elite. This is closely followed by dying fisheries, rapidly shrinking arable soil and fresh water, sea-level rise, global heating and extreme weather events, and the worldwide horrors of hundreds of millions

of people forced out of their countries because they are no longer able to feed themselves. Such mega-refugeeism will mean shifts of peoples on a scale never seen before and the unsurprising convulsions of warfare that will accompany massive shifts of populations from unsurvivable zones to places already occupied. Predictably, the delicate interconnected global web of trade and travel that defines our current civilisation will collapse to an unknown extent, taking with it most of the global and national institutions that aim to provide care and support to those in need (Bender, 2003; Emmott, 2013; Hansen, 2009; Jamail, 2019).

Arguably, end-stage capitalist business-as-usual is already killing much of the planetary ecosystems, with much worse to come, and a significant proportion of humanity will die as a consequence. Aotearoa New Zealand is fortunately placed in terms of latitude but will not escape the turmoil. This is not science fiction or fantasy, these are predictions made by credible and cautious researchers (Beddinton, 2008, 2015; Motesharrei et al., 2014). Life in future will very likely mean surviving among a fractured resource-poor global environment significantly harsher than that of today.

## **Neoliberal capitalism**

There is a political aspect that needs to be factored into any serious consideration of the future environment. We live in a world dominated by an entrenched neoliberal ideology and this is unlikely to change soon. Neoliberal policies and practices and the coming ecological catastrophes are intimately intertwined. Consider the fact that more CO<sub>2</sub> has been released and more ecological damage done since 1989 than in the previous 200 years (Hausfather, 2018). The year 1989 is approximately when neoliberal policies and practices reached ascendant status, truly seized the reins of global power and started remaking the world in neoliberal image and to the advantage of its hyper-wealthy advocates (Harvey, 2013).

We need to counter the neoliberal hegemony (now and in the future) with collective and community approaches to managing and surviving the coming ecological and societal predicaments. Actively facing these predicaments is not simply a miserable matter of considering possible disaster. My personal hope is that much that is good in terms of healthier and more connected ways of living may emerge through the experience of catastrophe and post catastrophe.

## **Collapse creates solidarity and possibilities**

Bonded communities and other communities they bridge into do not usually break down in the face of shared disaster, rather they typically become stronger (Fritz, 1996). Fritz's well-researched work on communities and mental health makes the point that the evidence of lived experience shows

that through catastrophe and disaster communities emerge stronger, more connected, more generous, and with a much-increased awareness on the part of individuals of the value of the social bond. Fritz's work reveals that the zombie-apocalypse movie depictions of tiny fractious survivor groups in vicious and lethal competition are only fiction and do not reflect what is known about how communities truly respond to shared challenge. Community development is ideally placed to be an articulate force for good in the necessary community transitions much of the world will soon face.

Hope for the future is important, but individual actions have almost no likelihood of stopping climatic and environmental changes that are already happening. Most serious researchers tell us it is too late. Human-driven climate change processes already begun mean that major sea-level rise is inevitable. Every degree of warming creates new problems that will further accelerate global warming and worsen environmental degradation, with accompanying shrinkage of the resource base that humanity requires to feed itself. Spiraling cycles of warming and extreme weather conditions will render large parts of the globe functionally unlivable in future. Life will retreat toward the poles (Lovelock, 2014). What compounds the situation is the reality that current global power configurations are dominated by entrenched growth-at-all-costs neoliberal capitalist policies that have no capacity or desire to alter the lethal status quo. Those who benefit most from neoliberal policies are also those effectively in control of the global economy, and also have the resources to protect themselves from the worst effects of environmental degradation. As is usual under laissez-faire capitalism, it is the poor and the already disenfranchised who will suffer the most (Motesharrei et al., 2014).

Neale (2019) argues that societal collapse will not necessarily involve the disintegration of our current forms of state government but will instead very likely mean the recrystallisation of existing power and governing structures into new and more brutal social forms. In reference to the fascist horrors of the 20th and early 21st centuries, and the mega-deaths that have accompanied drought, famine and the political responses to these events, he states:

Almost none of those horrors were committed by small groups of savages wandering through the ruins. They were committed by States, and by mass political movements. Society did not disintegrate. It did not come apart. Society intensified. Power concentrated and split and those powers had us kill each other. It seems reasonable to assume that climate social collapse will be like that. Only with five times as many dead, if we are lucky, and twenty-five times as many, if we are not. Remember this, because when the moment of runaway climate change comes for you, where you live, it will not come in the form of a few wandering hairy bikers. It will come with the tanks on the streets and the military or the fascists taking power. Those generals will talk in deep green language. They will speak of degrowth, and the boundaries of planetary ecology. They will tell us we have consumed too much, and been too greedy, and now for the sake of Mother Earth, we must tighten our belts. Then we will tighten our belts, and we will suffer, and they will build a new kind of gross green inequality. And in a world of ecological freefall, it will take

cruelty on an unprecedented scale to keep their inequality in place. (2019, p. 6)

Neale paints a disturbing political picture of the future that somewhat fits with what is known about how authoritative totalitarian fascism arises in response to resource depletion (Davies & Lynch, 2002). It is important that community development as a (frequently) state-funded enterprise be alive to the possibility that it could all too easily become an enforcement tool of the vision of oppressive totalitarian states. The vision of the future portrayed by Neale, and what I have suggested are the implications of Fritz's (1996) work, may appear to reflect a jarring dissonance. One story of the future reflects what is known about the tendency for states to become ever more authoritarian when resources are stretched. The other story reflects what is known about the way small and interconnected communities respond to the existential crisis of living through disaster. Both seem likely: a broad state response of oppression combined with local communities drawing together to survive both diminished resources and harsher state conditions. Arguably it is within this dissonance that community development may have a critical role to play. As Claridge (2018) describes, bridging and linking are critical functions for building social capital. As locally bonded communities draw together in response to difficult conditions, bridging between diverse groups will be of critical importance, as will the difficult task of finding ways to speak truth to state power so that communities are resourced to survive.

One of the great challenges for community development in a possible future of harsher governance and diminished resources will be the unfortunate typical neoliberal response to societal and environmental problems of a default tendency to individualise fault and tailor responses to crisis toward the individual, not the driving structural issues (Kenkel, 2005; Mayer, 2016; Rose, 1998, 1999). Such an individual responsabilising approach is diametrically opposed to a community development position. The typical neoliberal response is the call to make individuals responsible as authors of their own difficulties, when they might more realistically be understood as victims of inequitable structural circumstance, is always strong under neoliberal conditions (Han, 2017) and it is a call that needs to be strongly resisted by the community development profession if we are to maintain moral integrity.

It is not possible to predict the exact nature of the (potential) coming collapse, and this will of course be different in different geopolitical contexts. However, one can imagine (with some likelihood of certainty) that, as Ife (2013) points out, just as the welfare state is generally incompatible with neoliberalism, the continuity of state welfare provision will also be incompatible with a future of crumbling or refigured government infrastructure amidst a shrinking resource base.

What also seems likely is that the elite groups (for whom neoliberal policies work well) will not give over control but will instead attempt to implement strategies to embed the iniquitous status quo even more firmly into the world's social and economic structures (Motesharrei et al., 2014; Neale, 2019; Piketty & Goldhammer, 2014; Wacquant, 2009). As some commentators have argued, neoliberal ideology operates as a closed tautological loop (Kenkel, 2005; Marshall, 1995). Within the worldview of neoliberalism there is

no device for critiquing its own foundational assumptions. Typically, instead, the response to any external crisis is to apply neoliberal policies even more firmly. This is likely to be the case even as signs of collapse and catastrophe become ever more apparent to the general population.

The moral task for an activist community development movement that maintains a commitment to social justice and the capacity to name inequities will not be to determine the final nature of community post environmental and societal breakdown. That determination will arise from diverse surviving communities themselves (Wright et al., 2011). Instead, the task of community development could be supporting solidarity and humane behaviour, and resisting political calls for xenophobia and the blaming of the 'other' during the time between the present and an unknown (possible) post-collapse future.

Arguably, as conditions become more chaotic and the coherency of society stretches and tears, it seems likely there will be more calls to police and discipline those most affected by resource deprivation in ways more draconian than now. Wacquant (2009) argues that the neoliberal political project has shifted the aim of the state from re-moralisation and re-inclusion of the poor toward an increasingly punitive and controlling approach, with little interest in rehabilitation. Community development will (I would argue) be one of the (potential) quasi-arms of the state to be invited into these policing and disciplining roles, and I would argue we need to be alert to that possibility and be prepared to resist such invitations. Social work has historically been deeply complicit in enforcing state norms, and it seems very likely that in a similar way community development will also be positioned as an industry perceived as capable of influencing and controlling recalcitrant population groups (Andrews & Reisch, 2002).

In Wacquant's view, we currently have a two-tiered system of state regulation running in tandem: a generous and light-handed regime for the very rich and an accompanying massive investment in social systems for punishing, blaming, imprisoning and controlling the poor. If we accept Wacquant's view, it is hard to imagine this double system of state regulation softening as resources shrink and the effects of ecological collapse are felt by growing numbers of the poor.

## Future context

In considering a future of societal and ecological collapse to an extent which we do not yet know, I would imagine (and that is all anyone can do at this point) that a range of possibilities for community will coexist.

**First:** There will undoubtedly be massive movement of population from areas insufficiently resourced to support their populations; this is likely to involve a convulsion of warfare and struggle globally.

**Second:** It seems very likely there will also be well-defended technological wealth enclaves that support the descendants/recipients of those who have benefited from the last decades of neoliberal policies.

**Third:** It seems quite possible that there will be many communities who operate with a degree of autonomous self-sufficiency after partial or complete

state collapse.

**Fourth:** There exists the possibility of tyrannical governmental structures, with new forms of brutally imposed inequality.

## Discussion

To remain ethical, all forms of social practice (including community development practice) may need to give up the dividing and 'othering' practice of referring to the people they work with as clients. As Russell argues, the use of the word 'client' implies both dependency and a user of needed services (2015). The language of 'practitioner–client' commences a human relationship from a foundation not of people in solidarity in the face of shared troubles, but rather one group in need, and another group with the capacity to offer (or not) resources, assistance or advice. The language inherently produces a power relationship that shrinks the possibility of simple fellowship. 'Client' is a word that replaces 'we' with 'I' and 'the other.' Following this, I would argue a renewed commitment to solidarity will be critically important in the future of community development practice.

Speaking as an educator, I contend that we will also need to be at the leading edge of academics who are prepared to begin telling the truth about (potential) coming catastrophes. Having trialed this kind of 'truth telling' in a range of community forums, I can report it is not happily received and is only done at some cost to the teller. I suspect that this kind of 'truth-telling' will attract sanction from both professional bodies and the institutions we teach within. At a practical level, this will mean academics being courageous enough to turn away from their usual textbooks and journals and research what is known about the likelihood of ecological and social collapse. Finding this information is not difficult. Anyone who wants to can easily find relevant and well-researched material that supports the basic thrust of the argument that some form of catastrophic collapse is inevitable, very likely within the lifetime of those reading this article.

Educators and influencers need to find courage in speaking painful truth to students and community about what is likely to happen in the coming years. If we lie, by polite (or frightened) omission, we become complicit in a process of collective denial. If we lie, then, rather than arming people with information about what is coming and tools of community connection, engagement and solidarity (that we will all need to survive the coming predicaments), we instead potentially collude with the refiguring of practice as a state arm that will all too likely work to further oppress the poor and struggling in a degrading environment.

Regarding hope and planning, Bendell (2019) suggests, "It is time to drop all hopes and visions that arise from an inability to accept impermanence and non-control, and instead describe a radical hope of how we respond in these times" (p. 12). As a force for social change, community development as a profession and as a set of practices is somewhat uniquely placed, in that rather than being the defender or maintainer of the status quo it could be characterised as a series of fluid responses to changing conditions,

underpinned by a set of situational values cherishing fairness, collectivity and a humane response to structurally imposed conditions. Within this (admittedly) optimistic view of community development, hope becomes contingent on the realities of the moment rather than adhering to any specific political vision of how society should be structured. In that sense, community development is very well positioned to assist communities when frameworks of support and sustenance once presumed permanent begin to fracture and collapse. As Bendell (2018) and Hines and Kingsnorth (2009) argue, the great challenge of the coming decades will not be to shore up the status quo but, rather, to face up to, and successfully adapt to, predicaments that bring new sets of problems and challenges.

This kind of courageous community development 'ethical facing-up-to' will require giving up the West's cultural delusion that everything can be techno-fixed, and instead mean a relinquishment of some kinds of harmful delusional hope and the discovery of new hopes that are not linked to maintaining the permanence of our current societal infrastructures.

What potentially needs to be given away is the kind of hope espoused by some mainstream green activists that with enough effort the climate crisis can be turned around. The wholesale adoption of electric cars, more rigorous recycling strategies and investment in green energy are both unlikely to occur under neoliberal conditions and, even if enthusiastically taken up worldwide, unlikely to fully halt climatic processes of change that are already well underway (IPCC, 2018). The kind of hope that will be needed in future is smaller in scale, and likely to involve new ways for local communities of people to connect, cherish and support each other. Such connection and local supportive cherishing are exactly what community development is skilled at.

Relinquishing hope that things will remain the same (but with a few green tweaks) and truly beginning to face coming predicaments cannot be done without real emotional and spiritual costs. There will need to be both cultural and individual processes of grieving and imaginative adaptation that a range of authors argue the last 40 years in the West has ill-equipped us for (Bendell, 2018; Emmott, 2013; Hine & Kingsnorth, 2009; Jamail, 2019; Kenkel, 2005, 2018, 2019; Neale, 2019; Roberts, 2015; Smith, 2013). As these authors argue, the cultural meme of progress as a natural inevitability creates little room for imagining a more resource poor and environmentally diminished future world where the supermarket is no longer the easy source of sustenance. As resources diminish, nation-state support services fracture, and our environments become harsher and poorer, one of the most important roles for community development may be to assist communities to enrich their imaginations, discover how to grieve for what is lost, and find new ways of hoping and cherishing in solidarity with others.

As Fritz (1996) points out, communities under threat, challenge and crisis do not fracture; they typically become stronger, with a new understanding and valuing of the power of interdependence and solidarity. Community development has a real role to play in assisting communities to adopt new ways of hoping and valuing. This is particularly the case if, as Neile (2019) argues, the broader state apparatuses are likely to become more draconian and harsher. Community development will have a potentially important role in what could very likely be seen as the subversive activities of assisting

communities to create solidarity in the face of both environmental collapse and harsh compliance demands from government.

## Community development organisations

The following are ideas that have emerged from discussions about what may be required of community organisations to be a force for positive change in a resource-diminished future facing new predicaments. What seems critically important is to find ways to consider the likelihood of a very different future. This will involve emotion and dismay that is perhaps unavoidable and cannot simply be an intellectual endeavour. Alongside internal board and staff processes for facing, feeling and thinking about the likelihood of different and harsher futures, there also needs to be an external-facing commitment to speaking about harsh possibilities in future. As Bendell (2018) points out, there is a great deal of public dialogue supporting the notion that everything will be fine because progress will rescue us, while what is quietly known in the scientific community is that there is little likelihood of rescue coming. A role for community development can be to stop colluding with a collective silence and begin to publicly speak of uncomfortable likelihoods.

Arguably, it is also important for community development organisations to recheck priorities. Does the mission statement and vision of your organisation have room for attending to the needs of many people facing the predicaments the near-to-mid-term future will likely bring? Is your purpose able to encompass the likelihood of massive change in the coming decades?

It might also be important to begin considering what will need to be relinquished in a resource-diminished future. For instance, it is unlikely that funding streams will continue unchanged into the future. What seems more likely is that community development will need, even more than it does today, to exist in solidarity and interdependence with communities. This may require new considerations of old questions, such as the balance between the visions and wants of funders and the needs of communities under challenge. As Han (2017), Neale (2019) and Waquant (2009) point out, the tendency of states under neoliberal conditions, particularly when under threat, is to take the default position of individualising responsibility for problems. This tendency to blame individuals is likely (I would argue) to strengthen as conditions become harsher. Community development as a profession needs to be prepared to resist the call to blame individuals, and instead work toward an ethos of collective responsibility and collective wellbeing. Doing so may involve some very hard decisions about accepting conditional funding and perhaps considering futures of no funding at all.

To be effective in future as a profession and set of practices, community development will need the courage to shift away from displacement activities that discourage facing the predicaments caused by the Anthropocene. Facing what is coming will not be assisted by frantic efforts to maintain the status quo. What will need to accompany shifts away from unhelpful displacement activities is the exploration of what can be retained, restored and cherished, and the beginning of planning for what must be protected into the future.

A diversity of communities exploring, surviving and thriving in a different future will have a great deal to offer each other. Community development can play a key bridging role in assisting diverse communities to remain connected and supportive of each other. At this point in history it also seems sensible to begin planning for a post-welfare state. Authors such as Ife (2013) have argued that neoliberalism is fundamentally incompatible with widescale social welfare serving collective need, and this movement towards the full disintegration of a welfare state is likely to accelerate as conditions harshen.

There are also aspects that need to be resisted, such as xenophobia, closed-border nationalism, blame of the other and horizontal violence within communities. As Ife (2013) points out, these are all phenomena that have increased in the last few decades and the socio-political tendency to blame the 'other' is likely to accelerate in future, as is arguably the current case in the USA. Community development has a role in speaking against tendencies of peoples under threat to place blame on the 'other.' Maintaining the capacity for a structural analysis that seeks cause for problems in larger stories of inequity will be very important in resisting the call to blame both individuals and the different other. Han (2017) argues that under the tyranny of a neoliberal story of the self, the individual (rather than structural forces) becomes the causative site for quality-of-life outcome. He asserts that under these conditions, resistance to collectively experienced oppressive forces becomes difficult, whereas self-blame and depression become almost inevitable. It seems likely that as harsher environmental conditions mean good life outcomes become individually harder to achieve, the neoliberal story of individual culpability for personal wellbeing will remain prevalent. Such an agonising disjunct between individual experience and neoliberal propaganda will (potentially) affect increasing numbers of people. Depression and a misguided belief in a structurally context-free individual capacity for perfectibility are already an epidemic (Curran & Hill, 2017). The nightmare of the impossibility of achieving economic and personal success in a harsh, straitened future that continues to promote a neoliberal story of 'personal responsibility and perfectibility' is likely to make this a pandemic.

Community development may have a vital role in telling another story. Community development needs to continue to promote the story of solidarity and shared struggle that says your individual success (or failure) is not so much to do with your own efforts as to do with global conditions created by large economic and societal structures designed to serve the few, not the many. Alongside this refusal to accept a story of individual responsibility needs to go an even louder refusal to accept the neoliberal promise that all will be well as long as we all continue to work hard, borrow hard and consume much.

## Conclusion

The TAZ (temporary autonomous zone) is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it. (Bey, 1991, p. 70)

In concluding, rather than drawing on a community development theorist, I would prefer to use the writings of Hakim Bey (1991), a poet and thinker who studied the histories of pirate utopias. These were groups of sailors, often forced into servitude to early colonial forces, who frequently responded to their oppression by first rebelling, and then developing what were (for the times) extraordinarily egalitarian charters to live by. These were peoples living at the edge of the colonising world, acutely aware that their rebellions were likely to quickly attract the disciplining attentions of larger states. The charters developed by these quixotic rebels were notable for their commitment to equality for all peoples, a commitment to the equal sharing of treasures and resources and, most particularly, a celebration of what life-in-the-moment had to offer in the full knowledge that crushing and oppressive state responses could occur at any time. What Bey suggests is that, rather than the monolith of revolution, what is currently needed is the light-footedness of insurrection: responses to oppressive practices, able to assert positions without the hope that any position can be politically maintained long-term in the face of challenge and difficulty. A future policy of nomadic light-footed insurrection and supporting and learning from 'temporary autonomous zones' of community change and difference seems very sensible to me. Sensible in the way a morally coherent community development profession may need to operate to support communities to maintain cohesion and develop new ways of living, both within bonded communities and across communities of difference. As discussed, this may mean the refusal of notions such as 'client-worker' in favour of the simple solidarity of 'we-us' people responding to coming difficult times.

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