

Community Development in Local Food Solutions

by John M. Stansfield and Amber Frankland-Hutchinson



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Article

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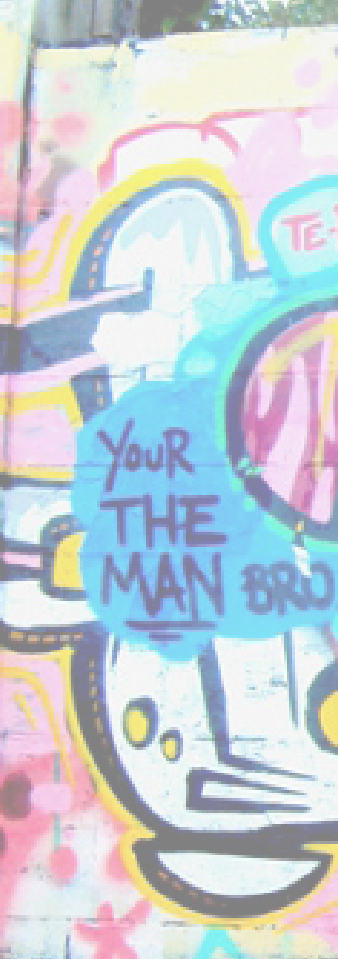
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INTRODUCTION

Food security and food provenance are becoming topical issues in a globalised food market and a climate-insecure world. New forms of accessing food are emerging and forgotten forms being rediscovered, disrupting increasingly monopolistic commercial markets. Within this, 'local food' solutions have gained currency as consumers seek a range of satisfactions beyond price and nutrition. Little has been written on these solutions in the New Zealand context and this paper draws extensively on international literature. Here we examine several models of local food solutions and their relationship to community development. We follow the fortunes of roadside fruit tree planting on Waiheke Island, the varied levels of support or hindrance from local government and its impact on community practice. We report briefly on the results of our questioning and reflect on the expressive nature of community planting, its place in community building and impact on relationships with local government.

BACKGROUND

Building on the response to a pesticide-poisoned food chain heralded in Rachel Carson's seminal environmental science work *Silent Spring* (1962) we have seen a growing distrust of the global food system and a growing interest in food provenance (Morgan & Marsden, 2006). The 1972-75 food crisis saw the prices of grain skyrocket as crop failure fuelled scarcity. The uncontrolled market took a huge human toll as famine ravaged the developing world, particularly in North Africa (Jachertz, 2015). This shattered a complacency that the modern industrialised world, with its open markets, could reliably feed everybody. The disquiet generated – as the world came to understand that the famine was being visited most harshly on food producers in poor nations who were exporting their crops, and driven by the trade policies in the developing world – a continuing interest in the social and political economy of food (Friedman, 1993). At the same time, a second early-1970s crisis, the oil crisis, sponsored a radical rethink of global economics. This is perhaps most famously expressed in E. F. Schumacher's profoundly influential critique *Small is Beautiful* (1972). This text introduced the notion of fossil fuels as a finite resource and not properly accounted for in the changing methods of food production and distribution. This theme was later developed with the lens of climate change, and small-scale farming and agroecology, and identified as "not merely less harmful than large-scale industrial food production", but able to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions (Lin & Chapple, 2012).



THE REBIRTH OF LOCAL FOOD SOLUTIONS IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The responses to this questioning were both structural and personal, with some concerned and informed consumers connecting social, economic and environmental issues, and supporting new food systems such as 'local food solutions'. So, despite the growth of corporate agriculture and the mega-farms, small farming has enjoyed a renaissance. At a global level, we have seen the emergence of the peasant and farmer alliance, La Via Campesina (Rosset, 2008). Locally, we see collections of citizens and consumers in grassroots social movements responding to climate change, such as the transition, or transition towns movement (Sage, 2014), community gardens, local food exchanges, and an emerging range of new forms addressing the personal concerns of consumers. And in many parts of this picture we can see the influence of community development, as



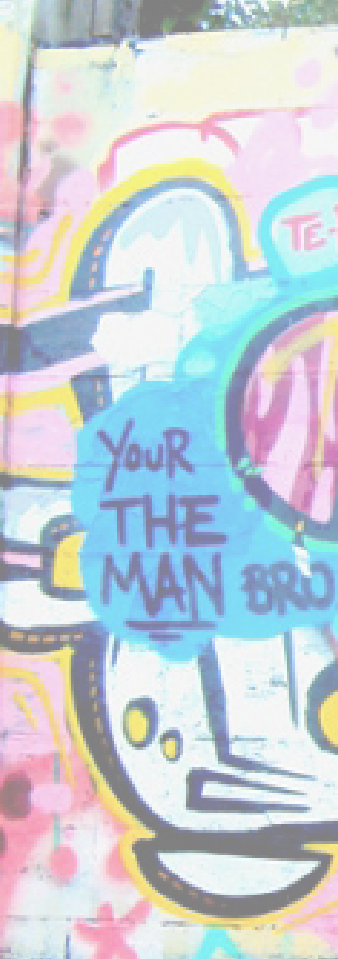
citizens come together questioning in whose interests the modern industrial food system works, and seeking solutions in which they are active participants. Community development's history of solutions-focused collective action for the common good has much to offer. Community development is seen as a key factor in successful US community gardens (Milburn, & Vail, 2011). A community development influence is, however, less visible in externally driven technocratic approaches such as the 'Sustainable Livelihoods Approach' (Brocklesby & Fisher, 2003).

Within the broad agenda of 'local food solutions' a variety of new social and economic relationships seek to disrupt and shorten the chain between producer and consumer (Starr, 2010). At a collective level, these range between the community food garden and community-supported agriculture, and address issues well beyond economics and nutrition (Turner et al., 2011).

Community Supported Agriculture [CSA] is one such model, in which consumers pre-purchase a share of farm output. While the primary benefit of such a system is economic from the producers' perspective (Cooley & Lass, 1998), consumers are also motivated by having access to very fresh produce at reduced prices, and an opportunity to disengage from corporate and global supply chains (Schnell, 2010). The building of local community is also considered an important reason for community-supported agriculture, although some later authors (Pole & Gray, 2013) suggest motivations may be more instrumental and functional than collaborative and communitarian. As a relatively recent form, there is emerging diversity in community-supported agriculture, and it might be expected that this is an arrangement whose form and processes are evolving (Lang, 2010).

Urban farms are another response within the local food solutions portfolio. The antecedents of these are also varied. In trade-starved Cuba during the mid-1990s, urban farms annually produced 8500 tonnes of produce, alongside 7.5 million eggs and more than 3700 tonnes of meat (Altieri et al., 1999). Urban farms have also developed as a response to urban decay, occupying deserted lots in the brownfield renewal (Goldstein, 2009). These farms are also becoming a feature of disaster response and preparedness. In Christchurch, New Zealand's third largest city, a series of catastrophic earthquakes have left some central city sections vacant, and much land – in what has become known as 'the red zone', a huge area from the city to the sea – unsuitable for building. This has been quickly colonised by the NGO Cultivate as an urban farm and youth opportunity spaces.

As with CSA, urban farms often have social and environmental goals beyond production and, again, there is a range of commitment to these broader goals with those in poorer communities more likely to subscribe to food security goals (Dimitri, Oberholtzer, & Pressman, 2016). Like community gardens, urban farms are not universally welcomed as a positive force. They occupy a complex political space as both relieving the neoliberal state of obligation and at the same time giving expression to a community critique of capitalism (McClintock, 2014). Nor are urban farms without risk or cost, and increasingly there is a degree of due diligence required before financial and other investments are



made to develop such farms (Ivkovic, Domazet & Ivkovic, 2010).

Community gardens in first-world urban settings are another form of local food solutions enjoying somewhat of a Renaissance (Firth, Maye, & Pearson, 2011). This is less novel in the more collective developing world where over 2.5 billion people are fed from collective subsistence agriculture, in traditions which date back thousands of years (Alexandratos & Bruinsma, 2012).

Urban community gardens have a history of more than 100 years. In the 1890s, vacant city lots in the US were turned over to community garden groups as a form of relief for unemployed workers. Perhaps the biggest scaling up of community gardens was as a response to war. During World War Two, 20% of food in the US was grown in the 'Victory Gardens', a government-sponsored initiative for community gardening and food resilience. The definition of community gardens is by no means a cultural universal – in the US the term refers to a form of urban agriculture which dates back to World War One and is typified by a community-managed space in which gardeners have individual plots (Lawson, 2004). By contrast, contemporary community gardens in the New Zealand setting are typically gardens which are collectively organised and managed, generally on public land, by a group which any local resident can join and which manages and gardens the land together.

In common with other local food solutions, community gardens achieve a range of outputs beyond producing food, including building social cohesion, community bonding and building and linking social capital (Twiss et al., 2003; Firth et al., 2011). There are numerous studies examining the community development approaches and outcomes of community gardens (Armstrong, 2000; Ferris et al., 2001; Ober et al., 2008), and whilst these gardens are sometimes criticised as the preserve of the urban white liberal (Eizenberg, 2012), their antecedents in working-class estates and the success of African-American and migrant communities in the US gardens challenge this. These gardens have been important, culturally-specific gathering places from which collective organisation and political initiative have emerged (Saldivar-Tanaka & Krasny, 2004).

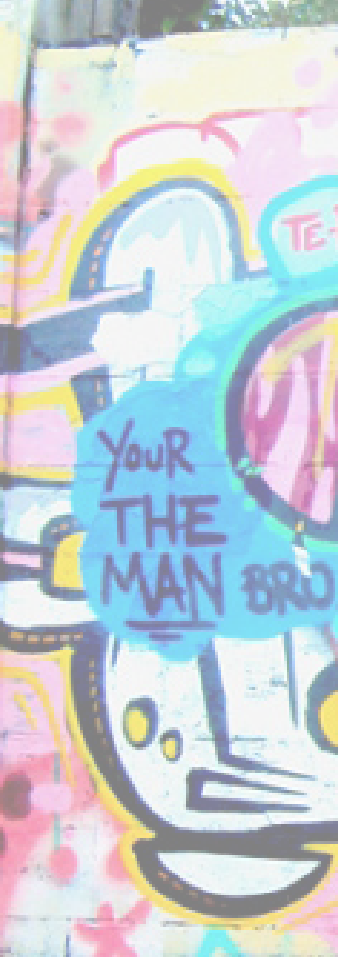
Less obvious in the literature is the appropriation of roadside verges for fruit production. These initiatives have often been part of urban resistance where engagement with the relevant authorities is eschewed, such as in the guerrilla gardening movement.

Guerrilla gardening is defined as the unauthorised cultivation of land belonging to another (Hung, 2017) or, in more counterculture terms, as the illicit cultivation of land (Reynolds, 2008); although the illicit here refers to 'without permission' rather than illegal or not permitted, as is more generally understood (Merriam Webster, 2017). This land is frequently public land and the use of the term guerrilla is a nod to the secrecy and skirmishing between guerrilla gardening groups and the authorities. Guerrilla gardening is perhaps best understood as a form of collectively cultivating with a political purpose. (Kato, Passidomo, & Harvey, 2013). The practice can reactivate environmental politics, making environmental relations a public issue with collective engagement (Certoma, 2011). Moreover, the practice is cited as a potential lever for the creation of new property rights (Hung, 2017), enhancing its reputation as a disruptor. The extent to which local food systems, including community gardening, can be seen as a universal threat to an established economic order is, however, the subject of some contention. The pervading neoliberal economic paradigms have the power to co-opt new social movements which might simultaneously contest and reinforce a neoliberal agenda (Crossan et al., 2016).

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

The use of public land is an important feature of community gardens in most countries. It brings with it a relationship with the custodians of that land, generally central and local government. This relationship is also significant for urban farms as well as other local food systems, and can be both enabling and disabling of the community aspiration. The practices and policies of the government, usually local government, have an impact on both the instigation and sustainability of community gardens, leading to some areas having thriving community gardens while immediately adjacent communities having none (Mintz & McManus, 2014).

Outside wartime, governments are typically involved in the promotion of local food systems for reasons which go well beyond food production. These include health promotion and the prevention of chronic disease, particularly in deprived areas (Larson et al., 2013; Armstrong, 2000); ecological, environmental and sustainability goals (Chen, 2012; Ohmer, 2009); economic development and community wellbeing (Phillips & Wharton, 2016), community development and community economic



development aspirations (Christensen & Phillips, 2016; Wright, 2014); providing culturally specific gathering and organising spaces for minorities (Salvadar et al., 2009) as well as leisure and visual amenities.

The extent to which government or local government is an obstacle, an enabler, or perhaps ignored in the development of local food systems, is dynamic (Lawson, 2004). Just as neighbouring towns can adopt vastly different approaches (Mintz & McManus, 2014), so can the same town when examined over a period of time. Often there are disputes about the appropriation of land and a contest between neighbours, such as was the case with Auckland's Basque Park evictions (Rudman, 2002). But councils are not always successful in their clearances, as was famously discovered in New York community gardens, where community resistance trumped government power (Staeheli, Mitchell, & Gibson, 2002).

A WAIHEKE FRUIT STORY

Waiheke Island, which styles itself as the jewel in the crown of Auckland's Hauraki Gulf, has a colourful history from early Māori settlement to being the playground of the rich and famous. It also has its own fascinating stories of local food, community gardens, a compost collective, a community produce exchange and, until recently, a community-supported agriculture farm. As well as having great fishing and fabulous beaches the island has been, from early times, a settlement with very productive fruit trees.

METHODOLOGY

To study the history of community fruit-tree planting on Waiheke Island we:

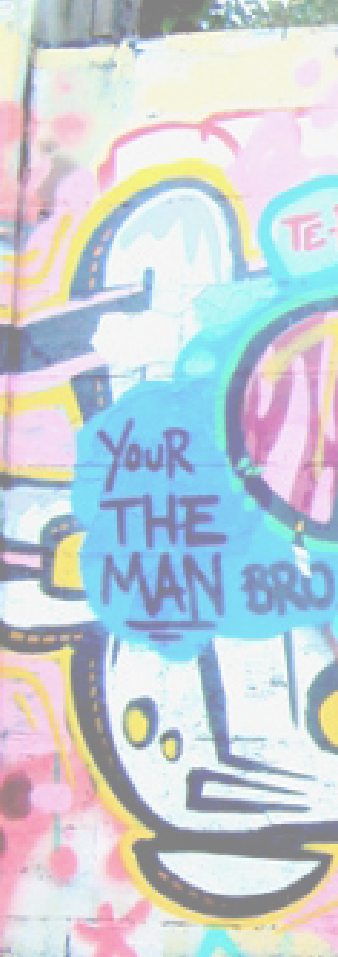
- Reviewed the existing literature, particularly the community newspapers.
- Interviewed key stakeholders using a semi-structured interview process.
- Visited the plantings.
- Held a focus group of stakeholders from two community plantings.

All stakeholders engaged in the projects were invited to take part in the interviews. These included those involved in the plantings, the representatives of community organisations, representative of the local board, suppliers, current and former council staff, and residents who had been involved in earlier roadside planting initiatives. Twenty-seven individuals and four organisations responded and were interviewed.

However, this is not primarily a report on research methods but a report on community development practice. A further report on the detailed methodology and findings of the study is due in December 2017.

The story begins in 1906 with Ethel Jones, my paternal grandmother, then aged six, travelling by schooner from Coromandel township to Auckland and stopping throughout the fruit season at remote Awawaroa Bay on Waiheke Island where she and her brothers picked fruit, which they sold on the wharves of Auckland. The peaches themselves were in a sheltered orchard and were an unusual white-fleshed variety with a pink-blush skin. In the microclimate of the valley these peaches ripened almost a month earlier than peaches in Auckland, thus commanding young entrepreneurs a premium price. Descendants of these trees are sold in the spring at the local market, carefully preserved and raised by a local nurseryman who claims they are practically disease-resistant and extraordinarily productive (R. Morton, personal communication, July 29, 2017).

So prized were these peaches that a small group of women calling themselves the peachstoners set out to make sure the whole island had access to them. The women began by gathering the peach stones from the very orchard where Ethel had picked the peaches. On their daily walks, the women began planting peach stones on the road verges, to the delight of many but to the ire of local county council staff who were mowing the same verges. Council responded by banning the practice, citing traffic hazards and community safety concerns. By engaging their friends and neighbours, the women began to foil the council ban by asking residents whose properties adjoined the road to plant the peach stones just inside their boundaries, out of harm's way from the council lawnmowers. After a brief political tussle, and seeing the steely resolve of the women, the council staff began to collaborate and identify public land areas suitable for planting which their mowers would not reach.



On an island much denuded of trees, where giant kauri forests once stood, the women were an inspiration. When the Waiheke County Council was formed (1970–1989) residents were quick to seize the opportunity to shape their environment, passing a comprehensive pro-environment planning document which protected and encouraged tree planting. The council developed its own native tree nursery and every ratepayer had an entitlement of two free trees per year. Demand for fruit trees grew and the nursery diversified into the propagation of fruit trees, selecting stock from older well-proven island varieties. The nursery staff were very liberally managed and, with the encouragement of residents, soon began initiating plantings around the island, including small pockets of fruit trees on unused council land and on the perimeters of reserves.

Much loved by the residents, the nursery and trees were, however, in grave danger. The winds of political change saw the compulsory amalgamation of Waiheke into the new Auckland City Council, a contentious decision which islanders continue to relitigate. (Orsman, 2016; Peters, 2016). Initially, nursery staff were instructed to cease all plantings which had not been authorised by the new council's Auckland-based planners, and shortly after this the council divested itself of the nursery. However, it was not lost from the island, as local staff took it over and it flourishes more than 20 years later. The free-tree entitlement with your rates demand, however, was not so lucky and was discontinued.

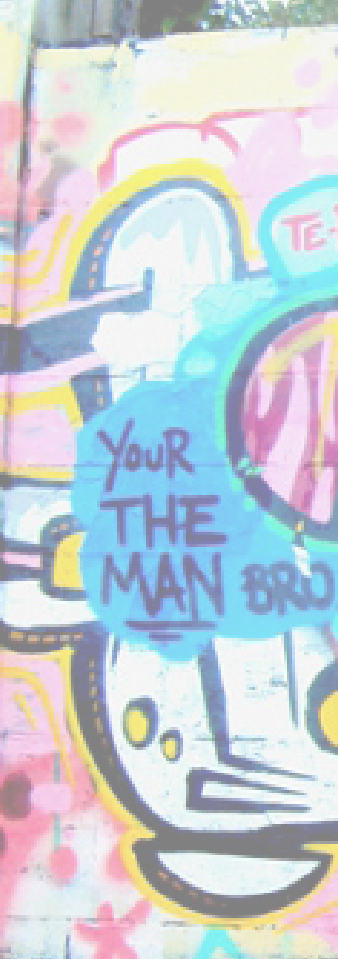
On Waiheke, a 2009 planting of fruit trees on a disused Surfdale reserve survives and has had a lot of recent attention by the Food to Soil composting project of Home-grown Waiheke, a local food-resilience-focused community development group. The history of this planting had been quite chequered. It was established by enthusiasts, many of whom were from outside the suburb, as a future food-forest. Maintenance was sporadic and the planting lapsed periodically into a very weedy lot. At some time it was also maintained by the council, who used the falling community involvement as evidence that community plantings would ultimately become a burden on the ratepayer and should not be permitted in the future.

In a more recent chapter, the master of the local Sea Scouts den found he was dealing with a lot of small boys who came to scouts hours early, often misbehaving and always hungry. He began to feed them toast and jam, and was astounded at how their behaviour improved. After some months, he reflected on a more sustainable solution and together with the scouts began planting fruit trees along the route used by the boys to come to the meetings. This kindness did not go unnoticed, and in short order, the planners and enforcement officials of the council-controlled transport organisation ordered the programme to stop. But, stop it did not – the scoutmaster went on to political life and became the chair of the council's local board, which then began to sponsor the fruit-tree planting in partnership with the community. A Waiheke community development group – Blackpool Residents Association (BRA), whose motto is “Uplifting and supporting the community” – organised the first community planting on the street verges in Blackpool, with a mountain of mulch supplied by the Waiheke local board, and fruit trees sourced from all over the country. A more planned approach in the future would see trees being exclusively sourced from a local nursery raising heirloom varieties selected for their low maintenance and disease resistance.

The local board reported receiving positive feedback from the plantings and resolved to roll the project out across the island. Waiheke Resources Trust (WRT), a local community development organisation already embedded in other sustainability projects with the community, was selected as the managing partner due to its capacity and established relationships across many of the island's communities.

The city-based council-controlled transport organisation, Auckland Transport (AT), responded by promising a policy review (Walden, 2015) which, after two years, produced a policy which allowed roadside plantings of less than two square metres, provided they were not above knee-height. Bonsai-style fruit trees, however, were not what the community wanted and the policy was both





ridiculed and blithely ignored. AT, however, went on to cause problems for community plantings elsewhere in Auckland (Thomas, 2017).

Amidst the uncertainty of the new council policy, the local board temporarily suspended the planting partnership with the WRT. Frustrated at the loss of the planting programme, local activists in Surfdale met with the nurseryman and established that there were trees ready to plant, and that the planting season would soon be over and the opportunity lost.

A leaflet drop in a Surfdale street, calling neighbours together to discuss roadside fruit-tree planting, drew no response at all. Community development, the lens through which we viewed this project, is essentially an exercise in very local participatory democracy and, as John Dewey is reputed to have said in a speech for his 90th birthday, “democracy begins in conversation” (Diggins, 1995). Mirroring this, the activists began conversations with neighbours in the street. A fruitcake was produced, tea was made and a plan was hatched to go ahead with the plantings just as if they had been council-sanctioned.

The boldness of the action was enough to unlock the impasse at the local board, who contracted the WRT to recommence the programme. The WRT again began engaging with communities and facilitating the roadside tree planting (Peters, 2016).

Using a community development approach to planting the verges involves the application of sound community development theory and practice, such as starting from where the people or community are (Campbell, Wunungmurra, & Nyomba, 2007). In practice, this means that different communities will approach an issue in different ways. The Blackpool community, for instance, is quite cohesive, having come together following severe flooding. It has its own neighbourhood association (BRA), has identified leaders and a history of collective community achievement. In contrast to Surfdale, where many of the neighbours had not previously met, the Blackpool residents saw the fruit-tree planting as a natural extension of the community activity to collectively improve their environment. Blackpool residents, in their responses to the questionnaire, noted that the exercise not only grew fruit trees but that the project had grown and strengthened their neighbourhood association. In Surfdale the project may have built the foundational relationships for further community development initiatives.

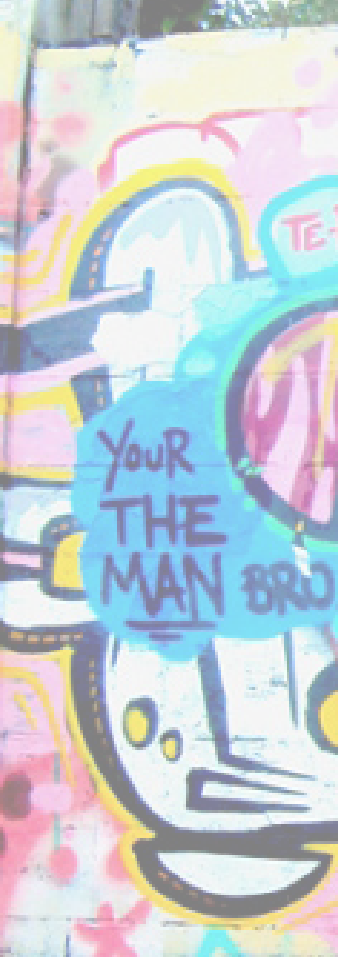
A further wave of political change sees the much-loved community fruit-tree project once again under threat, as the local board moves to cease its funding, responding to political pressure exercised in a less-united board, following recent elections. Interviewees noted that the very public and collective nature of the fruit-tree project put it on an ideological collision course with newly-elected members who had campaigned on a more conservative platform.

Community development might be said to be the crucible of democracy, the place where citizens come together to share their dreams and negotiate, plan and execute their common futures. In studying the various waves of community fruit-tree planting on Waiheke, two very strong themes have emerged:

Firstly, we are struck by the very human spirit of wanting to shape the environment around us in the image of values we hold. It was expressed simply and frequently by the participants in our study: “Wouldn’t it be great if there were fruit trees lining the streets so children had a good breakfast on the way to school and something to eat on the walk back home?” A spirit of hope and generosity expressed in an alley of fruit trees.

Secondly, we were struck by the desire to collaborate and co-create a new commons. Any of the participants we interviewed could, and most do, have fruit trees in their own backyards, but the roadside verge planting is a hugely symbolic act of sharing which has occurred in an era of individualism, privatisation and neoliberalism.





SOME INITIAL FINDINGS FROM THE STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

What the interviews taught us about community development:

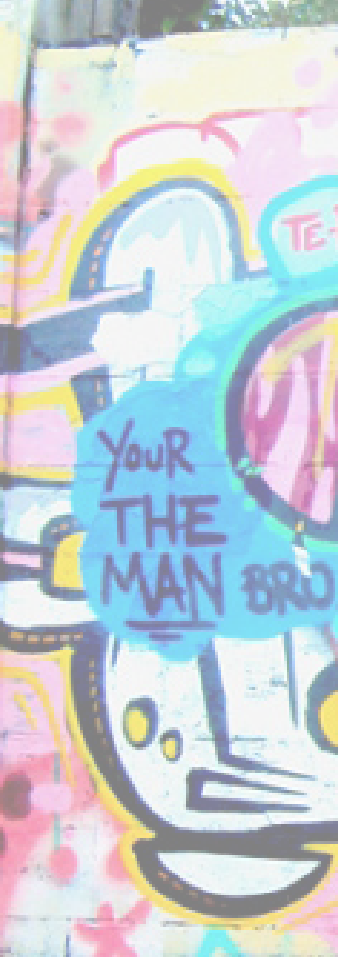
- Already-organised communities with local neighbourhood associations had the most successful outcomes, but the project itself can be used as a way of building local neighbourhood connections.
- Fruit-tree planting, together with your neighbours, is a deeply symbolic act where local people come together to take charge of the local environment.
- Waiheke has a strong local-community fruit-tree tradition, but many of the stories had been lost.
- Successful projects had local political leaders, local neighbourhood support and a degree of wilful deafness to negative regulations developed offshore.
- The education aspects of the project were most highly valued – people love learning together.
- The community sector marches on its stomach and the importance of a cup of tea and a piece of cake in building the relationships that made successful projects should not be underrated.
- The old community development adage, “If you are fun to be with, there will always be people with you,” held true in these projects, where the sometimes heavy physical work was tempered with good-natured fun.
- The importance of local identity and giving people the opportunity to build identity using local knowledge and local relationships improved the community’s sense of resilience.
- More attention to the diversity of participants should feature in future projects.
- A range of communication methods works best.

What the interviews taught us about community-government relations:

- Having a single, respected community organisation as the interface with council resulted in the best long-term relationships.
- Local government was most appreciated where it listened and enabled collective local aspiration. Conversely, remote decision-making, which did not involve the local community, was treated with contempt.
- Working with the community can improve the regard in which local government is held.
- Wise and sensitive officials can act as a bridge between the bureaucracy and the community, even when this relationship has been damaged in the past.
- There is currently an increased interest in the provenance of food.
- Ratepayers enjoyed the experience of getting something tangible back from their rates.

CONCLUSION

Community development is a useful lens for examining local-food-solution initiatives. The theory and practice of community development contribute to the successful establishment and long-term success of local-food-solution initiatives. The relationship between the community and local government is an important feature of these initiatives and provides the stage on which relationships are expressed and interpreted, and where the roles of the parties are defined, negotiated and redefined. Limited literature in New Zealand suggests there is fertile ground for further research as this exciting field evolves. In particular, the range of benefits to participants might encourage governments to more actively promote local food solutions and adopt a more consistent approach to their development.

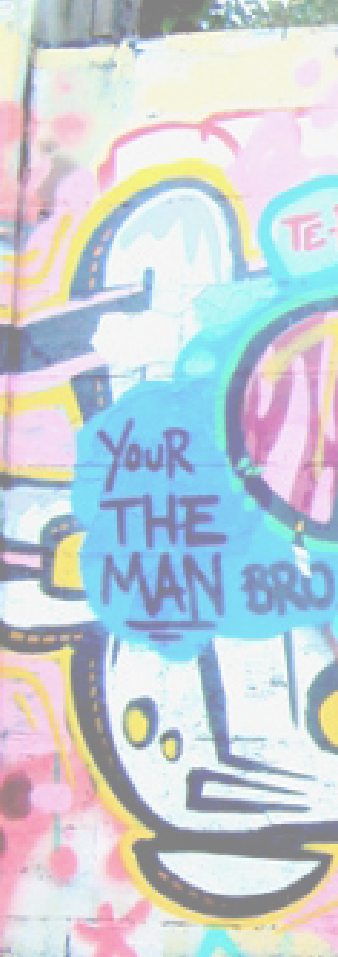


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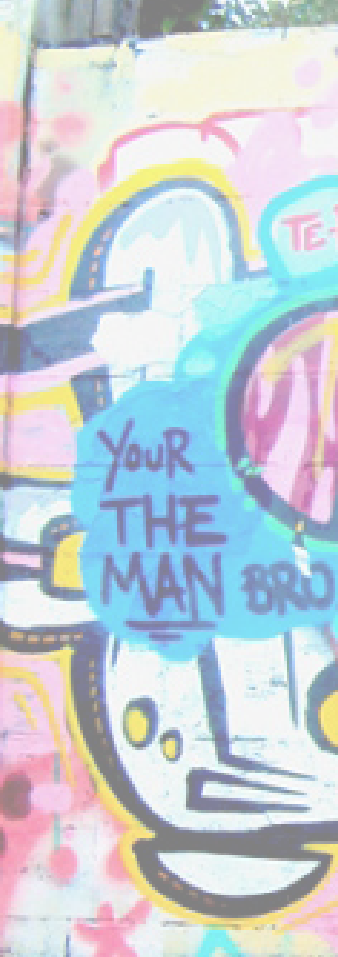
Amber Frankland-Hutchinson recently graduated with a Bachelors Degree in Social Practice (Community Development) from Unitec Institute of Technology. She began working as the Executive Officer for the Aotearoa Community Development Association (ACDA) as her final work placement in July 2016, and is continuing to work in this capacity as well as in the role of Conference Coordinator for the joint IACD and ACDA Community Development Conference 2017. Amber is also a trained advocate for Auckland Action Against Poverty's (AAP) beneficiary service, raising awareness of and advocating for people to receive what they're entitled to under the Social Securities Act. At the beginning of her career, Amber has dreams of working with children and youth to amplify their voices in political decision-making and to utilise her skills within her iwi.

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