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Laudato si' - establishing local approaches for global ecological conversion

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Laudato si' – establishing local approaches for global ecological conversion

ANNE JENNINGS

Abstract

In 2017 the Aotearoa Community Development Association (ACDA) and the International Association for Community Development (IACD) held a conference, *Sustainably yours: Community development and a sustainably just future*, in Auckland where I presented a paper titled “Community development – The ‘missing ingredient’ in striving for sustainability”. That paper examined the United Nations Agenda 2030 (2015) and, in particular, the associated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This paper will explore a further significant document, also released in 2015, the encyclical (letter) by Pope Francis, *Laudato si': On care for our common home*. The paper starts with some history of the Pope's work, moves on to provide an overview of the areas *Laudato si'* encompasses, analyses some of the responses it has attained, and then concludes with a review of how and where community development theory and processes fit with the document.

Preamble

This section provides a brief overview of the previous paper, “Community development – The ‘missing ingredient’ in striving for sustainability” (Jennings, 2017). As noted in the abstract, this paper was presented at the *Sustainably Yours: Community development and a sustainably just future* conference in Auckland in 2017. The paper included a summary of differing views of the SDGs, some of which pointed to ‘top-down’ government and corporate approaches to change that are urgently required, due to our planet's ecological predicament. The paper did, however, subsequently question if/where non-government organisations (NGOs) could be involved using ‘bottom-up’ community development approaches.

UNITED NATIONS 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The publication *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development* (United Nations, 2015) is, according to the United Nations (UN), “a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity”, that “seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom”, whilst “recogniz[ing] that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development” (United Nations, 2015, p. 3).

The 2030 Agenda comprises 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), incorporating 169 targets that cover economic, social and ecological developmental objectives. The need for action is certainly understandable, given that *The Sustainable Development Goals report* (United Nations, 2016) found that approximately one in eight people live in extreme poverty, nearly 800 million people suffer from hunger, 1.1 billion people are living without electricity, and water scarcity affects more than 2 billion people. Significantly, many of the issues related to climate change. Further, the report noted that:

- In 2013, 59 million primary-school-aged children were out of school, and during the same period 757 million adults were unable to read and write.
- An average of 83,000 people died and 211 million were affected each year by natural disasters from 2000 to 2013.
- Over 23,000 ecosystem species face extinction across the globe.
- In 2004 13% of human trafficking worldwide comprised of children, in 2011 this had risen to 34% (United Nations, 2016).

All this is in addition to the extreme climate change events currently being felt across the globe, many a result of human-instigated destruction, pollution and overconsumption. We are now in the position where our current epoch (period), the Holocene, which provided us with 12,000 years of stable climate since the last ice age, has clearly ended. “Humanity’s impact on the Earth is now so profound that a new geological epoch – the Anthropocene – needs to be declared,” according to experts at an International Geological Congress (Carrington, 2016, para. 3).

Given the degree and complexity of the mainly human-activated issues facing the world today, the 2030 Agenda is an important attempt to galvanise actions “for people, planet and prosperity” (United Nations, 2015, p. 3). The resultant SDGs are a declaration of aspirations, framed within a voluntary agreement, but not an obligatory accord (Pogge & Sengupta, 2016). The United Nations (2015) position on the voluntary nature of the agreement is that, although it is not legally binding, governments are expected to take ownership and establish national frameworks for the achievement of outcomes of the goals.

To support this process the UN Global Compact was created, with groups established in member nations to “help companies understand what responsible business means within different national, cultural and language contexts and facilitate outreach, learning, policy dialogue, collective action and partnerships” (UN Global Compact, 2016, para. 2). It was proposed that, through “networks, companies can make local connections – with other

businesses and stakeholders from NGOs, government and academia – and receive guidance to put their sustainability commitments into action” (UN Global Compact, 2016, para. 2). This has resulted, however, in many ‘top-down’ approaches to policy, planning and proposed action for social, economic and environmental change.

AUSTRALIA’S INVOLVEMENT

In Australia the responsibility for the Global Compact Local Network lies with the Commonwealth Government’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). This department’s position is as follows:

The 2030 Agenda helps Australia in advocating for a strong focus on economic growth and development in the Indo-Pacific region, and in promoting investment priorities including gender equality, governance and strengthening tax systems. It is also well aligned with Australia’s foreign, security and trade interests especially in promoting regional stability, security and economic prosperity. (DFAT, n.d., para. 6)

This certainly does not encourage small-to-medium communities and non-government organisations (NGOs) to participate in the change process. Further, it appears Australia isn’t managing very well in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. According to the 2018 Global SDG Index Australia is now ranked 37th in the world – down from 26th last year (Thwaites & Kestrin, 2018, para. 1, 2). Whilst performing relatively well in health and education, results for the environmental goals and climate change are among the worst in the OECD group of advanced nations. Further:

The new [2018] index ranks Australia as the worst-performing country in the world on climate action (SDG 13). The measure takes into account green-house gas emissions within Australia; emissions embodied in the goods we consume; climate change vulnerability; and exported emissions from fossil fuel shipments to other countries. (Thwaites & Kestrin, 2018, para. 7)

Whilst recognising the UN has been involved in, and has supported, community development approaches to social change for over 60 years (UNESCO, 1954) current approaches to economics and ecological conversion are questioned. That includes asking to what extent can combining the goals of top-down business-as-usual economic development with social and ecological activities be transformative (Jennings, 2017; Sachs, 2017).

WHERE IS COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

So where, if at all, do the ‘bottom-up’ community-based processes come into the SDG programmes? When examining the global ecological predicament, Ife proposes that the ‘bottom-up’ approach to the changes required involves community development processes – which he identified as the “missing ingredient” (Ife, 2013, pp. 20-22). He recommends this approach as a feasible alternative to the current neoliberal social, economic and environmental policies and practices that are major contributors to the current dilemma. “At the heart of community development,” he explained, “is the idea of change from below” (2013, p. 138).



Whilst the UN SDG pro-active activities are often undertaken in (and by) small communities and villages across the globe there appears to be very little evidence of the same happening at this level in Australia. In the previous (first) paper in this sequence the following was concluded:

From a 'bottom-up' community development perspective the international and national approaches to SDGs lead non-government organisations and community development practitioners to question if there is a role for them in assisting to fulfil the SDGs. This paper clearly articulates the importance of the community development approaches, advocated for by the International Association for Community Development. This includes recognising that, when addressing structural and social class inequalities, the poor who are victims can become active contributors in designing and developing solutions. This is tangible 'bottom-up' community development. (Jennings, 2017, p. 16)

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

There have been many valuable international climatic, social and economic changes as a result of the adoption of the 2030 Agenda by member nations. Local people and local communities, however, are often going it alone when they clearly identify social, cultural, health, economic and environmental risks in their own backyards. Consequently, they intuitively adopt 'bottom-up' community development processes to work collectively to overcome them.

Given this discussion so far, research into other similar approaches and campaigns to address the challenges of our global issues was undertaken, resulting in the following study into the encyclical (letter) *Laudato si': On care for our common home*¹ by Pope Francis (2015). The following sections of this

¹
Referred to in this paper
as *Laudato si'*.

paper will explore this letter and, as with the previous paper, “Community development – The ‘missing ingredient’ in striving for sustainability” (Jennings, 2017), will conclude by examining relevant links with local community development processes that could lead to ecological transformation.

Laudato si’ – the encyclical

BACKGROUND

To begin, what is an encyclical? The name is derived from the Greek word for circle, or circular. Accordingly, an encyclical is an important letter from the Pope of the day, sent to all bishops around the world, containing vital information relating to Catholic social teaching. They are not issued often, but contain important guiding principles to be taken seriously, and should challenge people to grow their personal knowledge and faith (Global Catholic Climate Movement, 2015). Lately encyclicals are addressed to Catholics, other Christians, people of other faiths/belief systems. Or, as Pope Francis clarifies in *Laudato si’*, “faced as we are with global environmental deterioration, I wish to address every person living on this planet” (2015a, para. 3).

The current Pope, on his investiture in 2013, adopted the name Francis because of a strong conviction in the principles held by St. Francis of Assisi, who devoted his life’s work to caring for poor and sick people. Importantly he also loved and cared for all animals and creatures, whom he considered brothers and sisters under God. St. Francis died in Assisi, Italy, in 1226 (Biography.com, n.d.).

Because of this, Pope Francis’ very first words in his encyclical are:

“Laudato si’, mi’ Signore” – “Praise be to you, my Lord”. In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. (2015a, para. 1)

Some journalists and others note Pope Francis is the first Pope to address ecological issues. For example, Tilche and Nociti, in their otherwise supportive paper, state “The Encyclical Letter of Pope Francis, *Laudato si’*, addresses for the first time in the Church’s history the subject of the protection of the environment” (2015, pp. 1-5). However, in all fairness, the following is acknowledged:

- “In 1963 Pope John XXIII emphasized the world’s growing interdependence ... he extended the [then] traditional principle of the common good from the nation-state to the world community. Ecological concern [he said] has now heightened our awareness of just how interdependent our world is. Some of the gravest environmental problems are clearly global. In this shrinking world, everyone is affected and everyone is responsible, although those most responsible are often the least affected. The universal common good can serve as a foundation for a global environmental ethic” (United States Catholic Conference, n.d., para. 9).

- In 1971 Blessed Pope Paul VI referred to the ecological concern as “a tragic consequence” of unchecked human activity: “Due to an ill-considered exploitation of nature, humanity runs the risk of destroying it and becoming in turn a victim of this degradation” (Pope Francis, 2015a, para. 4).
- Saint John Paul II, in his first encyclical in 2001, warned that human beings frequently seem “to see no other meaning in their natural environment than what serves their immediate use and consumption”. Subsequently, he called for a global ecological conversion (Pope Francis, 2015a, para. 5).
- In 2007 Pope Francis’ predecessor Benedict XVI, proposed “eliminating the structural causes of the dysfunctions of the world economy and correcting models of growth which have proved incapable of ensuring respect for the environment” ... Benedict urged us to realise that creation is harmed “where we ourselves have the final word, where everything is simply our property and we use it for ourselves alone” (Pope Francis, 2015a, para. 6).

Thus, the stage is set – not for a conflicting approach to the UN’s 2030 Agenda, but for a similar one with many commonalities, plus added dimensions. There are also some differences, which will be discussed later in this paper.

COMMENCEMENT OF *LAUDATO SI’*

In 2015 Pope Francis released the encyclical ‘*Laudato si’*: On care for our common home’, two months before the United Nations released the 2030 Agenda. In fact, on the day of the UN document’s release Pope Francis was guest speaker at the United Nations. In his speech to the UN General Assembly the Pope discussed many areas covered by both representations. This included the following:

First, it must be stated that a true “right of the environment” does exist, for two reasons. First, because we human beings are part of the environment. We live in communion with it, since the environment itself entails ethical limits which human activity must acknowledge and respect. ... Any harm done to the environment ... is harm done to humanity. Second, because every creature, particularly a living creature, has an intrinsic value, in its existence, its life, its beauty and its interdependence with other creatures. (Pope Francis, 2015b, p. 2)

He continued by emphasising:

The misuse and destruction of the environment are also accompanied by a relentless process of exclusion. In effect, a selfish and boundless thirst for power and material prosperity leads both to the misuse of available natural resources and to the exclusion of the weak and disadvantaged. Economic and social exclusion is a complete denial of human fraternity and a grave offense against human rights and the environment. (Pope Francis, 2015b, pp. 2-3)

In the preparation of *Laudato si'* Pope Francis was assisted by an esteemed team of eco-theologists, and scientists from the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. The Academy, established in 1603, has international, multi-racial and non-sectarian membership, which has included many Nobel Laureates and other famous scientists, including the recently deceased Stephen Hawking (Pontifical Academy of Sciences, 2017).

Therefore, at this stage of the investigation into *Laudato si'* one clear message that distinguishes it from the UN's 2030 Agenda is that, globally, people, with their individual and/or collective faith/spiritual belief systems, or lack of them, are now an integral part of discussions relating to the planetary environmental crisis; and that it is a crisis, as clearly articulated in *Laudato si'*, that not only involves the environment, but also demonstrates a deep connection between environment and poverty.

So how does this differ from fundamental scientific approaches? As one scientist, Gus Speth, a US advisor on climate change, co-founder of the Natural Resources Defence Council, and former Dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, stated:

I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change.

I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address these problems.

But I was wrong.

The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation – and we scientists don't know how to do that. (quoted in Curwood, 2016)

Based on discussion to date, the next section of this paper will move into an overview of what *Laudato si'* contains, chapter by chapter. Whilst the amount of detail is restricted by the length of the paper, the whole document is available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html if people wish to explore it further.

WHAT DOES *LAUDATO SI'* CONTAIN?

This section provides a synopsis of content covered in *Laudato si'*, to lay the foundation for further discourse in this article. Principally the question being asked in the encyclical is “What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?” (Pope Francis, 2015a, para. 160). This question is at the heart of discussion on caring for our common home. It is a passionate call to all people of the world to undertake unified global action to address the destruction of nature and people who cohabit our planet.

In Chapter 1, entitled ‘What is happening to our common home’, Pope Francis discusses many of the environmental issues facing us today, including poverty and human inequality, loss of biodiversity, the throwaway culture, overconsumption, global degradation and climate change. Throughout this chapter the interconnectedness of all creation is emphasised, and it clearly illustrates that we cannot continue to exploit and pollute our common home.

Chapter 2, ‘The Gospel of Creation’, sets out to address the areas

identified in the previous chapter, through understanding and insight that the Bible offers. Pope Francis clearly pronounces:

...the charge that Judaeo-Christian thinking, on the basis of the Genesis account which grants man "dominion" over the earth has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting him as domineering and destructive by nature. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church. ... we must forcefully reject the notion that [we have been] given dominion over the earth [or] ... absolute domination over other creatures. (2015a, para. 67)

Thus the wellbeing of all creation is emphasised, including appreciating that every creature has its own value and significance.

Chapter 3, 'The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis', examines the human origins of our current situation, and also explores the use, and dangers of overuse of technology. Misguided anthropocentrism "which sees everything as irrelevant unless it serves one's own immediate interests" (2015a, para. 122) is addressed, as is the importance of work for everyone. Issues relating to biotechnology and genetic engineering are also examined.

In this section, Chapter 4, 'Integral Ecology', is proposed as the heart of the encyclical, as the paradigm for justice. It upholds the relationship between environmental issues as inseparable from social and human issues. Further, it calls for preferential opportunities for people who live in poverty, those most harmed by ecological degradation. Pope Francis devotes this chapter to advancing a new world vision and offers integral ecology as "a vision capable of taking into account every aspect of the global crisis" (2015a, para. 137). Further, Pope Francis emphasises it is essential to show consideration towards Indigenous communities and their cultural traditions (2015a, para. 146).

Chapter 5, 'Lines of Approach and Action', assesses the achievement of efforts at international and local levels to protect the environment. "World Summits on the environment," the encyclical reports, "have not lived up to expectations because, due to a lack of political will, they were unable to reach truly meaningful and effective global agreements on the environment". In addition, Pope Francis clarifies, "The Church does not presume to settle scientific questions or to replace politics. But is concerned to encourage an honest and open debate, so that particular interests or ideologies will not prejudice the common good" (2015a, para. 188).

'Ecological Education and Spirituality', Chapter 6, emphasises that it is human beings, above all, who need to change. What we need, it advises, is to educate ourselves to forge an agreement between humanity and the environment. Ecological citizenship, which curbs unsustainable behaviours and promotes ecological virtues, is addressed as a requirement to lead to a reflective "ecological conversion".

Overall, '*Laudato si'*: On Care for Our Common Home' addresses many social issues, embedded within their economic and environmental contexts. This includes unemployment, lack of housing, barriers to people leading dignified lives, injustices, and the growing numbers of people deprived of basic human rights. Thus the encyclical promotes social peace, stability and security – calling on society, as a whole, to defend and promote the common good.

Laudato si' concludes with two prayers. The first is for the Earth, which

includes a call to assist us to “protect life and beauty” and “help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth”. The other, a prayer in union with Creation, includes a plea to “[e]nlighten those who possess power and money that they may avoid the sin of indifference, that they may love the common good, advance the weak, and care for this world in which we live. The poor and the earth are crying out”, wrote Pope Francis (2015a, para. 246).

The next section will further discuss and analyse *Laudato si'* – what are people and institutions, both within and outside of the Judeo-Christian and other belief systems, saying about the encyclical? Climate change and appropriate economics lead this discussion.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF *LAUDATO SI'*

Like other global approaches aimed at supporting and/or instigating international social, economic and environmental change, for example the UN 2030 Agenda, *Laudato si'*, by incorporating the spiritual, has received both positive and negative responses. Dialogue at this level, however, is considered essential as it involves examining and discussing issues relating to the survival of people, creatures and natural habitats on this planet.

One analyst, Fritjof Capra, describes the encyclical as “The Pope’s ecoliterate challenge to climate change, ... a ‘truly systemic’ understanding of the ecological basis for a just, sustainable, and peaceful world” (2015, p. 1). Capra also upholds that the “radical ethics championed by Pope Francis ... is essentially the ethics of deep ecology” (2015, p. 2). Throughout his paper Capra continually quotes direct from *Laudato si'* to support this theme, including comparing it to ethical principles within the Earth Charter.

However, “the only unconvincing section”, Capra found, “is paragraph 50 where Pope Francis tries to downplay the importance of stabilizing population (2015, p. 12). This is not surprising, he qualified, given the Church’s staunch opposition to birth control. That section within the encyclical does, however, bring other questions into account on that subject, including pointing out the view of many who maintain the problems of the poor can only be changed by reduction in the birth rate, without considering “extreme and selective consumerism on the part of some” (Pope Francis, 2015a, para. 50).

Overall, in supporting *Laudato si'*, Capra concluded that, “our key challenge is how to shift from an economic system based on the notion of unlimited growth to one that is both ecologically sustainable and socially just” (2015, pp. 8-9).

The need for economic change arises regularly in literature pertaining to global climate change and international social justice, both in discussions concerning the UN 2030 Agenda’s SDGs and to *Laudato si'*. Wolfgang Sachs, Director Emeritus of the Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy in Germany, is one researcher who has compared the Sustainable Development Goals and *Laudato si'* on this issue (Sachs, 2017). Based on what is happening globally, he states, “the Agenda 2030 is protecting the growth model, a model which has always been prioritised over protection of nature” (2017, p. 2581). The Pope, he says:

...chooses the path less trodden by clearly mentioning both ecological and social limits, and by holding the industrial growth model accountable

for its various shortcomings. At one point, he even goes as far as recommending de-growth for the more affluent parts of the world. In other words, he advocates a reductive rather than an expansive modernity. (Sachs, 2017, p. 2581)

Thus, Sachs points out, "*Laudato si'* suggests a strategy of sufficiency embedded in cultural change: it is indeed the rich who have to change, not the poor; it is wealth that needs to be alleviated, not poverty" (2017, p. 2581). In summary Sachs pronounces:

While the Agenda 2030 seeks to repair the existing global economic model significantly, the encyclical calls for a pushing back of economic hegemony and for more ethical responsibility on all levels. While the Agenda 2030 envisions a green economy with social democratic hues, the encyclical foresees a post-capitalist era, based on a cultural shift toward eco-solidarity. (2017, p. 2584)

Overall, the cultural change Sachs advocates for is intended to be approached from both local and global levels, comprising both cooperative economics and politics aimed at the common good.

Of course, not everyone agrees with this view. *The Australian* newspaper, for example, published a number of articles criticising *Laudato si'*, saying it was "wrong about climate change and ignorant about economics" (Duncan, 2015, p. 55). Further, editor Paul Kelly declared the Pope's language was "almost hysterical. Profound intellectual ignorance is dressed up as 'honouring God'. Page after page reveals Francis and his advisers as environmental populists and economic ideologues of a quasi-Marxist bent." In addition, he claimed, "the Pope has 'delegitimised as immoral' pro-market economic forces" (Kelly quoted in Duncan, 2015, p. 55).

In his investigation into these incidences, Duncan concluded:

Kelly seriously misrepresented *Laudato si'*, surprisingly so for such a senior journalist and economic commentator. Contrary to Kelly's allegation that the Pope is "blind to the liberating power of markets and technology", Pope Francis explicitly acknowledges and rejoices in the benefits of modern science, technology and creativity which have resulted in advances for humankind. (Duncan, 2015, p. 56)

Another perspective is offered by Carmen Gonzalez, a Professor of Law at Seattle University. In her article 'UN goals fall short of Francis' vision', Gonzalez reviewed the content of both the UN 2030 Agenda SDGs and *Laudato si'*, and surmised:

While the sustainable development goals represent a welcome incorporation of environmental concerns into the development agenda, they fall short of Francis' vision by seeking to moderate rather than transform the consumption-driven, growth-orientated model of economic development that degrades human dignity and has caused potentially catastrophic environmental harm. (Gonzalez, 2015, p. 30)

Scharmer and Kaufer, in their book *Leading from the Emerging Future*, discuss disconnection: in particular, ecological disconnection, social disconnection and

spiritual-cultural disconnection. They call for the end of the “silo-type approach – dealing with one symptom cluster at a time – [which] isn’t working. On the contrary,” they say “it seems to be part of the problem” (2013, p. 5). *Laudato si’*, it is maintained, provides the synthesis that enables the spiritual to cross those boundaries to be the connector.

In summary, there are many areas that the 2030 Agenda and *Laudato si’* have in common. In fact the United Nations and the Vatican work closely together in many ways, aiming to instigate social, economic and environmental change. But, as shown, there are also some differences, in both philosophy and resultant activity. This paper will now move from the global to the local, to see where and how communities and NGOs can participate in activities relating to *Laudato si’*.

LAUDATO SI’ – WHERE DOES COMMUNITY FIT?

As highlighted in the preamble to this paper, the question “Where does community fit?” was previously asked in relation to the SDGs. Some answers pointed to ‘top-down’ corporate approaches to change, often totally disassociated from local communities. This question is now being asked of Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato si’*.

I will commence by relating it to local Indigenous people/communities. I live on Yawuru country, in Broome, in the northwest of Australia. The Yawuru people are the Traditional Owners, Custodians of the Land, and Native Title Holders of this country. I pay my respects to their people, past, present and future, as I prepare this paper from their land.

In *Laudato si’* Pope Francis addresses his words to “every person living on this planet” (2015a, para. 3). He expands on this by clearly noting it is essential that Indigenous communities and their spiritual and cultural traditions are respected and protected. As Pope Francis explains:

They are not merely one minority among others, but should be the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting their land are proposed. For them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred place with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values. When they remain on their land, they themselves care for it best. (2015a, para. 146)

At a conference held in Broome in 2016, Peter Yu, from the organisation Nyamba Buru Yawuru (This is the land of the Yawuru), was keynote speaker, addressing ways *Laudato si’* was relevant to Yawuru people. He clearly articulated:

I can say with absolute confidence that *Laudato si’* speaks to the overriding concerns of Indigenous people – degeneration of our lands and seas that nurture us spiritually, culturally, socially and economically; social and political alienation; and rampant industrial development and greed. (Yu, 2016, pp. 2-3)

These thoughts can also be extended to villages and communities around the world. Whilst addressing major international organisations, as the

2030 Agenda does, Pope Francis also pays particular attention to small communities, encouraging them to contribute to locally instigated activities for change. This, it is contended, clearly involves community development understandings, processes and activities.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Community development (which includes communities of intent and/or geographical communities) is the process whereby people organise to inform, skill and empower each other to take collective action on jointly identified needs (Kenny, 2011). Those needs can include positive value-adding to community social infrastructure, through to undertaking activities to overcome disadvantage and climate change.

As Ife explained:

Community development represents a vision of how things might be organised differently, so that genuine ecological sustainability and social justice, which seem unachievable at global or national levels, can be realised in the experience of human community. (2013, p. 2)

This involves “change from below, valuing the wisdom, expertise and skills of the community ... and the importance of community control” (Ife, 2013, p. 4). In addition, Ife highlights “[t]he purpose of community development is to re-establish the community as the location of significant human experience” (2013, p. 212). He does, however, advise against single-purpose projects/ programmes, as “one-dimensional community development is likely to be of limited value” (2013, p. 212).

In addition, links between spiritual and community development ways of undertaking social and sustainability transformation have been made by Ife (2013), and Chile and Simpson (2004). Ife states:

The spiritual dimension ... is important to community development. A sense of the sacred, and a respect for spiritual values, is an essential part of re-establishing human community and providing meaning and purpose for people’s lives. But the corollary is also true: genuine human community is in itself a spiritual experience, so the development of community is an important ingredient of spiritual development. The two belong together. (2013, p. 255)

When exploring the work of faith-based organisations, Chile and Simpson noted that:

The underpinning philosophy of community development and *spirituality* is the connection of the individual to the collective, acknowledging that the well-being of the individual influences and is influenced by the well-being of community. The central tenets of this philosophy are the promotion of fairness, *social justice* and access to community resources to create responsible well-being. (Chile & Simpson, 2004, p. 318)

In addition, they maintain that the dimensions of community development identified by Ife “are strongly informed by spiritual values of holism, sustainability, diversity, equilibrium and social justice” (2004, p. 318). They conclude the role of spirituality within this “discourse provides a framework

for critical analysis and understanding of the causes of oppression as a means for creating positive and sustainable transforming community development” (2004, p. 323).

PEOPLE AND COMMUNITY AS HIGHLIGHTED IN *LAUDATO SI'*

It appears Pope Francis understands and supports community development approaches as described above. He clearly points out:

Attempts to resolve all problems through uniform regulations or technical interventions can lead to overlooking the complexities of local problems which demand the active participation of all members of the community. New processes taking shape cannot always fit into frameworks imported from outside; they need to be based in the local culture itself. (2015a, para. 144)

Thus, he clarifies:

There is a need to respect the rights of peoples and cultures, and to appreciate that the development of a social group presupposes an historical process which takes place within a cultural context and demands the constant and active involvement of local people *from within their proper culture*.² Nor can the notion of the quality of life be imposed from without, for quality of life must be understood within the world of symbols and customs proper to each human group. (2015a, para. 144)

Other community-based issues, which appear personalised within *Laudato si'*, include:

A wholesome social life can light up a seemingly undesirable environment. At times a commendable human ecology is practised by the poor despite numerous hardships. The feeling of asphyxiation brought on by densely populated residential areas is countered if close and warm relationships develop, if communities are created, if the limitations of the environment are compensated for in the interior of each person who feels held within a network of solidarity and belonging. (2015a, para. 148)

A further cross-section of community, grassroots-relevant quotes, provided by the Pope include:

[Do not] underestimate the importance of interpersonal skills. If the present ecological crisis is one small sign of the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity, we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships. (2015a, para. 119)

We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature. (2015a, para. 139)

There is also a need to protect common areas, visual landmarks and urban landscapes which increase our sense of belonging, of rootedness, of “feeling at home” within a city which includes us and brings us together. (2015a, para. 151)

[We must not] overlook the abandonment and neglect also experienced by some rural populations which lack access to essential services and where some workers are reduced to conditions of servitude, without rights or even the hope of a more dignified life. (2015a, para. 154)

The list could go on; however, this discourse will be concluded by noting a discussion in *Laudato Si'* that describes a case where cooperatives are being developed to provide renewable energy resources, ensuring local self-sufficiency and the possibility of sale of surpluses. Pope Francis tells us that:

This simple example shows that, while the existing world order proves powerless to assume its responsibilities, local individuals and groups can make a real difference. They are able to instil a greater sense of responsibility, a strong sense of community, a readiness to protect others, a spirit of creativity and a deep love for the land. They are also concerned about what they will eventually leave to their children and grandchildren. (2015a, para. 179)

Conclusion

I'm a community development practitioner and researcher, commencing PhD studies in community development for an ecologically sustainable future. Scrutinising both the United Nations 2030 Agenda (Jennings, 2017) and Pope Francis' *Laudato si'* (this paper) has been essential to my decision relating to which document I will primarily ground my local community action research, activities, projects and consequently thesis, within. I have now decided to primarily use *Laudato si'*, and then 2030 Agenda to a lesser degree.

Why? *Laudato si'*, I found, encapsulates many of my personal beliefs, philosophy and approaches to ways of working. So, after some time away from the Catholic Church, *Laudato si'* has led me to strengthen my Catholic beliefs and practices. I will now venture to shape those areas into a framework for my study. In doing this I aim to provide participants (local people in my local community) the space to think, and act, big – using community action research. This will be combined with community development processes of cooperation, shared vision and collective action in the challenges that will emerge as we (my community) move forward, towards defining and activating a more positive future.

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