



# On-going Community Resilience from the Ground Up:

A relational place based approach to grassroots community resilience



## Overview-

The Christchurch earthquakes that occurred in September 2010 and February, June and December 2011 have wrought unprecedented devastation on the region of Canterbury. Yet amongst the disaster, hope has shone through. Communities have pulled together, supported each other and started the long process of recovery and rebuilding. Academics, community leaders and policy analysts, both locally and internationally, have looked to Christchurch to observe the effects of this disaster and the way in which Cantabrians have and will recover. Having lived in Christchurch for most of my adolescence I started this research in the hope of showing the human stories of disasters in the academic and policy realm. To do this I have focussed on the role of grassroots organisations in facilitating resilience and the role of place in shaping these processes.

I approached Project Lyttelton as a possible case study for this research as they were well publicised as a grassroots group that was actively involved in immediate and on-going recovery from the earthquakes. Project Lyttelton is an organisation that focusses on building a sustainable and vibrant community in response to the issues of climate change, peak oil and consumerism. Through appreciative inquiry (searching for and telling the good stories) and hands on grassroots activities, such as a time bank, farmers market and community garden, the group has been contributing to the Lyttelton community since 2003. Due to the generous participation of members of the organisation and wider community this research was able to be undertaken in June 2012. The following information summarises the approach of the research and the results.

The research followed these objectives:

- 1. What is community resilience and how is it defined in relation to grassroots community organisations?*
- 2. How can community organisations like Project Lyttelton facilitate the strengthening of resilience at a grass roots level?*
- 3. How does place affect individual and group identity and how does this contribute to on-going community resilience?*
- 4. How do different conceptualisations of place affect the levels of resilience enacted by a grass roots community group?*

The intention of the questions on community resilience was twofold. First the research aimed to more fully understand the role of non-governmental local organisations in shaping responses to local crises. Second, the intention was to also investigate whether there was a case for increasing support for grassroots groups on the basis of the resilience capacities they can contribute.

Issues of place were also investigated as an aspect of community resilience. There is little existing research on the role of place in shaping resilience to disasters. I wished to investigate if there was a need for understanding place in regards to resilience and what this understanding might look like.

## Methodology-

Qualitative methods were used for this research through the interviews and stories. 7 face to face interviews were undertaken in Lyttelton in June 2012. A further 8 e-interviews were undertaken through a survey platform on the internet. Through this approach I aimed to offer a less intense option for those wanting to share their thoughts and opinions. I have also been very grateful for the use of the '*Shaken Heart*' book created by Project Lyttelton and Julie Evans. This book contains 32 unedited interview transcripts with residents on their experiences in the earthquakes and allowed me to read their stories without subjecting residents to yet another request for research. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using discourse analysis.

## Findings-

The research results were split into two categories – those relating to grassroots community resilience and those relating to place and resilience. Working with Project Lyttelton to better understand their experiences of the aftermath of the earthquakes provided insights into how community organisations can be prepared for unexpected and sudden change particularly as a result of natural disasters.

There were three main areas of focus with regards to resilience:

- Social Support and Participation
- Social Learning and Social Memory
- Inclusivity and Diversity

Each of these resilience capacities have been shown by other studies to effect the way that communities recover from and adapt to disasters.

### *Social Support and Participation:*

Social support and participation are closely linked to the concept of social capital which is widely thought to be important to how communities function, especially in times of change. Social support refers to informal networks within a community based on friendship, kinship or acquaintance. The actual support people gain from these networks is just as important as how much people perceive they will be supported during times of need. Project Lyttelton's activities showed many characteristics that led to an increased level of social support in the town. Activities such as the time bank, community garden, seasonal festivals and farmers markets increased the loose ties that people have with others in the community.

During the earthquakes activities such as the community garden provided a space for increasing these social support networks as this participant explained:

*“The community garden was a great place for people to come and talk and forget about the earthquake [to] get their hands dirty, get stuck in” (E-1)*

Others also noted these support networks were at play before the earthquakes:

*“When I gave birth I received great support with clothes, meals, equipment, and help with my other children - when my children walked to shops or pool I would get messages to say 'the kids are just going past me now". We share chickens, gardens, fruit trees. For neighbours who are elderly we have set up alarms/direct dials, and if we have not connected within 24 [hours] we pop in” (E-6)*

Social participation, while similar to social support places emphasis on formalised networks such as volunteering, politics, sports and charities. One of the most interesting results from this research was that the time bank provided an already established means of participation for citizens to become involved in the recovery effort despite not being formally trained by the Civil Defence. One participant noted that the Christchurch Civil Defence was turning people away due to being inundated with requests to volunteer. In Lyttelton however the time bank ran alongside the Navy, Armed Forces and Volunteer Ambulance to provide a balanced recovery operation that everyone could partake in. As this participant noted this was beneficial for both individuals and the community:

*“You need to have the ability to be able to use people who come in and offer, because that's part of their healing or getting over things. It deals with their need to be with someone else and to be of use. It's sort of a way of them capturing their control as it where over, you know, my house is all gone and everything else but I can do this. So it's quite important. So the time bank was able to do that very well” (F-2)*

Other social participation activities also assisted the community's recovery, such as the re-establishment of the farmers market by Project Lyttelton which established a sense of routine as and provided a focus to re-start the local economy.

### ***Social Memory and Learning:***

Resilience capacities can also relate to the ability to adapt to change in the face of disasters. This is considered the social memory and social learning of a community. Social memory involves the ability for societies and communities to remember the lessons for past events as individuals do while social learning is the process of adapting to challenges to lessen future disasters. Studying these aspects of resilience often occurs in retrospect but through interviews it was clear that some of Project Lyttelton's activities were moving towards community based learning as a result of the earthquakes.

The most prominent example is the creation of the Harbour Resilience Project (HRP). This project shows the ability and motivation of Project Lyttelton to find lessons in the experiences of the quakes and to turn them into something productive for not only the immediate community but the wider region. The HRP has already succeeded in creating a community owned food co-op and plenty to share stall. These activities not only positively challenge social norms around giving and sharing but also increase the food security of the community during future crises. Plans to create an operational farm at a site in the harbour will also increase food supply and sustainability.

*“I guess the main component or the main outcome that we are trying to achieve with that is providing an avenue for experiential education so it's not just reading from the book but you can actually come there and see how things are done. Try it out, consult with experts and take that home with you and just yeah kind of trying to be really practical about it” (F-7)*

Such plans could incorporate an element of lessons from the earthquakes which could then serve as a reminder to those who visit as to the experiences of those in Lyttelton at the time.

In addition, activities such as the Lyttel Stitches group that sewed hearts, giving them away and sewing them onto fences provide a symbol for remembrance to keep the memory of what happened alive – hopefully for future generations. That this activity was broadcast on television and in museums across the country also shows the power of the hearts sewing group to affect not only those in Christchurch but individuals across the country

### *Inclusivity and Diversity:*

Resilience theory often discusses the importance of diversity in both biological and social terms. In a biological setting diversity aids the recovery of an ecosystem by providing alternative strengths and weaknesses to draw on. In a human community diversity provides multiple ways for people to see and experience the world, thus diversifying the approaches to crisis and change. Inclusivity is a way for groups and communities to increase this diversity. Project Lyttelton approaches their activities with an expressly open and inclusive attitude. Whoever wants to be involved and drive their own project can do so if they are willing to put their energy behind the project. Participants also noted that they use inclusive imagery and wording and attempt to build networks with other groups in the community, particularly through the garage sale system where organisations can run the garage sale on a weekend and use the profits for their group.

*“We try and be open to anybody and we certainly try and connect with existing different entities that are here... we certainly try and make sure that anything we put out there is inclusive in its terminology and if it’s got you know pictorial references that they’re broad in what they describe. I think most of what PL does is done from compassion and love so it’s not necessarily something that is focussed on but is assumed automatically” (F-6)*

However, one trend that did come up in interviews was that there are some in the community who feel excluded by the activities of Project Lyttelton. This tension was often referred to as ‘old’ and ‘new’ Lyttelton and will most likely be unfamiliar to those who live in Lyttelton. The tension was mentioned by almost every participant but with differing levels of concern. It became apparent that the experience of the earthquakes had drawn many people together; acting as a common experience that people could identify with and draw on. However it did seem that some tension was re-emerging with regards to how the town would be rebuilt.

### Considerations of Place and Resilience:

The effects of place on resilience is currently an area where there is little specific research. This thesis attempted to contribute to this gap by providing insight into the specific case of Lyttelton. Place is in many ways taken for granted as an aspect of life but is in most cases fundamentally altered by a disaster. In an earthquake, landscapes change and streetscapes are damaged or destroyed. In this research it became apparent that people respond to this change differently. While many people came together during the earthquakes, the following period of recovery and rebuilding is starting to show old tensions emerge in the visions for what Lyttelton should be like in the future.

The tension mentioned before between ‘old’ and ‘new’ Lyttelton is one of the ways this tension has manifested. The divide is best described as the perceived distinctions between those who come

from working class port backgrounds and who have family ties in the area going back several generations and those who have migrated more recently to the township. From the interviews and what people discussed it appeared that one element of this tension was a differing view in how people identified with the place of Lyttelton.

Some viewed the place of Lyttelton as strongly tied to the history, buildings and ancestry of those with long running ties. Others view the place as imbued with strong community ties and a friendly atmosphere that meant that people were more important than the buildings. The earthquakes resulted in a lot of grief for everyone, especially those with long running attachments to the buildings that were destroyed or damaged.

*“A lot of the buildings have gone along with the bars and the great people that ran them. The harbour light and the time ball are a great lost along with the volcano. It was like it had its soul ripped out with the people dazed and upset” (E-2)*

*“I remember someone saying it’s like we’ve lost Lyttelton, it’s just not going to be the same. And in one sense she’s right. Someone else described Lyttelton as being like a gummy mouth with so many gaps post-quake. And the real sense of a lack of, you know, all these buildings they had just loved and been around and that they were deeply missing” (F-1)*

*“If I remember what the streetscape of Lyttelton used to be, we were so proud of our heritage, the cradle of Canterbury, so many firsts in NZ started there. The buildings anchored the streetscape, those critical buildings on those corners and it created full stops and now you’ve got all this openness and this bareness and key buildings that were Lyttelton are gone. Key buildings that have been there for some people’s whole lifetimes are gone, and so all those memories and all those things they used to do, how they socialised, how they lived has been literally wiped out” (F-4)*

What emerged from these interviews was that some people who felt this grief over loss of history and buildings were concerned about the pace of rebuilding and the perceived lack of consultation by those in Project Lyttelton with those who considered themselves ‘old’ Lyttelton.

Project Lyttelton have attempted to be as inclusive as possible given their resources but what appears to be occurring is a clash in how different groups in the town want to approach the rebuilding of elements that were once critical to how some individuals identified with the town. Here different ideas about what place is and should be like going into the future are conflicting causing tension within the community. The issue with this is that this tension may undermine the positive work being done by Project Lyttelton and other community organisations with regards to social support, participation, learning and inclusivity. One participant expressed concerns about Project Lyttelton and the wider community:

*“I think some of my concern is not necessarily about Lyttelton but it... I still think we’re not taking the population with us. And I don’t know how you do that. I don’t know how you do that but it seems that we’re not and I dunno is it just that we haven’t reached that magical point?”*

The issue is possibly a matter of moving to accept and diversify the different ways people see Lyttelton. What is potentially lacking in Lyttelton is an understanding of the many different ways that people view Lyttelton, some see history, others see the port and some see the community spirit and activities, while others see bits and pieces of all of these ideas.

These considerations may be especially important in how the community works forward in the earthquake recovery. Lyttelton has been through extraordinarily challenging circumstances which

have reshaped the physical and psychological landscape. These factors need to be taken into consideration not only by community organisations but also by local and central government. Rebuilding a city or town without consider how different people view place and the destruction of what they formerly identified with is highly likely to incite tension and conflict over what is the “real” or “authentic” identity of place.

In reality there is no “authentic” identity of place. Lyttelton has continually been shaped by forces from the outside. Those who identified with the port town element of history noted the various changes and influences of having ships from all over the world dock in the town, increasing diversity and vibrancy. Those who have moved to the town in recent decades are just another flow of people with differing views of place that can add their own flare of diversity and vibrancy. By taking an antagonistic approach to this conflict either ‘side’ is passing up the opportunity to embrace the many styles of Lyttelton in the rebuild of the physical elements of the town.

Indeed by ignoring the multiple ways people see Lyttelton, the very characteristics that supported the resilience of the town through the earthquakes could be compromised. This is highly undesirable as it would result not only in lack of adaptation from the earthquake events but an actual weakening of the resilience capacities that Project Lyttelton and the wider community have so strongly fostered.

### *Conclusions:*

Project Lyttelton’s activities have been shown to support community resilience capacities at a grassroots level. They provided both informal and formal networks for residents to draw on during the disaster and have continued to be active in promoting resilience following the immediate time of crisis through the Harbour Resilience Project. There is significant evidence in this research that grassroots action can provide a unique perspective on the needs and requirements of the local communities they are based in. If community support networks such as Project Lyttelton were extended throughout other communities the resilience of wider urban areas and countries may be significantly improved – an area for further research. Time banks and community gardens in particular provide important networks and community facilities. For local and central government to support these local initiatives would result in an increase in grassroots capacity for coping with disasters.

With regard to issues of place, as an outsider to Lyttelton, the observations made from the interviews will be understood from my particular experiences and those of the participants I talked to. The tension in Lyttelton is by no means an all-encompassing conflict – rather it is a narrative of conflict that has continued for many years and has evolved with the earthquakes to shift focus onto the rebuild. This sort of long running under the surface tension is important to understand and explore as it may compromise the positive resilience work being done by Project Lyttelton and the wider community.



*"I never understood how a man could dare to watch a city shaken to the ground, to feel the tremors, hear the tragic sound of houses twisting, crashing everywhere, and not be conquered by despair. Although his buildings crumble to a mound of worthless ruins, man has always found the urge to build a stronger city there.*

*Within my soul I made my towers high. They lie in ruins, yet I have begun to build again, now planning to restore what life has shaken to the earth; and I in faith shall build my towers towards the sun a stronger city than was there before."*

-Gertrude Ryder Bennett, Napier, 1931

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