Supercommunity
Could it save the world?

By *John Raeburn*

When I was asked by *Joan Lardner-Rivlin* (a hero of mine) to write an article for this ADCOSS magazine, I thought I would use it as an opportunity to develop an idea I've been toying with for quite a while. This is an appropriate setting, because I've been working on this idea since NSCOSS, together with Raeburn House, ran some workshops in the lead-up to the supercity, and I did a couple of presentations related to the concept of community in the supercity context. This involved a concept I referred to then as "super communities", which suggested a new and potent way communities could function in that context. At that time, I could see that the mega-city being proposed could easily steamroll over the very precious communities we have in Auckland, continuing a process that started many years ago when numerous local councils were abolished in favour of bigger groupings. As far as I'm concerned, community at the local and neighbourhood level is one of the greatest gifts we have as a society, a gift that gets increasingly threatened by the corporate, faceless and centralised nature of everything.

Community, which is to say humans' organisation into smallish groups with strong bonds between the people in them, is the oldest social model in

existence. The genus with the name Homo has been around for about 2.5 million years, and for most of that time, until about a hundred thousand years ago, we moved around in small hunter-gatherer groups of between 30 and 60 people.

Once groups started getting more settled, which especially took off with the emergence of agrarian society about 10,000 years ago, we went through various phases of clans, tribes, chiefdoms and nation states, but at each stage, our survival was dependent on strong bonds between people – something that academics call *social cohesion*. It's quite clear that our success as a species, Homo sapiens, was not due to our physical strength or even our brain size – other species had bigger brains and were definitely stronger than us. No, the thing that made us stand out from the rest, and allowed us to survive when all the others became extinct, was our capacity to co-operate and work together as groups.

If we now fast forward to the present, all of us are aware of the huge challenges facing us in the 21st century. I think that if most people were asked about the most important challenges, they might say things like global warming and terrorism. But I think there is another challenge that is of equal magnitude, but which tends to go under the radar. And that is *the loss of community.* People have been aware of this at some level for a long time. For example, when the Industrial Revolution started in the late 18th century, huge numbers of people moved from rural communities into industrialised cities, prompting one German scholar to come up with a distinction between what he called Gemeinshaft and Gesellschaft – community and society. What he felt was that the rural village had given away to a more faceless entity in the big city context. And one only has to go to almost any rural area New Zealand to get a sense of what real community is about.

Since then, we've had many philosophers and others talking about concepts like social alienation and faceless cities, and there's no doubt that urbanisation and population growth accentuate these tendencies.

Then, in the early 2000s, American economist *Robert Putman* bewailed what he saw as the loss of "social capital", evidenced by dwindling memberships

of community social groups such as bowling clubs and RSAs, and also a decreasing sense of trust between people in neighbourhoods. In short, we have no shortage of people who over the last few centuries have noted the decline of traditional types of community – the very social unit that is programmed into our genes, and which we all probably crave at some level. One of the books that most influenced my own journey as a psychologist venturing into community was called *The Psychological Sense of Community*, which made the case that we all have a desire for community built into us.

Today, here in the second decade of the 21st century, I believe there are two further key factors that are eroding the old-fashioned sense of community. The first of these is the international economic and political system that has prevailed since the 1980s, usually summed up in the term "neoliberalism". In a word, it is a system that creates inequity, not only by enriching the rich and impoverishing the poor, but also giving huge power to the corporate sector, making it more powerful than many governments, and detracting from the community sector. Indeed, organised communities are perceived as a threat to this system, because they represent directly the "people's will", and they might oppose it. And having people stressed and in fear of their jobs is a good way to keep them compliant and pay them low wages. It also makes those in work better consumers, on whom the system depends – people consume more when stressed.

The second community-eroding factor that is increasingly apparent in the past decade or so is technology. Not only are various types of digital social media substituting for "real" social interactions between flesh-and-blood people, but they also isolate people like never before.

Kids, for example, are just as likely to be looking at screens as playing with other kids. And looking into the future, it's almost certain that robotisation and artificial intelligence are likely to increasingly take over much of the work currently done by humans. If that's so, it will put our current societal arrangements on their ear, and we will be driven to find new methods of employing people in their communities, especially if there are few or no job opportunities.

I started lecturing medical students about the benefits of community for health and wellbeing in the 1970s (teaching medical students was my job at the time), in the process trying to find empirical support for what I was saying. This initially came in the form of research done in America on a small Italian immigrant community in Pennsylvania called Roseto. This community scored high on risk factors for heart disease and other illnesses – the people were overweight, had high blood pressure, smoked, got no exercise, and so on, yet they had little or none of these illnesses compared with surrounding communities. This led to several decades of research on Roseto, which came to the conclusion that there was one standout beneficial factor here – not the Mediterranean diet, but what the researchers called "social support". In other words, the combination of social cohesion and mutual support in this community was deemed to be the number one contributor to these people's remarkable health and wellbeing.

Since then, much other research has supported the notion that social support and strong communities create healthy and happy people, including an enhanced capacity to deal with stressful crises. I think we saw that in Christchurch, following the earthquakes, where the community's coming together and helping each other was the standout feature of their recovery process.

In other words, I am a total believer in the power of community as a central determinant of human health, wellbeing and happiness, and also how being nested in a good community enables us to deal more successfully with the inevitable stresses of life, including those beyond our control like environmental disasters and war, and there is a large amount of scientific evidence to support this. And yet, in the academic health and medical realm I've inhabited for the past 40 years or so, the importance of community barely rates a mention, and when it does, it's usually a top-down version where the experts are doing things to the community, or "consulting" community to foster their own purposes, as worthy as those may be. Anybody who's heard me rave away over those years will know that I believe the key ingredient here is a people-centred approach (I wrote a book in the 1990s with Canadian *Irv Rootman* called *People-Centred Health Promotion* setting out this approach in detail), that makes empowerment, self-determination and community control the overriding requirements. Experts certainly have a role here, but as facilitators and supporters of that process, rather than running things. Yet how many professionals have been trained in that approach, much less actually practise it?

For me, the proof of the pudding about all this was provided in the 1970s from my involvement in the Birkdale-Beach Haven Community

Project (BBCP), which began as a partnership between those two communities and the Auckland Medical School, which attempted to put these principles into action. The end of that decade saw the BBCP being called "*the most successful community project in New Zealand*", and the combined Birkdale-Beach Haven community being rated in a newspaper poll first equal (with St Heliers) as the best liked community in Auckland by its residents.

The extensive research that accompanied the project, published in international journals, showed that on a wide variety of health, wellbeing and social measures, the project was a stunning success. This project was (and still is) totally community-controlled and run, as well as being self-funded. At its peak, it had 10,000 of the 14,000 residents of those communities involved in some way or other. I'm happy to report that BBCP is still going, and right

now, is engaged in a renewal process that could well bring it back to its former glory.

I believe that fostering local community using empowering, self-determined and community controlled processes is the way to go in the future. But it does require the systematic organizational approach used by the BBCP (which the community, after some hesitation, grew to love), plus the shared values, because like any other complex enterprise with many parts, it needs dedicated and co-ordinated effort to work. But with people working together on common goals, for the great cause of "community", it certainly creates a cohesive and high wellbeing population. Whereas most public health academics and experts feel that it is government policy that will potentially save the world, my view is that policy is only part of the story.

The other part directly involves people, and in particular, people who are potently organised in terms of their localities and their communities. A highly organised local community is unstoppable, and actually should be, in my view, an important source of policy production. This is not to denigrate the role of academics, professionals and policymakers in any kind of way. They have a very important contribution to make too. But unless it's done in tandem with, and respect for, grass-roots (and flax-roots) community, then it's going to fail. In other words, I believe community is the secret ingredient for saving the world in it's 21st century plight.

"Supercommunity"

The concept of Supercommunity is one where I see a 21st century world of connected, supportive and well-organized communities, just like Birkdale-Beach Haven and many other such communities, who network through the internet and other means to provide a coherent "community voice" across the globe, while also focusing on their very local issues. That is, Supercommunity is a collective grouping of thousands or millions of communities around the world, all sharing much the same values, and expressing a "people perspective" as a legitimate one in an overly corporatized

and undemocratic world, where the people's voice is actively disempowered. In terms of strategy, the well-known saying "*Think global, act local*" exactly gets it.

So how do we achieve this? To describe this fully would take another lengthy article, so I'll just be brief here. What I believe we need is a new 21st-century model of community broadly based on the principles I've just outlined, plus a means to link all the communities that work this way. What's new about it is not so much the methods used, although it has some original dimensions, but more the effort to reinstate community back to its original role in humanity. That is, it represents an effort to have local community recognized once again around the world as the single most important consideration for how we organise ourselves as a human species, in terms of our overall sense of wellbeing.

As in the BBCP example, Supercommunity is about the people of each community who want to be part of this effort being empowered and able to determine their own destinies, in partnership (as far as possible) with their governments and other central authorities.

The overriding value here is negotiation, not confrontation, though sometimes the latter may be required. The agenda is one that combines the accomplishment of community-chosen goals with building strong and positive relationships between residents. And here, I'm talking exclusively about *locality* community – where we live. The ideal size of the these localities in terms of their basic community organization is up to about 10,000 people, which in turn can be aggregated into clusters totalling tens of thousands, depending on what people subjectively judge to be their community. And although the "whole world" is the ultimate goal, the actual process will be one community at a time, the demonstrable success of which would, in time, encourage other communities to try this way of operating.

The Supercommunity concept sees each of these individual communities having a central meeting place, akin to a community house or wharenui. These are neutral from a political or vested interest perspective, located in the psychological heart of a community, and being positive and welcoming

places seen as the nerve centre of that community. They are *not* service centres or community centres in the traditional sense – they are community meeting places whose primary role is to serve as an organizational centre for the whole community, but which can also provide space for various community activities. They aren't beholden to outside agencies such as councils or other institutions and sectional interests, but they may receive funds or other resources from existing bodies, government agencies, businesses, and so on, so long as there are no unacceptable strings attached to these. In these places, anything and everything can be discussed, a process that requires clear ground rules and facilitation, the overall agenda always being one of building overall community wellbeing and positive relationships between residents.

Careful planning of actions is crucial and consensual, based in the first place on periodic representative needs/wishes surveys of the whole community. It's this systematic approach to ascertaining the will of the community, plus its empowering values, that most distinguishes the Supercommunity concept from others, plus the co-operative community-led action that takes place to meet the community's ascertained needs and wishes. At present most communities don't have anything comparable to this, and even most existing community houses, of which there are dozens around the country, don't fulfil this kind of function. Because the *whole* community is involved, not just some problem group or other selected population, I call each of these endeavours "comprehensive community projects" – they are inclusive of everyone, and potentially involve every aspect of community life.

You might wonder who's going to undertake all this, and where the funding and other resources will come from. I don't have time to address the latter here (funding and resources), although I think that is relatively straightforward. But I would like to end with a brief consideration of who might be the main organizers and human resources for these projects. In the 1970s BBCP, we typically had several main co-ordinators, plus up to 300 group leaders of various kinds, some paid, some voluntary. I would see something comparable here. And who will be available to undertake these tasks, most of which will happen during the day? I see two main groups as possibilities.

The first of these groups are older people. In New Zealand, for instance, over 65s are predicted to double by 2030, and constitute a quarter of the population. Dramatic language is used to describe this growth, which is happening around the world, for example "silver tsunami".

Much recent research, such as that in a 2013 Massey University report called *Inclusion, Contribution, Connection*, show that the desire of older people to contribute to and participate in their communities is high among their priorities. And just think of all the skills these people have, and because of the improving health of older people, many will still be energetic to an advanced age. (Look at *Joan*!). This is not to say that older people will be the only resources – of course people of any age can be participants. But these days, as far as adults are concerned, the majority, both male and female, are in the workforce. (The idea of older people contributing to their communities in the supercity context this way is something I've presented on for a number of years under the label of "Superageing").

The second group is slightly more notional, but if predictions of the ever-increasing mechanisation, computerization and robotisation of work are correct (someone commented that Xero may put most accountants out of work), there are going to be a lot of younger people available in communities too. From *Henry Ford* onwards, we've seen industrialists favouring machines over people, mainly because they are cheaper. In America, the vast numbers of derelict factories are testimony to that trend, which is one of the reasons why *Donald Trump* has been doing so well – he appeals to the dispossessed, who feel increasingly alienated from the existing system.

Comprehensive community projects would not just benefit from this potential human resource, they would also provide a vehicle for creating new occupational opportunities, whether paid or unpaid. Whole new economic systems could be co-ordinated through these projects.

For example, one future scenario could see increasing numbers of people adopting a subsistence or food producing lifestyle, with their produce being traded in a co-operative fashion through such projects. And that's only the start of the possibilities.

Anyway, that is plenty on this topic for the moment. There's much more that I could cover, such as financing and the technology of organizing such projects. However, I hope that what I have written here gives some food for thought about a possible way forward, one where human wellbeing and a sense of community are the central considerations.

If the world were composed of a network of thousands or potentially millions of interconnected communities driven by the concept of wellbeing for everyone, and sharing basically the same values, it would definitely be a better place.