



community



what is it?

It's group human interaction, usually tied to a place, but not necessarily (e.g. nomadic or online communities). Humans (in fact all primates) are social animals - we've always lived in groups, from hunter-gatherer bands to city streets. We're not just talking about intentional communities or ecovillages, where people deliberately form community. It's the spirit of community that's important – people living near to each other don't automatically have it. There can be several communities in one geographical area – based on interests (music, sport, etc.), religion, culture, age, profession etc. Individuals can be part of more than one, and all will contribute to the overall community of place.

History: all humans lived in hunter-gatherer bands pre-agriculture, with strong kinship ties and resource sharing. Agriculture allowed tribes to settle, after which resources could be stored, and accumulated in the hands of a few. Wealth concentrated, empires grew, but community remained for ordinary people. Communities were largely rural until the end of feudalism, when enclosure of common land pushed peasants into cities to work in the new factories, and vital skills were lost. Local economies had always been about producing useful things for an exchange medium, which was then used to purchase things other people had produced. Now the aim of the economy was to make money from money, via investments, interest, and rent on property. The industrial revolution brought trains, then roads, then commuting, and both local economies and community began to break down.

Friendly (or mutual) societies grew up in response. They were essentially social security organisations, providing insurance for sickness, accident, old age etc. for a subscription; but they provided community cohesion too, in the form of social clubs, lectures, ceremonies, emotional support for the bereaved or sick etc. They're still strong in many poorer countries. The state



Market traders bring character to, and help keep wealth in, the local economy.

caused the demise of the friendly societies in the UK by introducing mandatory national insurance in 1911 – when there were around 9 million members of registered and unregistered societies. Communities are now being weakened further by the 'sharing economy' (companies like Über and Airbnb), and by corporate supermarkets and chains in every community, sucking out wealth to pay shareholders. People drive to supermarkets and back without meeting local traders, there's no feeling of ownership, there are fewer (and more boring) jobs than in economies of small, local businesses. We're becoming a nation of 'clone towns'. But glimmers of hope are appearing. There's renewed interest in local food and craft produce, and many local authorities are looking into 'community wealth building'. In Preston, the council give contracts to local businesses to provide services for hospitals, education, police etc. and if no local business exists to provide those services, they'll help set up and provide training for a co-op to do it.

what are the benefits?

Community is essential to human well-being, which depends on meaningful interactions – to feel that you mean something to others; that you belong; that you have emotional connections; that you'd be missed if you left the community. Loss of community has caused a loneliness epidemic in the West – especially among the elderly.

Strong communities instill moral accountability, which means less crime. Social interaction makes neighbourhoods safer, friendlier and more interesting. It also helps us meet our practical needs (in a cost-effective way) – sharing tools or equipment, finding babysitters or people to feed your pet while you're away etc. Online communities can't meet our requirements for human contact in the same way.

Community often becomes stronger in times of crisis, and will be vital in case of future crashes – economic or ecological – to provide security, plus the essentials of life where long-distance transport becomes prohibitively expensive or impossible.

Community-embedded local economies provide more, and more interesting, jobs. The scale of businesses (small) is important too in building community.

A good local social life and economy reduces the need to travel and therefore burn fossil fuels. 'Stuff' doesn't have to travel so much either, and its amount can be reduced in communities where there's lots of sharing. Plus strong communities can come together to fight the removal of or damage to natural capital such as forests or rivers.



How to kill community: Cradley Heath High Street (West Mids) in the 1990s and now.

what can I do?

The instinct to be social animals can't really be stifled – community will always try to return. We need to counter the trends that are killing it. Decentralisation and the principle of subsidiarity are key to a vibrant community, community-based economy and potentially, governance.

Socialise: get to know your neighbours. Smile at people – what's the worst that can happen? Talk to an old person – offer to dig their garden, take their dog for a walk, anything they might find difficult. Join things – a drama group, Transition group, choir, sports club, supper club, book club, any club that takes your fancy. Get an allotment, start a local seed club, invite people to a picnic, volunteer, throw a party. Stand for local office – but not in a divisive, party-political way. Stand as an independent instead. That's what they did in Frome, Somerset – and won every seat!

Support your local economy: patronise local businesses and alternatives to the corporate giants (see NonCorporate.org), which includes various community-based initiatives like community-supported agriculture, credit unions, community energy; local currencies, mutual credit, co-ops of all kinds etc. Do we want to get our food, energy, clothes and consumer goods from low-quality corporate sources, probably produced by virtual slave labour, unsustainably,

with tax avoided, to the detriment of your community, or do you want to consume sustainably, from people who care about good food, the environment, craft skills, quality produce and their communities? Then you have to find those sources and be prepared to pay a fair price.

Become part of your local economy: work for a local business, co-op or not-for-profit, or become a sole trader. That could mean skilling up to produce something useful for your community, and supporting others doing the same. You might find the prices of artisanal goods / organic food etc. high, but you'll be producing the same kinds of things, so you'll be a consumer and a producer.

You could take it further, and become a mover and a shaker in the local economy – helping start community land trusts, housing co-ops, cohousing projects, hosting a REconomy event, getting your council to look at the Preston Model etc. Talk to us about becoming a local convener for the Open Credit Network. As it's based on trust, mutual credit could be the 'glue' that holds local economies together, and links them to others, potentially in a global system. As Tom Greco says: 'What the world needs is a means of payment that is locally controlled but globally useful'.

resources

- lowimpact.org/community for information, courses, links and books, including:
- Shareable, *Sharing Cities*
- Charles Vogl, *the Art of Community*
- Nick Wates, *Community Planning Handbook*
- cles.org.uk: association for local economies
- streetbank.com: enabling sharing in community
- reconomy.org: helping start local businesses



Front porches are popular in the US – they allow people to chat with passers-by.

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