

Communities can build a more resilient society

Alan Betts (<http://alanbetts.com/writings>)

This summer I spent a week at Lake Bomoseen in western Vermont. Each morning I watched the sunrise and the wildlife, the fishermen, the children playing — and the power boats zipping by, having fun but going nowhere.

Without a clear vision societies drift. Our society has been drifting for some time, politically paralyzed because we cannot accept that the dream based on economic growth, fossil fuel and debt is unsustainable. Finding social consensus on a new vision is essential but difficult. New concepts have to meet general approval and not offend our sacred dogmas. They must be broad enough to embrace real world complexity and subtle enough that few oppose them.

One attempt: “We need to construct a sustainable society” did not get far, since many cannot accept that the historic post-war system is unsustainable. A new vision is: “How can we build a resilient society?” This is more subtle, as it is a way of recognizing that society is becoming more vulnerable without having to agree on why.

Building resilience is a multistep process. When disasters like Tropical Storm Irene devastate a community, governments and towns work together as part of the recovery process. It is fairly easy to reach consensus on reducing vulnerability to disasters that are fresh in our memory. There is debate, but out of that a common view can emerge. For example, it’s clear that rebuilding in floodplains makes no sense.

It is much harder to change our way of life to reduce the likelihood of future disasters, such as the ones we face as climate change accelerates. Here wise action often conflicts with business as usual. In deeply divided societies, government has much less power — and the farsighted must lead their communities in creating new options for the future.

A transition movement is spreading around the world. A major theme is one of helping communities plan for the future and build resilience. The Transition Network handbook lists two ingredients of a resilient community: diversity and modularity. (www.transitionnetwork.org)

Diversity of land use, economic opportunities and skilled people enable a community to respond flexibly to future challenges. The idea of modularity is that the collapse of one part does not bring down the whole.

Many of our globalized networks are becoming fragile because shocks can travel rapidly through them. The price of food or oil on the global market can change around the world in days. We saw the spreading economic collapse that followed the crash of the global financial system. A big solar flare could bring down our satellite-based communication, financial and navigation systems.

Resilience allows key aspects of the local community to be decoupled from the global system. This is where localization is important. Can we build a local smart electrical grid that can be decoupled from neighboring regions? Can our local food system support us if climate extremes threaten key crops elsewhere? Can our local banking system be protected from the vulnerable and speculative global system? Can we reduce our dependence on fossil fuel to minimize pressure on the climate and keep precious dollars in our community? Can we recycle more of our waste to cut down on its environmental impact?

Local control also builds resilience because it brings responsibility close to home and tighter connections with our neighbors. The farming networks in our communities can both build soil fertility and be responsive to our needs. Locally we can ensure pesticides and pollutants are kept out of our food. But we have little knowledge and no control if our food comes from far away, where costs are lower and environmental regulation is weak.

We can draw on experience and wisdom from across the world, as we support and encourage those who are building our local communities and resources. Caring for each other will create a living future for Earth’s children.