

**HOPE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT:  
HOW TO OPEN TO THE POTENTIAL  
OF EMPOWERMENT AT THE LOCAL LEVEL**

by

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## 1. Introduction

I want to speak about H.O.P.E.: about **H**ow to **O**pen to the **P**otential of **E**mpowerment at the local level.

I want to begin by confessing that I approach the question of how to listen to the voices of the community about global environmental problems by feeling completely unskilled and inept. This is because of the enormity of the challenge we are facing.

I have spent my career devising processes for listening to communities -- through consultative and participatory processes. Now I wish to focus our attention on ecological issues.

## 2. The Context for Local Environmental Decision-making

I am deeply conscious of my ineptitude in speaking about these issues. However, I feel that my only approach must be to stay in the place of "not knowing", of "beginner's mind". From that place, I can offer my best interpretation of the context of community participation about environmental issues at the local level.

Firstly, let me affirm that I am convinced that the environmental problem's real. It's not going to go away. The expectation that science will come up with a "technical" solution to global environmental problems has been exposed as a sham. Without help, I predict that there will be two general types of responses from local government:

- . Frenetic activity (most likely of an uncoordinated nature);
- . Paralyzing despair (the "green stress" Peter Newman has described).

From State governments I predict entrenched and crippling bureaucratic despair as well.

Secondly, the good old days are gone forever. The days of compliant local communities who trusted their Councils and did not enquire very deeply into their affairs have departed. Never to return. A Canadian specialist in citizen participation training, Desmond Connor, has argued that society has changed irrevocably from most people's memories of "a time and place in which our community was relatively small, social change took place slowly, the population was fairly homogeneous, most people respected authority and the majority were generally satisfied with life."

Asking, "What has happened to those halcyon days?", he finds some explanation in the following factors: increasing community size; the speed of social change; communities now containing a volatile mix of people with very different values, goals and assumptions; scepticism about professionals replacing the established respect for authority; rising levels of education, unemployment and early retirement. These factors combine to produce a pool of competent citizens who continually ask "Why?" and, even more uncomfortably, "Why not?"

Other factors which contribute to your communities' reluctance to permit "business as usual" are generalised anxiety and hostility resulting from high interest rates, the threat and experience of unemployment, inflation and uncertainty about the future and rising expectations fostered by communications breakthroughs, establishing global norms even in the most isolated places. (Connor, 1984: 1/3)

These factors combine with increasing environmental awareness on the part of the community as a whole to intensify the demands placed on local Councils. In general, despite the catch-cry that communities are apathetic, communities often lead their councils when it comes to environmental issues. In the 1990s communities are sophisticated enough to realise that governments are avoiding the debate. It is now abundantly clear to me that the old bureaucratic approach of "decide, announce and defend", which has

characterised environmental decision-making, no longer works. Simply "receiving submissions" on environmental matters is a thing of the past -- an approach no longer tolerated by communities.

### 3. The Impact of the Global Environmental Crisis on Local Government

I contend that local government is likely to be affected by the growing consciousness about **global** environmental issues in three ways:

- . Council staff and elected members will initiate programs to deal with environmental problems such as waste recycling, local food production, water and land management (the proactive approach);
- . Communities will demand that action be taken on issues of local concern;
- . Councils will respond to **outside** initiatives (such as the MFP, an industrial park, housing, a marina, a shopping centre, road widening...) (the reactive approach).

In all of these situations, it will be imperative for Councils to develop ways of thoroughly involving their communities in environmental decision-making.

This is a historic time. Without question, local government is increasingly in charge. In fact, when it comes to the environment, we're all in charge. Now is the time to interrogate the opportunities which restructuring offers us: to discard the outdated model of "managing the system" in favour of transforming the consciousness of government.

### 4. Two Principles for Decision-Making at the Local Level

I believe that there are two important keys to successful management of environmental decision-making at the local level. The first is accountability. In my work as a consultant with government, developers and communities, we often establish an Accountability Group, to replace the old concept of the Steering Committee. This Group keeps us accountable to the issue we are working on (in this case, global environmental issues dealt with locally). And the Group is themselves accountable to their wider communities, groups or constituencies. Accountability is a two-way street. It's a constant reminder that we are all in this together. Thus, the Council becomes the organiser of the resources of the **whole** community.

The second key for Councils is to practice **working from the heart**. This is at once a simple path and a most difficult practice. We need to cultivate the ability to be open when we are afraid, bewildered, despairing, ignorant. Then we can embrace change in a multidimensional way. The work which we must do together to heal this fragile planet -- to empower participants and create viable partnerships -- will need to demonstrate a quality which anyone can grasp. That is the quality, which often we dare not name: the quality of working from the heart.

Working from the heart can help Councils build trust with communities. And trust can be built only when participants believe -- at a deep level -- that those who propose change have the communities' best interests at heart. The key words are "at heart": to create opportunities where that feeling arises in communities, those who propose change must be willing to make their hearts accessible at some level.

In this work one precept emerges: we will not know the answers when we begin to work in accountable and participatory ways. There will be no single answer. We will need to find ways of achieving several goals at once. The challenge for Local Government will be to seek to create opportunities for communities so that creative local answers can emerge which will truly contribute to resolving global problems.

## 5. How to Open to Local Potential

Local Councils are going to be challenged to tackle complex global environmental issues at the local level. While this appears difficult, **political and professional futures will depend on how well local government is able to grasp the nettle**. Ultimately, success will depend on how well local government handles the global/local connection.

In my view, to foster full participation of local communities in environmental decision-making is simply a job of work -- specialised work. It's a job, but it's not impossible. It can be taught -- but it is important that it be done carefully. Guidelines are available about which techniques to use and what's likely to work in different situations.

Once the political will is demonstrated, we can get down to work. What is needed is a central clearing-house where that learning and dissemination of information can occur. How that could be arranged will be discussed later.

## 6. A Checklist for Earthcare at the Local Level (CELL)

As my contribution to illustrating what could be accomplished, I have devised a list of topics which could be developed into a Checklist for Council decision-making. This ten-point Checklist is my preliminary, humble offering. It would need to be refined for each local or regional situation, of course.

I can imagine this Checklist being used to evaluate an initiative coming to a Council meeting -- like a proposal to illuminate City buildings at night; or for planting stretches of grass to enhance the marketing of a new housing development; the decision to change to 240 litre rubbish bins rather than waste sorting; or to purchase 6-cylinder rather than 4-cylinder fleet cars. And I can imagine elected members asking proponents to change proposals which were seen as environmentally damaging, or requiring them to do something real to redress the impacts.

For example, if the impact of the proposal involved increased car use, the proponent could be asked, on behalf of us all, to make an appropriate environmental contribution -- say, in the form of tree-planting to counteract the noxious emissions which increased car use would create. (I realise that this proposal raises some complex issues about levies and contributions. They would have to be resolved with care.)

The ten-point Checklist (the CELL) could address the following issues:

1. **Waste:** dealing with local waste locally; using waste-free products; recycling; packaging issues...
2. **Materials:** avoiding scarce or non-renewable resources; selecting materials with minimum negative ecological impacts, e.g., rainforest timber...
3. **Ozone Layer Depletion:** banning and control of products with CFCs, including refrigerants...
4. **Global Warming and Greenhouse Gases:** supporting proposals which do not increase emissions of carbon dioxide, methane, CFCs, etc.
5. **Energy and Electricity:** supporting projects which do not draw excessive electricity off the grid for local use; alternative energy sources; energy-efficient site planning, building and landscaping, including passive solar designs; higher density housing, public transport options...
6. **Water:** local water conservation and management; wetlands; alternative approaches to stormwater drainage; grey water and rainwater collection and use...

7. **Local Employment and Services:** local food production and processing; child care near work and home; home-based work; mixed housing and employment; housing and employment near public transport; "village" nodes of housing and employment...
8. **Landcare:** contribute to the care of the land: soil protection, water conservation, and species protection...
9. **Community Participation:** involve as wide a range of local people as possible in participating in the project and learning about the environment from it; emphasis on learning and information-sharing...
10. **Social Justice:** be consistent with established social justice principles to ensure that achievement of global and local environmental objectives does not in any way contribute to negative social impacts for minority or disadvantaged groups.

## 7. Suggested Steps in Developing a CELL

Any development of a CELL would need to be pursued as part of a full participatory process. In the end, a Council's or region's list may very well look totally different from my hesitant offering. Some of the steps in this participatory process could be the following:

- 7.1 Become knowledgeable about environmental issues. Council will need help from State Government and from local communities to focus on the most important issues. Make the information widely available in a form which anyone can understand. You may very well decide to undertake this work regionally, building on the excellent models of regional cooperation which already exist.
- 7.2 Form an Accountability Group to keep honest. Invite onto it representatives of everyone who has ever criticised Council's environmental decision-making, as well as others who have specific interests, skills or concerns. Liaise with local groups and the wider community through this group.
- 7.3 Prepare a rough draft of the CELL policy and Checklist and don't be too precious about it. It seems to work best if we put our hearts into it but not our egos. Balance the "technical" with the "social", so that people can understand why certain approaches are advocated. Distribute the draft CELL for wide community discussion. Be prepared to alter it dramatically, if that's required.
- 7.4 When it's refined and accepted (this could take some time), practice with it. Question the use of it. Stay in close contact with the Accountability Group. Council could benefit enormously from their support, their fingers on the pulse, their contacts and their ability to keep them up-to-date with ever changing environmental information. And to keep you honest.
- 7.5 Evaluate processes and revise approaches.
- 7.6 Share work and findings widely throughout the Local Government community.

I am not suggesting a "top-down" process here. Quite the contrary: the creation of a CELL, the building block of the body of the environmentally conscious community, would in fact represent community development at its most sophisticated. As an alternative to the old "technical fix" way of approaching environmental questions, the CELL approach challenges us to reconceptualise problems as opportunities and address them in creative ways.

## 8. Collaborative Decision-Making: Bridging and Co-Production

This work will take time and cost money. It will require a re-evaluation of Council priorities. It will uncover fears, intransigence and defended positions. Above all, it will require a commitment to collaborative decision-making -- truly working in partnership with communities. This new approach can be seen as "**bridging**", a dynamic process which encourages relationships to form where there is some degree of trust, where both information and action can flow -- back and forth from community to Council. When bridging really occurs, all participants feel that solutions to common problems more accurately reflect their views. Something greater seems to emerge.

The other term is "**co-production**". It implies a shared responsibility between communities and Councils for producing and managing the outcomes of decision-making, not simply the decision-making processes. The aim is to work together constructively through the inevitable tensions and conflicts, negotiating outcomes with recognised sharing of power and responsibility. Co-production acknowledges that there will not be one stable way, but a changing, evolving, pattern, where appropriate roles are negotiated between communities and Councils.

These are the hallmarks of **collaboration** between communities and Councils. As I see it, a collaborative process...

- is owned by participants; they must be involved in designing the process.
- must be open and visible: communities must be aware of it as it happens.
- is based on inclusion, not exclusion.
- is based on consensus.
- must include from the beginning **all** individuals or groups who are responsible for the final decisions, affected by them, or have the power to block them.
- must be educational: participants must be educated about local impacts of global environmental issues, as the process of education is one of the important benefits.
- is reflected in Council's commitment of resources (dollars, in-kind support services, personnel, etc.).
- takes time and money and staff support: often one must go slow to go fast.
- must produce some immediate successes/spinoffs in order to demonstrate its legitimacy and effectiveness.

## **9. Four Suggestions for Reform**

To work collaboratively, with local people participating as full partners in decisions about **outcomes** which have global environmental impacts, some changes will have to occur in the manner in which Local Government is resourced. The current restructuring of intergovernmental relations provides a perfect opportunity to target resources for this urgent work. Four suggestions are made below: two requiring significant innovations and two about the flavour of local participatory processes.

### **9.1. The Community Participation Unit**

To help Councils learn how to listen to communities, a **Community Participation Unit** (CPU) could be established within either the State Government or the local government body in each state. The functions of the CPU would be to work with Councils to develop participatory approaches to environmental

questions, train staff and elected members, develop kits and manuals and other appropriate tools and provide, perhaps on a fee-for-service basis, specialist advice and consulting assistance to Councils.

A vital part of the work of the CPU would be staff education, integral to the multi-skilling process, to ensure that Council staff were fully familiar with key environmental issues and participatory processes.

In the first instance the sources for this skill development could originate from two sources: Local Councils and State Government. From certain sophisticated Councils highly experienced staff could be released for a year or so to establish the Unit and begin to develop its offerings. Managers within Councils would need to be convinced of the significance of this work and funding would need to be provided for their temporary replacements.

## **9.2. An Environmental Clearinghouse for Coordination of Technical Information about Environmental Problems**

All our good intentions will fail dismally if we have poor-quality information. As a matter of the greatest urgency, State Government will need to encourage and support local Councils by providing information about environmental issues in understandable and trustworthy formats. This, too, will require adequate resourcing.

At present, it is impossible to say who in most State Governments is responsible for helping local Councils understand "ecological sustainability". Yet ecological sustainability -- and all its ramifications -- is the critical issue we have to address. It needs to be clearly defined and the implications for action spelled out for all to understand.

An **Environmental Clearinghouse** for local Councils needs to be established to do this work. The aim would be to provide easily accessible information. Although the original sources of much of this information will be State Government Departments, the collection and dissemination of information must be controlled by Local Government, in my view, to ensure accessibility, intelligibility and quality control.

Above all, technical information must be trustworthy and comprehensible. It must withstand rigorous scrutiny by environmental groups, Council professionals and the wider community. Again, this is an urgent issue to be addressed in the restructuring process.

## **9.3. Establishing Environmental Accountability Groups**

Setting up Environmental Accountability Groups is excellent practice at any time and at any level. There would seem to be no real impediment to establishing a Local Environmental Accountability Group in each Council (or regional body), while all the other arrangements are being undertaken. Regional approaches may be most appropriate for this work.

## **9.4. Risking Innovative Approaches**

While we are working through these complex issues, we will have to resist our desire to resist doing things until we can "get it right". Our smallest actions, undertaken with honest intent and shared openly, can have great impact and can encourage others. Sharing work-in-process can be frightening. Putting our tentative suggestions out to others to critique is also frightening. But we must get into the habit of encouraging others to learn from our experiences, our tentative first steps ... And if we can see that the wider risk (of our inaction leading to even greater environmental problems) surpasses the risk of getting it wrong, we have placed our feet on the path to making a difference.

## **10. Confronting Despair**

We should not underestimate the risk of despair paralysing our creativity, our effectiveness, our capacity to function creatively and collaboratively. With the support of the Local Government community, we must craft new methods for channelling our despair about the painful reality that our magnificent planet is dying. It is appropriate to experience grief and guilt about such a tragic state of affairs. It is wise and healthy to express it. It is not a sign of frailty to sense a deep sadness for what we have lost. It is understandable and forgivable to be at a loss about how to proceed in view of the enormity of the problem.

There are now well-established ways of addressing despair about global environmental issues. (See Macy, 1983; Macy *et al.*, 1988.) Simply cramming more information into our already overcrowded heads is not the solution. Concentrating on "being optimistic" is not the solution, either. Before we can embrace empowerment, that state where we believe deeply that collectively local actions can make a difference, we must discover how to express this unfathomable grief. This work can be done in protected and supportive environments; it will release, strengthen and focus us for our greater tasks.

I sense most strongly that only by openly and unashamedly acknowledging our grief **and** our commitment will we pledge ourselves to effective collaborative environmental work at the local level. Only then will we truly be prepared to work. For all our sakes.

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