FACT SHEET NUMBER #11

COMMUNITY AUDITING THE DRAGON DREAMING WAY

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ABSTRACT: *What programs does our community really need? What way can we make sure that our projects meet real needs in the community and don't just reflect the prejudices and biases of the project creators?*

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INTRODUCTION

Is your community a Titanic, an accident looking for somewhere to happen? Can your community lookout see further than the prow of your community ship? How powerful are your community's binoculars in seeing into the future? Do decision makers in your community shoot the messenger, or listen to the message? How responsive is your community's engine room to changes in direction? How much effort does it take to turn your community around? Does your community have lifeboats sufficient for both first class and steerage passengers? Can your community stay afloat when it hits an obstacle? Engaging in Community Programs without understanding the consequences of these questions is really a futile exercise of just "shifting the deck chairs on the Titanic".

We need to make sure that the community is really better off through our efforts, rather than just a "warm fuzzy" feeling for project organisers.

The Titanic was really an accident that was just looking for somewhere to happen. The lookout at the top of the mast shouted to whoever was below to take a message to the bridge. There the Captain gave the order which the Bosun telegraphed to the engine room, where the Engineers then took the appropriate steps, Putting the engine into reverse from "full steam ahead" would stop the ship 4 miles later and to turn it around required a turning circle of 30 miles, the rudder was too small for the power of the engines and the weight of the ship. And to make matters worse, the lookout had left his binoculars back in Europe.

It is my contention that most of our communities are unprepared for the future. They are like a Titanic in which the lookout is blind, the cockpit windows are foggy, the brakes and steering wheel don't work well, and the connection from the driving seat to the engine is faulty. Then when our communities run into serious problems, and people suffer, the strange thing is that people wonder "why?" The damage done by the Katrina Hurricane in New Orleans was not an act of God. It was wholly predictable, but in this age of Peak Oil, Climate Change, rapidly rising expectations of a growing human population, and massive biodiversity loss, we are steering blind and unprepared.

In 1960, in a remote valley of Papua New Guinea, a medical researcher came to study the health of the villagers of this part of the World. The Southern Highlands province was amongst the last places on Earth to be brought into the "Modern World Development Field" and until the late 1950s and early 1960s, most people living in these remote highland valleys believed the universe ended where the sky touched the ground on the other side of the mountain. The first Europeans to visit these valleys were literally like "men from outer space" and the cultural transformation it brought about is equivalent to that we can imagine if the little green men

appeared over London or New York tomorrow, and told them that they were now part of the intergalactic empire.

In the remote Tari Valley, which lacked even an adequate road access into or out of the valley, one of the highest rural population densities was found living on the fertile volcanic soils from the nearby Doma peaks, dormant volcanoes which may have erupted within the cultural memory of the inhabitants. There the researcher spoke to the local aid posts and schools and persuaded the teachers to allow students to keep a little book of statistics on the health records of their village hamlet. At the end of three years the researcher collected all of the statistics and wrote up his doctorate, and then departed. The interesting thing was that no-one told the villagers to stop collecting the numbers. The booklets were easily produced, and aid post orderlies continued to collect them sending them eventually to the local hospital.

It then happened that news of the statistics eventually reached the ears of the World Health Organisation who were astounded at what the statistics could show. For example, the improvements in health status of the villagers, as a result of various inoculation campaigns were clearly visible, and one could see the improvements too in nutritional status associated with the introduction of coffee growing. Unfortunately one could also see the fall in nutritional status with the collapse of the world coffee prices too, as coffee was grown often on the most fertile soils, leaving food crops to be grown on less fertile, more marginal soils. When the value of the statistics was finally computed it was considered to be many millions of US dollars, as nowhere else in the so-called developing world was there such an accurate, year on year database for a population which has grown over the last 20 years to now over 140,000 people.

The Integrated Rural Development Scheme created for the Southern Highlands province, in part to provide the Tari Valley and the Huli people with road access joining it to the rest of the nation, has found the statistics of immense value in determining the success of various programs over the years that have followed. The AFTSEMU (Agricultural Field Trials, Surveys, Evaluation and Monitoring Unit), that was set up to examine the effects of the massive push to establish tea and coffee growing in the western part of the Southern Highlands built upon this tradition. Detailed studies of the Nembi Plateau region, by agronomists, nutritionists and demographers, also enabled researchers to see the exact effects of growing populations upon traditional agriculture, and the health effects of the introduction of coffee growing. Although in this case the collection of this information occurred before many of the changes that have occurred, it does illustrate very graphically, how a data monitoring system can determine the direction of progress, and can help any program in achieving its targets.

So how can a group monitor the progress of its project to ensure that its targets are being met, and that unintended outcomes can be assessed rapidly enough so that remedial activities can

occur that keeps the project on target? To be able to do this, the project must have some idea of the nature of the community in which they are operating.

UNDERSTANDING THE REAL NATURE OF YOUR COMMUNITY

In 1983, on returning from Papua New Guinea to Western Australia, I was working in an agency of Extension Officers working with young farmers. The director of the agency suggested that, as I had been overseas for some ten years, that before working in an area, I should gather information about the region in which I'd be working. There was all kinds of statistical and other information available, from the census and other sources, and information was available over a 20 year time frame. Analysis of the data provided a skeleton of the nature of the community, the way in which for the first ten years it had been losing population, shops had been shutting, school enrolments were down, dairy herds had declined, farms had become bigger, and a local timber mill had shut. Then ten years later, suddenly the numbers of people moving to the area, particularly in the under 30 year age bracket had reversed, school enrolments had increased, new forms of labour intensive horticulture and grape cultivation had come, school enrolments increased, and a variety of local enterprises had started. When I visited the area, people were fascinated with the data collected, as it had taken the pulse of developments within the community. The information was used repeatedly over the years, to prepare submissions from local government and community organizations for grants from government programs or philanthropic trusts. Once again the value of gathering such information had been confirmed. The value of local people gathering the information useful to them was illustrated to me when in other communities, the statistical analyses we prepared over the course of a weekend, were used repeatedly in following years in these ways.

Each Dragon Dreaming project is a part of a larger system with which it is engaged in continuous exchanges, in which the non-financial exchanges of living resources, and social care take precedence and are primary, whilst the financial flows are totally dependent upon the health and sustainability of these systems. Hazel Henderson demonstrates in her books "Politics of the Solar Age" and "Life Beyond Economics" that the system in which any project or organization finds itself, can be considered like a three layer cake with icing on top.

The Natural Ecology: At the bottom layer is the natural ecology of the local ecosystem. It is this system that ultimately makes the air breathable, the water drinkable and the soils fertile, provides all resources and reprocesses and recycles all wastes. Life is totally dependent on this system, yet paradoxically its flows are considered irrelevant to economics, which considers the living system an "externality" with no cost, at least, not until the system breaks down and starts costing people money. This was not always true of economics, however. The very name

economics comes from the term “management of the household”, and the ultimate living household is the more than human community of which all else is just a part. Physiocrat economics, first practiced under the ancient regime in France, before Adam Smith came and wedded economics just to the operation of the market, believed that the source of all wealth was ultimately the productivity of the land.

The Social Community: Totally dependent upon this layer is the partly-monetarised community economy. Here is where the bulk of unpaid domestic and voluntary work occurs, the caring and raising of children, and the care of the elderly and disabled. This is always the most lowly valued and poorly paid activity, despite the fact that this is where the values and social skills necessary for the rest of the economy are shaped and forged. Despite various attempts to assess the value of this community system of care and concern, most countries leave it out of their national accounts, despite the fact that international statistics show that the economies which pay greatest attention to this sector are also amongst the most profitable financially.

The Economic Financial System: The market financial system is totally dependent upon the bottom two layers of the cake, and its operations can have huge effects upon them. For example depletion of local non renewable resources can so undermine a local industry that it is forced to close, creating large scale local unemployment and leading to mass emigration of working families, no longer able to sustain themselves. Pollution by local industries can also damage the health of local residents, and have a very negative effect upon the ability of families to sustain themselves in an optimally healthy way. In communities suffering both problems, the lack of opportunities can lead to various forms of anti-social behaviour and criminality.

The Political Decision Making Structure: The final part of this analysis, the icing on the cake as it were is the political system, which draws its strength from the participation of the people at the second layer of the cake, and the payment of government taxes and charges, and government spending, which occurs at the third layer of the cake.

What makes the Community Auditing process so important is its ability to assist local residents to see the ‘cake’ as a series of integrated systems. These systems are constantly changing and to show you how we think the systems work. It is important to identify the flows, the sources and sinks where the flows come from or go to at each level. If we look at the systems in any community, we can see that they comprise a series of ‘flows’; flows of energy, flows of matter, flows of information, flows of people and flows of money and resources, into and out of your community.

THE CONDUCT COMMUNITY AUDITING TEAM

But how do we come to understand this system? The best way is to engage on a community audit. A community audit has many functions. It especially will allow a community to

- Assess its current environmental, social, and economic status
- Have a better understanding of the way it operates
- Arrive at an informed view of likely local trends and developments
- Discuss ideas, make decisions and implement effective plans for the future
- Get practical experience in gathering information of vitally important indicators for the future
- Be empowered by asking the right questions

A community audit requires a champion organization that is prepared to support the work of a part time coordinator of the effort for a period of some months. It requires the gathering a project team, some of the people it is targeting with its programs or projects, and people interested in the environmental, social and financial status of the community and who would like to discover what the indicators may show.

So who should be involved in such a project? There are a variety of people needed, and many different roles required. Some of these are

- Planners, to help identify what kind of information is available that the community needs to collect
- Dara gatherers for collecting information from inside and outside the community
- Computer lieterate people to organise spreadsheets and produce graphs
- Interviewers to speak to local people and organizations
- Survey designers to prepare appropriate questionnaires and surveys

- Note takers and record keepers
- Organisers for convening meetings and training needed
- Communicators to spread the results of the audit throughout the community and help its results become widely available
- Application writers for grants and submissions
- Report writers to collate the information and make it available to the community in a user friendly way
- Participants with a specific interest and enthusiastic and interested residents

Generally there should be about ten people engaged in each of the three teams, so that the Community Audit process would involve about 30 people working with an overall coordinator or team of people who are sponsoring the event, perhaps in association with some other organization for whom the data collected would be useful.

THE COMMUNITY AUDITING PROCESS

Given the analysis of the three layer cake (above), the community audit process answers the following important questions.

- What is the nature of the flows into and out of your community, from the environmental, social and financial systems of which it is a part?
- What is the nature of the environmental, social and financial elements within the community and how are they linked together?
- Are the flows into community systems or between the elements within each level changing in any way?
- In what directions are the changes occurring and why?
- Is it possible that a program or a project could change the direction of the flows, increasing them or decreasing them and their effects?
- What information needs to be gathered that could answer these questions?

Thus the initial work of each of the three groups is to identify what are the key elements of the system at their layer of the cake, within the geographically confined boundary in which the audit is to be conducted. For example at the level of the financial system, we could guess that important key elements are the small to medium enterprises within the locality, large corporations marketing their goods or services to local people, the households of the community who provide both customers and labour, and key government bodies, for instance schools, or other government services operating at various levels (for example at local state or provincial, or at national level.) Once these elements are identified, the nature of the flows – flows of energy, materials, information, entropy and finance, between these elements can be guessed at. With the financial system of course the key flows would be financial. At this stage of the audit it doesn't matter about the accuracy of the basic system one is working with, as it is not important yet. Once the principle elements are identified, and the major flows between them are also identified, one can then estimate "is the flow a positive or a negative feedback?" Positive feedback loops will tend to increase further flows in the same direction. Negative feedback will tend to reduce feedback in that direction. For example, a community which consistently over time has families greater than 2 children per couple (or two children per woman of reproductive years) will tend to grow – it has a positive feedback. A community in which the number of children born is equal to 2 will, over time, tend to stabilize as this constitutes a negative feedback.

The next part to understanding how a community functions as a system is to begin the collection of evidence. At this level the participants of the community audit seek to establish what indicators would help establish the current state of any of the elements or the nature of the flows that connect them. These indicators can be discovered by a brainstorming session conducted separately for each of the three groups.

The brain storming session should, like all such sessions, not be about evaluation, this will come later. At this stage it is just to uncover the list of possible indicators which could be useful. The brainstorm continues until some of the indicators get repeated. At this stage these indicators are then sorted as follows.

1. What indicators currently already exist in statistical form, perhaps gathered by a national census, by local government or some government department or public agency.

2. What indicators could be extrapolated from available data, perhaps concerning growth rates or declines in the numbers of particular age groups, or the extent of economic activity of various kinds compared to national or regional figures.

3. What indicators could be gathered by a small survey conducted by the audit group itself, that could possibly add value to an already existing indicator. For example an attitude survey concerning a particular event could be organised.

4. What information could be gathered by other agencies, that could be incorporated into the community audit. Such information as the number of customers in a specific agency or business, or environmental changes may be possibly collected.

5. What information, whilst it would be nice to have, cannot be collected at the moment, due to the difficulty of gaining the information, or insufficient funds or skill to collect the data. These indicators may make useful research projects for school or university students.

Indicators should also be the kinds of information that is of benefit to the people collecting the information. The question for the next 3 to 6 months is to collect as much of the data as possible. Separate meetings of the three groups are encouraged, to support those doing the data gathering and compare results. Once the three groups are satisfied with the results, and feel that they now have gathered as much of the information that is available or can be reasonably accumulated, the three groups are encouraged to come together for a joint session. Each group presents a report of its findings, and cross linked effects are to be sought. For example, the arrival of a large supermarket chain may have an effect upon local fruit and vegetable markets, and thus affect agricultural land use, and employment in retailing and agriculture. This in turn may effect the retention of single young people in the geographic region. Here an economic change effects the physical environment and then has social repercussions.

Such a community audit, especially if it can get access to the same kinds of data for an extended period of time in the past can establish not just a “State of the Environment” at a specific period of time, but can also look at long term trends. Furthermore, like the situation of the Tari Valley, the value of the auditing process will increase every time it is repeated.