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1 **‘Bouncing back’ to Capitalism? Grassroots autonomous activism**  
2 **in shaping discourses of resilience and transformation following**  
3 **disaster.**

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1 **‘Bouncing back’ to Capitalism? Grassroots autonomous activism**  
2 **in shaping discourses of resilience and transformation following**  
3 **disaster.**

4 Resilience has been criticised in many fields for focussing on attempts to bounce back or  
5 maintain the status quo following a disturbance. Such conceptualisations can uphold the  
6 hegemony of discourses of stability and are potentially unhelpful to groups seeking to achieve  
7 radical change. Despite this, the concept is fast subsuming sustainability as the latest catch  
8 phrase for community organisations wishing to address social and environmental injustices.  
9 Grassroots groups are mobilising activism to shape this interpretation through post capitalist  
10 visions - creating alternatives to dominant capitalist narratives in the present. This paper will  
11 discuss the expression of such radical notions of resilience through exploring how activism  
12 intersects with experiences of disaster. Through the case study of Project Lyttelton, a  
13 community organisation at the epicentre of the 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2011 Christchurch earthquake in  
14 Aotearoa New Zealand, this research examines the potential for a radical notion of resilience to  
15 challenge hegemonic understandings of every day capitalist life. By exploring this tension  
16 between resilience and post capitalist activism, this paper contributes to an emerging area of  
17 critique through articulating a more nuanced understanding of the radical potential for what is  
18 often expressed as an inherently non radical concept.

19           Keywords: autonomous geographies, resilience, Christchurch earthquake,  
20           activism

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## 2 **Introduction**

3 Resilience is becoming a popular and dominant discourse, not only for disaster recovery  
4 and preparedness but for approaching broader social and environmental challenges.<sup>1</sup>  
5 The origins of resilience theory speak to a desire to retain the characteristics of an  
6 ecological system following a disruption through an ability to absorb and withstand  
7 shocks.<sup>2</sup> More recent theoretical advances seek to align ecological and social systems  
8 through Social-Ecological Systems (SES) resilience, including concepts such as  
9 adaptation and transformation.<sup>3</sup> This theoretical framework has become an increasingly  
10 popular approach for anticipating and responding to the increasing frequency and  
11 intensity of natural disasters.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Christophe Béné et al., “Resilience: New Utopia or New Tyranny? Reflection About the Potentials and Limits of the Concept of Resilience in Relation to Vulnerability Reduction Programmes,” *IDS Working Papers* 2012, no. 405 (2012): 1–61; Danny MacKinnon and Kate D. Derickson, “From Resilience to Resourcefulness: A Critique of Resilience Policy and Activism,” *Progress in Human Geography* 37, no. 2 (August 8, 2012): 253–270, doi:10.1177/0309132512454775; World Bank, *Hazards of Nature, Risks to Development: An IEG Evaluation of World Bank Assistance for Natural Disasters*, Independent Evaluation Group Report (Washington: World Bank, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Crawford Holling, “Resilience and Stability of Ecological Systems,” *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 4 (1973).

<sup>3</sup> Kristen Magis, “Community Resilience: An Indicator of Social Sustainability,” *Society & Natural Resources* 23, no. 5 (April 5, 2010): 401–416.

<sup>4</sup> Karen O’Brien, Bronwyn Hayward, and Fikret Berkes, “Rethinking Social Contracts: Building Resilience in a Changing Climate,” *Ecology and Society* 14, no. 2 (2009): 12; Fikret Berkes and Dyanna Jolly, “Adapting to Climate Change: Social-ecological Resilience in a Canadian Western Arctic Community,” *Conservation Ecology* 5, no. 2 (2002): 18.

1           A recent article by MacKinnon and Derickson<sup>5</sup> deliberately critiques the  
2 increase in popularity of resilience, noting that this rise parallels the uptake of resilience  
3 based projects and organisations by anti-capitalist activists. This paper complements  
4 this work and offers further insight into why and how grassroots organisations mobilise  
5 resilience discourses. By acknowledging that the resilience paradigm is now present  
6 across both grassroots and top down approaches, this paper seeks to provide an  
7 understanding of how one community group is using the term in a radical way to  
8 counter-act the dominant status quo. While MacKinnon and Derickson<sup>6</sup> advise against  
9 groups using the resilience concept and framework, the fact remains that many are  
10 engaging with these ideas. As critical geographers we feel the need to explore the ways  
11 groups are working with and against the concept of resilience, especially when faced  
12 with a crisis that requires immediate action.

13           Many groups using resilience, such as Transition Towns<sup>i</sup>, plan for the onslaught  
14 of crises that are believed will affect the world during the 21<sup>st</sup> century, yet few have had  
15 the chance to act in a time of crisis and put their plans into practice. But the earthquakes  
16 of 2010/11 in the Canterbury region of Aotearoa New Zealand tested one grassroots  
17 organisation, Project Lyttelton<sup>ii</sup>. This group is a grassroots organisation located in the  
18 suburb of Lyttelton in Christchurch, close to the epicentre of the earthquakes. Since the  
19 earthquakes in February 2011, Project Lyttelton has been at the forefront of the  
20 immediate disaster response and recovery of the town. In this paper, we argue that  
21 grassroots groups such as Project Lyttelton are mobilising a radical politics of resilience  
22 that has the potential to provide valuable and workable alternatives to the political and  
23 economic status quo. Through discussing autonomous activism in a disaster zone, we  
24 explore the actions and politics of a group that aims to fundamentally (re)work societal  
25 relations through their pursuit of resilience.

26           This paper draws on qualitative research. In total 7 individuals from Lyttelton,  
27 Canterbury, were interviewed face to face or over the phone during June of 2012. A  
28 further 8 e-interviews were carried out. E-interviews utilised an open ended  
29 questionnaire format to engage individuals in a less time consuming and intense manner

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<sup>5</sup> MacKinnon and Derickson, “From Resilience to Resourcefulness”.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

1 given the sensitive nature of research in a post disaster situation.<sup>7</sup> The information  
2 gained from these e-interviews was, in many cases, as detailed as that given in face to  
3 face interviews. Participant identity is protected through the use of numbers which are  
4 indicated following quotes. In addition, websites, social media and a locally published  
5 book containing 32 interview transcripts of individual’s experiences of the earthquake  
6 were analysed (see Evans 2012).

7 Our research sheds light on the value of resilience as a radical concept while  
8 exploring the value of current critiques. To illustrate our argument we first explore the  
9 differences between mainstream resilience discourses and those mobilised by more  
10 radical discourses of societal change. Following this we discuss the actions of Project  
11 Lyttelton and how they occurred in the context of the 2010/11 earthquakes. Finally, we  
12 assess the potential of actions by groups such as Project Lyttelton to influence  
13 discourses of resilience, prior to, during and following times of crises.

14

## 15 **Resilience – to maintain or transform?**

16 There exists widespread ambiguity surrounding a conclusive definition of resilience,  
17 despite the rapid uptake of the concept across a wide array of disciplines.<sup>8</sup> Original  
18 conceptualisations of resilience were instigated in the disciplines of engineering and  
19 physics, and referred to the ability for physical strength to be maintained.<sup>9</sup> In the 1970’s,  
20 work done by Holling<sup>10</sup> developed the more commonly referred to idea of resilience in

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<sup>7</sup> Harrie Jensen, “The Logic of Qualitative Survey Research and Its Position in the Field of Social Research Methods”, *Open Journal* 11, no. 2 (2010).

<sup>8</sup> Fikret Berkes, “Understanding Uncertainty and Reducing Vulnerability: Lessons from Resilience Thinking”, *Springer Natural Hazards* 41 (2007): 283–295.

<sup>9</sup> Rolf Pendall, Kathryn A. Foster, and Margaret Cowell, “Resilience and Regions: Building Understanding of the Metaphor”, *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 3, no. 1 (2009): 71–84,

<sup>10</sup> Holling, “Resilience and Stability of Ecological Systems”.

1 relation to biological communities as the ‘ability of these systems to absorb changes of  
2 state variables, driving variables and parameters, and still persist’.<sup>11</sup>  
3 The main tenants of SES resilience build on this concept of ecological resilience by  
4 emphasising the ability of a system to absorb and adapt to uncertainty and shifts in  
5 critical thresholds without changing to a different state.<sup>12</sup> The inclusion of social  
6 systems has seen the resilience approach diversify and be applied to varying levels of  
7 urban and rural development, including specific communities and cities.<sup>13</sup> The aim of  
8 this approach is to interlink systems involving society, the environment and the  
9 economy.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, traits relating to social systems have been incorporated, such  
10 as social learning and memory, various forms of social, human and natural capital,  
11 governance and institutions, and adaptive capacity.<sup>15</sup> Despite extensive literature on the  
12 subject, scholars discussing resilience remain surprisingly silent regarding the relevance

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>12</sup> Carl Folke, “Resilience: The Emergence of a Perspective for Social-ecological Systems Analyses”, *Global Environmental Change* 16, no. 3 (2006): 253–267.

<sup>13</sup> Norris et al., “Community Resilience as a Metaphor, Theory, Set of Capacities, and Strategy for Disaster Readiness”.

<sup>14</sup> Lance Gunderson, “Ecological and Human Community Resilience in Response to Natural Disasters”, *Ecology and Society* 15, no. 2 (2010): 18; Jeremy Walker and Melinda Cooper, “Genealogies of Resilience: From Systems Ecology to the Political Economy of Crisis Adaptation”, *Security Dialogue* 42, no. 2 (2011): 143–160.

<sup>15</sup> Folke, “Resilience”; Gunderson, “Ecological and Human Community Resilience in Response to Natural Disasters”.

1 of politics and culture to existing SES theories despite numerous recent papers raising  
2 these critiques.<sup>16</sup>

3 To a certain extent SES resilience does not strictly follow earlier definitions of  
4 resilience which promote a bounce back approach. This is due to a shift in theory that  
5 incorporates the idea of adaptive capacity, or the idea of bouncing forward.<sup>17</sup> Adaptive  
6 capacity involves a framework that acknowledges the multiple, ever changing nature of  
7 systems and the need to prepare for uncertainty and make changes in response to  
8 disruptions.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, there is evidence discourses that promote the status quo are  
9 still expressed through this new perspective, albeit in subtler forms. For example, Pike  
10 et al.<sup>19</sup> note that adaptation can be used to strengthen arguments that advocate for minor  
11 changes towards a pre-conceived developmental path.

12 Another criticism levelled at theories of adaptive capacity is that they fail to  
13 consider the ability of individuals to challenge and shift the dominant social, political  
14 and economic system.<sup>20</sup> However, in some instances, adaptive capacity has been used in  
15 such a way that emphasises the need to transition or transform a system when the

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<sup>16</sup> Muriel Cote and Andrea J. Nightingale, “Resilience Thinking Meets Social Theory Situating Social Change in Socio-ecological Systems (SES) Research”, *Progress in Human Geography* 36, no. 4 (2012): 475–489; Debra J. Davidson, “The Applicability of the Concept of Resilience to Social Systems: Some Sources of Optimism and Nagging Doubts”, *Society and Natural Resources* 23, no. 12 (2010): 1135–1149; MacKinnon and Derickson, “From Resilience to Resourcefulness”.

<sup>17</sup> Berkes, “Understanding Uncertainty and Reducing Vulnerability: Lessons from Resilience Thinking”.

<sup>18</sup> Nathan Engle, “Adaptive Capacity and Its Assessment”, *Global Environmental Change* 21, no. 2 (2011): 647–656.

<sup>19</sup> Andy Pike, Stewart Dawley, and John Tomaney, “Resilience, Adaptation and Adaptability”, *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 3, no. 1 (2010): 59–70,

<sup>20</sup> Pendall, Foster, and Cowell, “Resilience and Regions”.



1 current state is considered ‘undesirable’.<sup>21</sup> In this instance, transformational capacity  
2 can be considered a more extreme form of change in which a system switches to a  
3 completely different developmental path.<sup>22</sup>

4 Despite the many nuances and interpretations of resilience, adaptive capacity  
5 and transformation, there still remains considerable scope for these concepts to be  
6 utilised in a way that justifies and maintains the status quo. As a result, resilience is  
7 currently being widely used to indicate a desire for social systems and crucial  
8 infrastructure to either maintain function or quickly recover from disruptions.<sup>23</sup> The  
9 widespread adoption and popularity of SES resilience by government and international  
10 organisations in the past decade is a testament to the broad ranging interpretations of the  
11 framework.<sup>24</sup> The term ‘resilience’ is now used as a central element of policy for  
12 governments, the World Bank, the International Panel for Climate Change and the  
13 European Union.<sup>25</sup> Such expansive development is seen as the infiltration of resilience  
14 theory into the arena of mainstream politics and culture.

15 Several commentators have noted that through this infiltration, resilience theory  
16 is being co-opted by those whose interests lie in perpetuating neoliberal discourses and  
17 governance that privilege existing power relations and contribute to the maintenance of  
18 the current, dominant capitalist system.<sup>26</sup> Neoliberalism in this context is defined as an

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<sup>21</sup> Engle, “Adaptive Capacity and Its Assessment”.

<sup>22</sup> Béné et al., “Resilience”.

<sup>23</sup> Engle, “Adaptive Capacity and Its Assessment”.

<sup>24</sup> Béné et al., “Resilience”; MacKinnon and Derickson, “From Resilience to Resourcefulness”;  
Norris et al., “Community Resilience as a Metaphor, Theory, Set of Capacities, and Strategy for  
Disaster Readiness”; Pendall, Foster, and Cowell, “Resilience and Regions”.

<sup>25</sup> Béné et al., “Resilience”; MacKinnon and Derickson, “From Resilience to Resourcefulness”;  
Walker and Cooper, “Genealogies of Resilience: From Systems Ecology to the Political  
Economy of Crisis Adaptation”.

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Joseph, “Resilience as Embedded Neoliberalism: A Governmentality Approach”,  
*Resilience* 1, no. 1 (April 2013): 38–52; MacKinnon and Derickson, “From Resilience to

1 overarching ideology that claims to define not only an ideal economic state but the  
2 reality of human nature.<sup>27</sup> Harvey<sup>28</sup> describes neoliberalism as a theory of political  
3 economic practices that liberates individual and entrepreneurial freedoms through  
4 encouraging private property rights, free markets and free trade. Yet neoliberal  
5 ideologies are not confined to the economic and political sphere, discourses extend  
6 beyond commodities to infiltrate everyday lives, shaping individuals as consumers and  
7 rational market agents, thus producing neoliberal subjectivities.<sup>29</sup>

8         The expression of neoliberal discourses and subjectivities may take a different  
9 shape and form depending on location, culture and governance. However, Walker and  
10 Cooper<sup>30</sup> have noted that resilience discourses are being widely used as a tool to  
11 implement neoliberal ideological projects following a crisis. Broadly speaking, these  
12 projects are used to justify and motivate actions that increase inequality and  
13 disadvantage marginalised communities through the use of market driven rationale. In  
14 this context, disasters are seen as opportunities for furthering projects that selectively  
15 restructure urban space and social services.<sup>31</sup> Such examples raise questions as to what  
16 outcomes state sponsored resilience programmes are aiming for. Cote and Nightingale

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Resourcefulness”; Walker and Cooper, “Genealogies of Resilience: From Systems Ecology to the Political Economy of Crisis Adaptation”.

<sup>27</sup> Jason Read, “A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus: Neoliberalism and the Production of Subjectivity”, *Foucault Studies* (2009): 25–36.

<sup>28</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

<sup>29</sup> Julie Guthman, “Neoliberalism and the Making of Food Politics in California”, *Geoforum* 39, no. 3 (2008): 1171–1183; Edmund Harris, “Neoliberal Subjectivities or a Politics of the Possible? Reading for Difference in Alternative Food Networks”, *Area* 41, no. 1 (2009): 55–63,

<sup>30</sup> Walker and Cooper, “Genealogies of Resilience: From Systems Ecology to the Political Economy of Crisis Adaptation”.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

1 <sup>32</sup> echo this concern stating that when addressing the use of resilience discourses we  
2 must ask questions of resilience of what, and for whom?

3 Discourses of resilience may also be strengthening government initiatives to de-  
4 centralise and roll back the power of the state through emphasising individual and  
5 community responsibility.<sup>33</sup> Under the guise of encouraging community resilience, such  
6 policies can take an approach that sees populations left with all responsibility and little  
7 power or resources.<sup>34</sup> This approach does not address underlying structural issues of  
8 power and inequality that may be contributing to the presence of disruptions or  
9 vulnerability. Such a dynamic is demonstrated in the British Government’s ‘Big  
10 Society’ project, as outlined by MacKinnon and Derickson<sup>35</sup>, who argue that this focus  
11 on localism and community seeks to further market rationalising discourses and remove  
12 the government’s role from the provision of state services. Indeed these applications of  
13 resilience appear to be used to perpetuate such policies which may have a negative  
14 effect on the resources available to communities.

15 While this progression of neoliberalism and resilience has been emerging,  
16 groups concerned with challenging dominant societal structures and systems have also  
17 been mobilising resilience as part of a different ideological approach. In this articulation  
18 of resilience, aspects of adaptive capacity and transformation have the potential to defy  
19 discourses of bouncing back or forward and lend strength to anti-capitalist activist  
20 projects. Thus resilience is regarded as the strength of communities rather than the aim  
21 to maintain dominant economic and political systems. This is considered by some  
22 groups as the ability for their alternatively organised community to ‘ride out the waves  
23 of change’ resulting from outside ‘shocks’ that can occur as a result of unsustainable

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<sup>32</sup> Cote and Nightingale, “Resilience Thinking Meets Social Theory Situating Social Change in Socio-ecological Systems (SES) Research”.

<sup>33</sup> MacKinnon and Derickson, “From Resilience to Resourcefulness”.

<sup>34</sup> Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell, “Neoliberalizing Space”, *Antipode* 34, no. 3 (2002): 380–404.

<sup>35</sup> MacKinnon and Derickson, “From Resilience to Resourcefulness”.

1 economic and energy systems.<sup>36</sup> In order to do so, groups engaged in this alternative  
2 articulation of resilience largely carry out localisation activities to improve the  
3 conditions of their community and environment such as; establishing systems of co-  
4 operative ownership and management, nurturing social capital and networks,  
5 encouraging sustainability, and implementing practical projects based around food,  
6 energy and care in the community<sup>37</sup>. Through these activities based around resilience,  
7 the argument can be made that such organisations are challenging the dominant values  
8 and norms of society.

9 Transition Towns are one example of a grassroots movement utilising resilience  
10 as a vehicle for imagining and creating alternatives to mainstream society.<sup>38</sup> Resilience  
11 is considered desirable in this context as it converges with concepts of sustainability to  
12 create a platform that addresses the interconnected nature of environmental issues and  
13 disasters in a global context.<sup>39</sup> The Transition Town movement is strongly based around  
14 the philosophy of relocalisation, or the desire to encourage community economies and

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<sup>36</sup> Rob Hopkins and Ben Brangwyn, “Transition Initiatives Primer” (Transition Network, 2010),  
<http://www.transitionnetwork.org/resources/who-we-are-and-what-we-do>; Transition Towns  
Totnes, “What Is Resilience?,” *Transition Town Totnes*, 2013,  
<http://www.transitiontowntotnes.org/about/what-is-transition/what-is-resilience/>.

<sup>37</sup> Project Lyttelton, “Harbour Resilience Project,” 2013, <http://www.lyttelton.net.nz/harbour-resilience>; Hopkins and Brangwyn, “Transition Initiatives Primer.” North, Peter. "Eco-localisation as a progressive response to peak oil and climate change—a sympathetic critique." *Geoforum* 41, no. 4 (2010): 585-594.

<sup>38</sup> Phil Connors and Peter McDonald, “Transitioning Communities: Community, Participation and the Transition Town Movement”, *Community Development Journal* 46, no. 4 (2011): 558–572.

<sup>39</sup> Graham A. Tobin, “Sustainability and Community Resilience: The Holy Grail of Hazards Planning?,” *Global Environmental Change Part B: Environmental Hazards* 1, no. 1 (1999): 13–25.

1 relations based on the scale of the local<sup>40</sup> Transition Towns in particular carry this out  
2 by drawing on 7 core principles to promote their activities, one of which is embracing  
3 resilience.<sup>41</sup>

4         One issue that arises from this use of resilience is the limits of the relocalisation  
5 philosophy for informing grassroots strategies. Concepts of *local*, *place* and *community*  
6 are socially constructed and variable but have risen in prominence as a way of  
7 countering the perceived homogenisation and disempowerment associated with  
8 globalisation.<sup>42</sup> . However, it is important not to assume an inherent relationship  
9 between the global and negative outcomes and the local with positive. As North<sup>43</sup>  
10 elucidates, there is great complexity underlying the social and environmental costs and  
11 benefits of local and global trade and relations. While this is the case, there is  
12 widespread concern that the power relations involved in shaping discourses of local can  
13 also lead to exclusion and isolation of difference within a community.<sup>44</sup> This is a  
14 pertinent issue for several reasons. First, ideas of place identity are commonly contested  
15 post disaster where the assumed static nature of physical symbols of place are  
16 compromised, increasing tensions that often surround recovery and rebuilding

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<sup>40</sup> Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience* (White River Junction, Vt: Chelsea Green Pub, 2009).

<sup>41</sup> Connors and McDonald, “Transitioning Communities: Community, Participation and the Transition Town Movement”.

<sup>42</sup> R. Feagan, “The Place of Food: Mapping Out the ‘Local’ in Local Food Systems,” *Progress in Human Geography* 31, no. 1 (February 1, 2007): 23–42,

<sup>43</sup> North, "Eco-localisation as a progressive response to peak oil and climate change—a sympathetic critique."

<sup>44</sup> W. Nicholls, “Place, Networks, Space: Theorising the Geographies of Social Movements,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 34, no. 1 (2009): 78–93; D Massey, “Geographies of Responsibility,” *Geografiska Annaler* 86, no. 1 (2004).

1 strategies.<sup>45</sup> Second, many socio-ecological resilience frameworks discuss the  
2 importance of social support and diversity.<sup>46</sup> If the construct of place and local are being  
3 used to shape groups aiming for resilience, it is conceivable that issues will arise around  
4 how perceptions of place affect some resilience capacities.

5 Project Lyttelton, while not explicitly a Transition Town, follows a similar re-  
6 localisation philosophy through working as a democratic grassroots environmental and  
7 social change community group. The organisation is self-described as ‘an inspiration  
8 and a model for communities wishing to build community resilience and sustainability  
9 through innovative projects and collective creativity’.<sup>47</sup> Whilst aiming for these goals,  
10 Project Lyttelton has established numerous projects such as a highly successful  
11 Farmer’s Market, a timebank<sup>iii</sup>, a community garden, film nights, a fundraising platform  
12 for other community organisations and a community owned and run food co-operative.  
13 As Lyttelton was located directly over the epicentre of the 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2011  
14 earthquake that hit the Canterbury region, the town suffered widespread destruction and  
15 disruption including loss of life. In addition, Lyttelton’s transport routes were damaged,  
16 geographically isolating the town for several days. During this time the group played a  
17 significant role in supporting the community, providing volunteers and engaging with  
18 participatory elements of the local government rebuild process. Project Lyttelton has  
19 used this experience to learn how to cope and provide support during a disaster and  
20 have established a new project titled the ‘Harbour Resilience Project’. This project  
21 seeks to improve the resilience of the whole harbour region by focussing largely on  
22 food security and building skills in the community.

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<sup>45</sup> L. C. Manzo and D. D. Perkins, “Finding Common Ground: The Importance of Place  
Attachment to Community Participation and Planning,” *Journal of Planning Literature* 20, no.  
4 (2006): 335–350.

<sup>46</sup> Norris et al., “Community Resilience as a Metaphor, Theory, Set of Capacities, and Strategy  
for Disaster Readiness.”

<sup>47</sup> Hall, “Project Lyttelton - Our Story” (Project Lyttelton, 2009), 3.

1 MacKinnon and Derickson<sup>48</sup> acknowledge the alternative way groups such as  
2 Project Lyttelton are engaging with resilience but they argue this is not the best way for  
3 groups to challenge hegemonic societal norms. What emerged from the Project  
4 Lyttelton case study is that while the way resilience is being used at a governmental and  
5 global level is deeply troubling (see MacKinnon and Derickson, 2012 and Walker and  
6 Cooper 2011), the concept is increasingly being used as a key term for strategic  
7 purposes by community groups. Drawing on ‘resilience’, groups can gain access to  
8 funding and political buy in for activities that seek to empower local communities and  
9 shift norms and values. More importantly, there is evidence to suggest that the activities  
10 promoted in Lyttelton as resilience building do in fact challenge the dominant way that  
11 society operates. The following explores interview data that shows how Project  
12 Lyttelton engaged with resilience in a way that contests power relations and social  
13 structures to create and envisage workable alternatives to capitalist society.  
14

#### 15 **The Role of Autonomous Activism in Resilience:**

16  
17 Grassroots groups, such as Transition Towns, challenge dominant societal discourses by  
18 localising social, political and economic interdependencies, in order to respond at a  
19 community level to the triple threats of peak oil, climate change and financial crises.<sup>49</sup>  
20 These geographies of autonomous activism are often complex, contested, and revolve  
21 for the large part around the identities of activists and activist groups.<sup>50</sup> Autonomous  
22 activists desire to use creativity and resistance as tools to imagine and embody  
23 alternatives to neoliberal, capitalist lifestyles through the practices of everyday life,

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<sup>48</sup> MacKinnon and Derickson, “From Resilience to Resourcefulness”

<sup>49</sup> Connors and McDonald, “Transitioning Communities: Community, Participation and the  
Transition Town Movement”; Kelvin Mason and Mark Whitehead, “Transition Urbanism and  
the Contested Politics of Ethical Place Making,” *Antipode* (February 2011): no–no.

<sup>50</sup> Chatterton and Pickerill, “Everyday Activism and Transitions Towards Post-Capitalist  
Worlds”

1 challenging discourses of consumption, market provision and work.<sup>51</sup> Gibson-Graham<sup>52</sup>  
2 note that joining these groups engages individuals in a ‘politics of becoming’ and  
3 discourses of self-transformation as well as the creation of physical projects. They liken  
4 the actions these community groups are undertaking to second wave feminism which  
5 offered new practices of the self that resulted in the possibility for new discourses to  
6 emerge in the everyday lives of women.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, Transition Towns and groups with  
7 similar aims are enacting discourses of transformation and alternative futures that  
8 challenge neoliberal values and norms through efforts to strengthen community, localise  
9 food and energy security and improve local resilience.

10        Though autonomous movements are often aligned with philosophies that seek to  
11 build community resilience through familiar, everyday activities, the disruptions that  
12 test resilience constitute the deeply unfamiliar in that they are not usually part of  
13 everyday life. Consequently, many groups aiming for resilience have yet to experience  
14 their capacities in this manner. However, during the Canterbury 2010/11 earthquakes,  
15 Project Lyttelton’s resilience capabilities were tested.

### 17 *Fostering Resilience Capacities:*

18        Despite the hardships experienced in Lyttelton from the disaster, the town  
19 became well known for its community spirit and ability to pull through the disaster.  
20 Several Project Lyttelton activities became integral to the disaster response in both  
21 formal and informal ways. Indeed, the existence of Project Lyttelton and activities such  
22 as the timebank were considered one of the reasons that Lyttelton as a community  
23 coped better than other communities:

24        It has fared better than other areas...because [of] those close knit [relationships],  
25        that resilience was already there, it wasn’t scrambled together after the  
26        earthquakes, it was in place before (6).

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> J. K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,  
2006).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.



1 Here, resilience that is already there is seen as the ability for people to come together  
2 and rally around each other to receive and provide support.<sup>54</sup>

3 The timebank became integrated with the local Civil Defence<sup>iv</sup> headquarters  
4 resulting in a network of individuals in the community who provided disaster relief  
5 alongside traditional providers such as the Navy and the Fire Service. Thus the  
6 timebank created an organised civilian division of the disaster response:

7 They'd have these briefing sessions every day...and timebanking's skill was  
8 being able to have the ability to link people very quickly and so you'd send out  
9 broadcasts... people would read the broadcasts and then self-select (2).

10 As a result, the timebank was able to check on over 300 elderly people, provide  
11 childcare, provide minor household repairs and help establish a 'meals on wheels'  
12 system that fed vulnerable people for months following the quakes. These actions  
13 instigated by Project Lyttelton helped re-establish community life and showed the value  
14 of resilience actions that encourage individuals to regain a degree of control over their  
15 surroundings following a disaster.<sup>55</sup>

16 Projects that promote the resilience capacities of social learning and adaptation  
17 were also utilised. Social learning involves the ability of societies and communities to  
18 retain and build on lessons learnt as a result of disruptive events.<sup>56</sup> Project Lyttelton has  
19 addressed this through several projects which seek to challenge the status quo and  
20 provide resilience in the event of future disruptions. The Harbour Resilience Project  
21 (HRP) is one such project. Project Lyttelton was able to secure funding for the HRP  
22 which has already established a local food store that runs on a co-operative business

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<sup>54</sup> Krzysztof Kaniasty and Fran Norris H, "In Search of Altruistic Community: Patterns of Social Support Mobilization Following Hurricane Hugo", *American Journal of Community Psychology* 23, no. 4 (1995): 447–477.

<sup>55</sup> Elvira Cicognani et al., "Social Participation, Sense of Community and Social Well Being: A Study on American, Italian and Iranian University Students", *Social Indicators Research* 89, no. 1 (November 29, 2007): 97–112.

<sup>56</sup> Gunderson, "Ecological and Human Community Resilience in Response to Natural Disasters".

1 model (2). Furthermore, the HRP plans to set up a resilience centre dedicated to  
2 community education and the practical implementation of improving food security for  
3 the region:

4         The main components [of the resilience centre] would be an organic farm which  
5         could then sell produce at the farmers market and the coop and within a  
6         community supported agriculture scheme...[and] a display of sustainable  
7         housing solutions... (7)

8 This learning centre will act as a physical repository of social memories and learning  
9 from the earthquakes as well as providing practical advice and skills to visitors. The  
10 multi sector approach to the project will be likely to strengthen the community and their  
11 responses to future events through collaboration and adaptation.<sup>57</sup> In projects such as the  
12 HRP and timebank, resilience has provided a useful framework for the organisation to  
13 respond to the disaster by focussing on uncertainty, change, social support and  
14 adaptation.

15

#### 16 ***Shifting Norms and Dominant Discourses:***

17         Project Lyttelton activities combined with the experience of the February  
18 earthquake not only provided support for the community but also strengthened the  
19 group's motivation to enact alternative futures and further work towards shifting  
20 societal norms. For example, timebanks value different strengths and skills in the same  
21 way -no one skill is considered more valuable than another.<sup>58</sup> This results in skills and  
22 roles that are not traditionally valued in a monetary sense, such as domestic child care,  
23 being valued through the collection of time credits that can be 'spent' on other  
24 services.<sup>59</sup> The Lyttelton timebank appears to have contributed to shifting the norms in

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<sup>57</sup> Claudia Pahl-Wostl et al., "Social Learning and Water Resources Management", *Ecology and Society* 12, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>58</sup> Edgar Cahn, *No More Throw Away People - The Co-production Imperative*, 2nd ed.  
(Washington DC: Essential Books, 2004).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

1 the community. One participant noted how important this was after each major  
2 earthquake:

3       You've already got a community that really knows each other and...is used to  
4       asking [for] and receiving help. So you can start to get the help that people need  
5       really, really, quickly...and people can volunteer really quickly and easily.

6       There's no stigma in saying 'oh I'm on my own, can someone come and help me  
7       put my house back together' because that's a normal thing to ask before the  
8       earthquakes so it just normalised the whole thing (6).

9 Gibson-Graham<sup>60</sup> agrees that these projects can shift dominant societal values by  
10 fostering small scale shifts in the conception of what is possible. These actions do not  
11 require higher level transformations, although they do, in many cases prelude such  
12 patterns. Another example of challenging societal values is the Harbour Resilience  
13 Project share stall, where individuals bring excess food or produce and leave it in a  
14 covered stall. People then take what they want or need. One participant noted with  
15 amusement that:

16       It's kind of encouraging a culture of sharing basically I think we're not that used  
17       to it...It's working pretty well...I think quite a lot of people really appreciate it  
18       and it was also nice to see puzzled faces, like when they were just like oh is this  
19       free to take? (7).

20 In a society that values individualism and monetary exchange, these localised economic  
21 shifts may indicate a change in values that could potentially challenge dominant  
22 discourses around 'help', reciprocity and the provisions of the market. Harris<sup>61</sup>, who  
23 analysed alternative food networks, agrees, stating that activism that cultivates thought  
24 outside of normalising neoliberal discourses of market rationales and individualism is  
25 integral for effective change to be envisioned and realised.

26       As a result of the earthquakes Project Lyttelton has also been part of the creation  
27 of a food co-operative. The food co-operative is owned by a group of individuals who  
28 live in and around Lyttelton. The project was launched following the February  
29 earthquake as a result of the single grocery store in the town facing closure due to

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<sup>60</sup> Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*.

<sup>61</sup> Harris, "Neoliberal Subjectivities or a Politics of the Possible?"

1 earthquake damage. After the event the town had no grocery store for several months.  
2 The lack of a supermarket left the town vulnerable in future crisis events as the  
3 geographical barriers of the hills could result in the community being isolated for  
4 several days without access to food supplies (as occurred on the February 22<sup>nd</sup> 2011).  
5 Thus, the Harbour Co-op has been established to explicitly enhance the resilience of the  
6 town in the case of another earthquake, but also as a wider response to re-localise food  
7 supply and production in the region (2).

8         The latest project we've got is a direct result of the earthquake. Because the  
9         tunnel was closed, [we realised]that we could be cut off. So it's making us  
10        realise that we need to look at how we can be resilient by ourselves (7).

11       In this case, the establishment of the Harbour Co-op has had several outcomes. First,  
12       the store is owned and run by the community and the individuals who shop there. This  
13       model is significantly different to the dominant neoliberal mode of food production  
14       which relies on globalised corporate supply<sup>62</sup>:

15        Part of [resilience] is the whole harbour Co-op thing, so that you've got your  
16        own food place there that is owned by the community. And it certainly *is* owned  
17        by the community. I mean how many people put money into the harbour Co-op?  
18        500 I think...that's a big group of people (5).

19       The Co-op presents a different way of doing business that runs on democratic  
20       organisation, re-localising profits and providing proceeds from the store back to the  
21       owners and community.<sup>63</sup> The store also supports local producers and potentially  
22       contributes to lower environmental food footprints through promoting local and  
23       sustainably produced food in combination with the Project Lyttelton run Farmers  
24       Market. These autonomous activist projects that radicalise everyday aspects of life show  
25       the value that a resilience approach can bring to a community group. Through  
26       envisioning the needs and desires of the community through everyday life and the

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<sup>62</sup> Guthman, "Neoliberalism and the Making of Food Politics in California."

<sup>63</sup> Harbour Co-op, "Why a Co-op?", 2013, <http://www.harbourcoop.co.nz/about-us/why-a-coop/>.

1 possibilities that arise out of a crisis, the Harbour Co-op has established an alternative to  
2 the capitalist business model in the community.<sup>64</sup>

3

#### 4 ***Power, Autonomy and Self Reliance:***

5 Another trait that Project Lyttelton’s activities appear to have nurtured within  
6 residents of Lyttelton is that of self-reliance. Participants noted that residents of the  
7 town cultivated an atmosphere of autonomy following the earthquakes. Feeling  
8 empowered within the community led individuals to take control over elements of the  
9 community response without requiring consent from those in power. Examples of this  
10 included stories of people who started clearing debris or repairing community assets  
11 without ‘official’ permission (2, 4). Within Lyttelton these stories cultivated an attitude  
12 that suggested that the residents were empowered to take the fate of their community  
13 into their own hands. These actions aimed to aid support systems in the community.

14 However, there is a danger that such a desire for autonomy and control can be  
15 used for what Peck and Tickell<sup>65</sup> describe as ‘responsibility without power’ whereby  
16 governments and institutions support policies that roll back the responsibilities of the  
17 state. This leaves communities with more responsibility but less funding and resources  
18 to carry out previously provided services.<sup>66</sup> However interactions between Project  
19 Lyttelton, the wider Lyttelton community and government organisations show that  
20 rather than accepting sole responsibility for the well-being of the community and  
21 shunning the role of the government, individuals are, following the earthquakes,  
22 attempting to hold centralised political structures to account and work in negotiation:

23 We live here, we know what these things are... So people here approached the  
24 council and said we don’t want to be consulted anymore we want partnership  
25 and the council didn’t quite know what partnership meant (2).

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<sup>64</sup> Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*.

<sup>65</sup> “Neoliberalizing Space”, 386.

<sup>66</sup> MacKinnon and Derickson, “From Resilience to Resourcefulness”.

1 The same participant also acknowledged and linked these political struggles to the  
2 wider dominant capitalist discourses of mainstream society that their activities are  
3 attempting to challenge:

4       People [in Lyttelton] are stroppy they'll go and say no, no we'd don't want that,  
5       we want this ...and I think the way the world has been going through capitalist  
6       consumerist society, we've tended to numb people [from] thinking (2).

7 Here the interviewee indicates that far from abdicating responsibility solely to the  
8 government or the community, individuals are becoming aware of the power dynamics  
9 at play in the complex interactions between politics and everyday communities. In  
10 many ways the group's activities decentralise power in the community resulting in local  
11 residents taking action towards their own future post disaster, while simultaneously  
12 seeking to hold government and other centralised power structures to account. This  
13 approach takes into consideration a much more nuanced reality of social relations,  
14 power and policies in their struggle for resilience.

15       Obviously Project Lyttelton does not reject the dominant capitalist model in its  
16 entirety – the Harbour Co-op and Farmers Market operate as businesses that exchange  
17 goods for monetary currency, and the organisation itself hires and employs members of  
18 the community. However the difference is that these projects are run democratically as  
19 community owned and operated entities which re-invest profits back into the  
20 community. Through engaging in such activities which are creating tangible alternatives  
21 to dominant capitalist practices, Project Lyttelton is using resilience as a platform to  
22 extend these ideas and shift societal norms.

23

## 24 **The Future of Resilience?**

25 Community and activist groups engaging with resilience often do so in a way that seeks  
26 to build, from the ground up, a transformative alternative to capitalism. Their aim is to  
27 create communities which can resist disruptions from environmental, economic or  
28 political crises.<sup>67</sup> A disaster as a time of crisis is an opportunity for such groups to take

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<sup>67</sup> Hopkins and Brangwyn, "Transition Initiatives Primer"; Transition Towns Totnes, "What Is Resilience?".

1 control during a momentary lapse in dominant capitalist life. Through the case study of  
2 Project Lyttelton there are several examples of resilience being used as a framework for  
3 building a working alternative to current capitalist norms and discourses. The first is the  
4 implementation of projects such as the timebank that actively shift social relationships  
5 and norms from individualism to community and reciprocity. The experiences of  
6 participants in these projects, during the series of earthquakes, show how ideas of  
7 resilience can increase the support available to a community during a crisis. Second,  
8 Project Lyttelton's activities are actively building and experimenting with physical and  
9 practical alternatives to everyday capitalist life. The experience of disaster, influenced  
10 by ideas of resilience, has supported the community in extending these projects  
11 following the earthquakes. Finally, the earthquakes provided an interesting insight into  
12 how communities which have been self-organising respond during a crisis. In the case  
13 of Lyttelton an attitude of autonomy was nurtured which encouraged people to take  
14 control in the absence of governing organisations. Following the immediate disaster  
15 response phase individuals in the town have been negotiating the restructuring of power  
16 relations with government through their participation, or lack thereof in official  
17 processes.

18 From this case study we can see that despite the worrying application of  
19 resilience theory at certain levels of governance and policy, the way grassroots groups  
20 are mobilising resilience may prove useful to create workable alternatives to capitalism.  
21 The most obvious element of existing resilience theory that co-exists with autonomous  
22 desires for societal change is that of social learning and transformation. If a community,  
23 nation or organisation does not learn how to adapt and shift with the challenges they  
24 face then it can be argued that their vulnerability to future disturbances will plateau or  
25 increase.<sup>68</sup> As with most theories, this principle can be interpreted in several ways. The  
26 way that Project Lyttelton appears to interpret this is to respond to future concerns  
27 through interpreting and identifying the layers of instability in the political and social  
28 system as is expressed through the earthquake recovery process. In one participant's  
29 view:

30 everything else that goes on with the rebuild and recovery is impacting on that  
31 ability to be resilient and go forward and for it to be a positive thing and to

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<sup>68</sup> Tobin, "Sustainability and Community Resilience".

1 rebuild better...I think that lack of information, that lack of accountability,  
2 transparency out of local government and [Parliament] is a real concern [for  
3 future resilience] (5)

4 Project Lyttelton uses resilience, in a way which emphasises political and cultural  
5 understandings in order to use the concept for its potential to advocate for pre-emptive,  
6 transformative change in the face of encroaching social and environmental issues.

7 While theorists and academics debate the implications of using certain frameworks, a  
8 number of groups such as Project Lyttelton are working at a grassroots level to interpret  
9 resilience in a way that suits their aims – to build alternatives to capitalist society.

10 MacKinnon and Derickson<sup>69</sup> suggest that grassroots activist groups employ the  
11 alternative concept of ‘resourcefulness’. While it is important to critique and suggest  
12 alternatives to neoliberal discourses, especially in the face of increasing inequalities and  
13 increased marginalisation in communities, we question the need to design a new  
14 framework, with a different title, that shares concepts used in the interpretation of  
15 resilience by grassroots groups. Resourcefulness as a concept has many cross overs with  
16 the broad interpretation of grassroots resilience. For instance, autonomous activism,  
17 Transition Towns and Project Lyttelton all put a large emphasis on skills and technical  
18 knowledge. This is illustrated by the push to reinvigorate traditional skills to enact  
19 alternatives to current day society, but also through the way in which Project Lyttelton  
20 has become adept in small scale governance and fundraising. These similarities can also  
21 be seen between the reskilling movement in Transition Towns and the resourcefulness  
22 model’s emphasis on indigenous and ‘folk’ knowledge. This case study shows that in  
23 this instance, while resilience is being used as the framework, similar elements of  
24 ‘resourcefulness’ are also being engaged albeit under a different title.

25 In addition, resilience has become a term with increasing political and popular  
26 buy-in. In Project Lyttelton’s case, through pushing an openly resilience based agenda  
27 they have been able to secure funding for projects that subtly yet surely seek to build  
28 alternative futures. As a member of Project Lyttelton claimed:

29 So [the Ministry for Social Development] start up and go ‘so there are different  
30 definitions of resilience’ and I thought – who cares? ... Some of the things like  
31 resilience we just use that word because it seems to currently cover what we’re

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<sup>69</sup> MacKinnon and Derickson, “From Resilience to Resourcefulness”.



1           doing. We're not that hung up on what it means... We in Lyttelton are quite  
2           good at surfing the wave and knowing where we want to go but also knowing  
3           what the keywords are (16).

4   As well as securing funding through these means, Project Lyttelton has become a model  
5   community serving as inspiration for other groups seeking to relocalise and improve  
6   resilience. Main organisers of the organisation speak regularly at events across New  
7   Zealand and internationally. Following the earthquakes, their profile, and use of  
8   resilience, has risen further, with media coverage and an exhibition of the group's post  
9   disaster street art at the National Museum Te Papa in Wellington (2,5).<sup>70</sup>

10           While Project Lyttelton has achieved remarkable success in their activities at a  
11   local scale, there are likely to be many similar groups operating under resilience visions  
12   that do not know about or acknowledge the issues of power and inequalities. It is also  
13   likely there are many ways in which Project Lyttelton could improve their activities in  
14   the community. However, what this case shows is that the verdict on resilience as a  
15   framework for grassroots activists is not clear cut. Critiquing resilience at a theoretical  
16   level is indeed a valuable and much needed process. However, a constructive dialogue  
17   with grassroots practitioners is also required. It is our concern that strongly opposing  
18   grassroots activist work through academically situated criticism could ostracise those  
19   working for social and environmental change in communities. As critical geographers  
20   we want to provide insight that is useful at both the academic and grassroots level. To  
21   this end we believe that there are significant issues with resilience concepts in that they  
22   are undoubtedly being used to push a neoliberal policy agenda that sacrifices the  
23   wellbeing of communities and places additional stress on social and environmental  
24   concerns. However, a radical mobilisation of resilience appears to be occurring. As  
25   exemplified in this paper, grassroots groups are using resilience as a way to gain  
26   purchase for their actions that aim to deconstruct capitalist norms through radicalising  
27   the everyday. Through Project Lyttelton's experiences in the earthquakes in Canterbury

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<sup>70</sup> Kate Preece, "Lyttelton Sprouts," *Avenues Magazine*, April 2012, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/christchurch-life/avenues/features/6810326/Lyttelton-sprouts>; Tamlyn Stewart, "Lyttelton Locals Work to Revive Town," *The Press*, March 6, 2013, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/business/small-business/8748144/Lyttelton-locals-work-to-revive-town>;

1 in 2010/11 we can see how ideas of resilience have pushed the boundaries of neoliberal  
2 norms and contributed to the scaling up of ‘resilience’ projects that also challenge  
3 mainstream societal values such as the Harbour Co-op and the Harbour Resilience  
4 Project.  
5

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<sup>i</sup> Transition Towns are community groups based around a re-localisation philosophy as a reaction to the threats of peak oil, climate change and financial collapse. Transition Towns often carry out locally based actions such as community gardens, alternative currencies and awareness raising activities.

<sup>ii</sup> Canterbury, Aotearoa New Zealand has experienced over 12,000 of earthquakes in the past three years. 4 major events have occurred, with earthquakes over magnitude 6.0 on the Richter scale, one in 2010 in September of 7.1 magnitude and three in 2011 in February, June and December. The February 22<sup>nd</sup> earthquake was the most destructive resulting in the loss of 181 lives and widespread damage to buildings and infrastructure.

<sup>iii</sup> Timebanks are an alternative currency which operates on the basis of earning credits for labour, skills or teaching that can then be exchanged by the individual for other services. Timebanks operate on the philosophy that every individual has valued skills and these should be traded at equal value.

- <sup>iv</sup> Civil Defence is the colloquially referred to local emergency management centres and response as part of the New Zealand Ministry for Civil Defence and Emergency Management.