

COMMUNITY PREPAREDNESS PLANS

A grassroots planning resource

Raven Cretney : 2013

Overview

Disasters and crises are times of great change and uncertainty. We cannot control when, how or why they occur, especially at a community level. What we can do is to prepare and enable ourselves and our communities to be ready for a crisis when it happens. Not only does this ensure that a community runs smoother during a disaster but it also means relationships and cohesion nurture and enrich our everyday lives.

Too often the power and knowledge for preparing for an emergency is held by those at the top of the political and economic food chain. Local communities know what is best for them, and often have the skills and resources to draw upon to get themselves through. In some cases it takes a few days or weeks following a disaster for these skills and resources to be organised into a form that is engaged with the wider community. By preparing now, we can lessen this time of disorganisation.

This disaster planning guide outlines an ideal project for groups such as Transition Towns, Community Gardens, Timebanks and Community Centres. During the earthquakes in Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand, these organisations were often the front line response for communities immediately

following the event. In cases of physical isolation and the concentration of resources on CBD search and rescue efforts, these groups provided support for weeks following the initial earthquakes.

This guide will enable individuals to strengthen community groups by preparing themselves and others for the possibility of self-reliance following a disruptive event. To have a plan in place before a disaster means that it is likely that initial stages of panic and confusion can be minimised, resulting in a smoother transition to providing the resources and services necessary for communities after a disaster.

How to Use This Guide

This guide is *not* a prescriptive how to, it is *not* an academic article, and it is *not* going to tell you what the best actions for your own community are. What this guide *will* do is give you some useful information, tools and potential activities that your community group can use to discuss and enhance your community's preparedness.

Community responses to disasters are shaped by the people who live in the place, the cultural and economic setting and the geographical constraints of an area. At all times it is recommended that you think about community preparedness as an open subject – differences of opinion in a community are an opportunity for growth rather than a constraint.

Without embracing our communities as places of difference, we close off many options and groups of people from engaging and participating.

Some of the activities and tools in this guide will help groups to recognise and use diversity as a strength.

Community Preparedness - Preparing for a Disaster

Resilience Frameworks

The importance of people

Diversity of people and ideas

Remembering the past and
adapting to the present

Permaculture Principles

Observation

Multiple purposes for projects/zones

Action Learning Cycle

Tying it All Together

Preparing for a Disaster

In a disaster in Aotearoa New Zealand, the Civil Defence is often the first port of call. Civil Defence is a great resource to draw on for practical information and contacts.

One of the easiest things you can do is alert your local Civil Defence about your existence!

Let them know you are interested in being part of an emergency response and what you think you could contribute during a disaster.

So what could your relationship with the Civil Defence look like? Could you provide food for the emergency centres from the community garden? Or would you want to build links between your timebank and other emergency organisations? There are many possibilities!

True Story

In the Christchurch 2010/11 earthquakes, the organisation Project Lyttelton was at the forefront of the grassroots response to the needs of the community. In the initial 2010 September quake, the Civil Defence in the town did not understand how the Timebank run by Project Lyttelton could help. But due to some fantastic communication skills from the Timebank coordinator, the Timebank was fully integrated with the official Civil Defence response by the time of the February 22nd earthquake. At this point the Timebank ran alongside other support organisations and was fully briefed on the situation every day. Individuals were able to help where they could and those who needed repairs, company or meals could receive assistance.

In addition to these important relationships **it is also important to think about your preparedness as an organisation and as individuals.** This can often encompass very practical concerns.

- Do you have enough stored water?
- Is there access to food supplies?
- Are there services that can provide basic medical supplies?
- What will you use for sanitation and sewage?
- Do you have a source of fuel and a way to heat food and water?
- Are you linked up with your local timebank?

By preparing as individuals we lessen the demand on emergency supplies and organisations.

In order to think about these issues as an organisation, there are some strategies that can be employed to think about the possibilities, the constraints and what action might need to be taken now.

Useful Tools

Below are some tools you might like to consider in combination with the 'Possible Steps' section.

Community Resilience Frameworks

Resilience is fast becoming a catch phrase of the disaster and sustainability world, but what can it contribute to grassroots groups who want to increase their social connection, build relationships in their community and be prepared for a crisis?

Well, resilience can provide us with some interesting information that can help us shape our responses and our plans. Here are some points from recent research that may be worth thinking about and considering for your community preparedness plan.

People Matter

Increasingly we are beginning to understand that one of the most important things for a local community to cultivate in order to get through a crisis is the relationships between people. These relationships build the foundation for things like social cohesion, how many people volunteer and how many people can support themselves and their immediate neighbours following a disaster.

There are generally considered two types of social interactions in resilience theory. One is the informal ways that people know each other, such as talking to their neighbours over the fence, swapping produce and looking after children. The other type of relationship is the formal type where people interact through organisations such as the timebank, faith-based groups, political organisations and sports teams. The more connections in your community, the more you are able to sustain a resilient response!

What does your organisation do that supports these formal and informal relationships? What else could it do?

- Do you run an event for Neighbours Day?
- Are members of your group encouraged to meet their neighbours?
- Do you make links with other organisations?

Diversity of People and Ideas

Diversity is important to resilience theory as it provides opportunities for new ways of working and adapting to challenges. As the well-known Einstein quote goes, *“we can’t expect to solve a problem based on the same thinking that created it.”* The same is true for resilience.

True Story

The Brooklyn Food Group, currently operating in Wellington Aotearoa New Zealand, began as a Transition Town. However, after a while of group activity remaining stagnant, a group of people diverged to create a group focussed on increasing and encouraging local food supply. By working on common ground (an interest in food) but acknowledging a diversity of interests, approaches and availability, the group has successfully created several shared gardens, a bartering stall at the farmer’s market, regular workshops and a community orchard. Some members are only interested in gardening while others are more interested in workshops and education, but everyone’s interests are accommodated. These actions show how embracing diversity can strengthen a group to provide different services to a community.

One of the most common problems in community groups with regards to resilience is the diversity of membership - it can be hard for some groups to expand their activities. One thing that has been shown is that groups need to try and work from a place of

accepting difference rather than solely highlighting commonalities.

How could your group increase diversity of approaches and membership?

- Are there meeting times that work for members with families or other commitments?
- Is the organisational structure open to new members interested in joining?
- Do your group activities accommodate a variety of interests?
- What sort of culture does your group have?
- How could you make it more inclusive?



Being aware of the time constraints those with young families have is one way you can be inclusive, and it also provides opportunities to engage with different activities – kids especially love gardening!

Remembering the Past and Adapting to the Present

The past is a treasure trove of lessons and ideas for how to improve our resilience in the present. Social memory – the ability for society to remember lessons from the past – can provide examples of how our communities have faced crises in the past and recovered. Engaging with elders in the community is a great way to learn about the past and how individuals and communities coped with tough times. By drawing on these lessons we can learn to adapt to present challenges. Similarly it is important to encourage the lessons that you as an organisation learn are passed on to those in the future, both in the organisation and in wider society.

How does your organisation remember the past?

- Do you work with older members of the community?
- Do you create plans and documents that share your lessons in the organisation with others?
- How could you engage with storytelling to promote positive memories and lessons?

Permaculture Principles

Permaculture is a complex theory relating to our relationship to each other and the environment. The theories are often used in gardening, community development and sustainability as a framework for a holistic mode of developing resources and projects. There are many different principles that we can draw on from permaculture, but this resource will just briefly describe several that may be useful tools to engage in a community preparedness planning situation.



Community art on a fence around earthquake rubble in Lyttelton Christchurch (Zack Dorner, 2012)

The Principle of Observation

Observation is used in permaculture as a tool for planning as it relies on observing your environment and community over the medium to long term to get ideas about the needs and opportunities available. This is often used in the context of gardening. If I observe my section over the course of a year, I will notice how in certain seasons the wind blows in a certain direction and intensity.

True Story

I noticed in my suburb of Newtown that the wind from the North was particularly strong in Autumn – just when my corn plants were maturing. So what I did was rather than not grow corn (which could also be an option!), I adapted to the situation and planted the corn in front of a shelter belt of trees. I also sowed the corn early so the plants were strong by the time the winds came, and I sowed beans underneath them to provide extra support. Next year the corn held up wonderfully in the wind!

In our communities we can follow the same principles. **By brainstorming about what we know about our community, we can identify the strengths and opportunities for exciting growth and we can see the areas that may need work or extra support.** We can draw on the already existing, extensive and combined knowledge of our area to be prepared and connected.

Multiple Uses for Projects/Zones

In permaculture, a project or crop doesn't often have just one single function. Instead we try and combine functions so that something has the most value derived from it. Another gardening example would be growing pumpkins underneath my corn. Not only do I get pumpkins, I protect the soil from erosion, I feed important nutrients to the corn and the pumpkin leaves serve as mulch for the beans and the corn, reducing how much water I need to use in Summer.



In a community you can see this principle work almost by default. A timebank is an ideal example. While the timebank's aim is to provide value to all services provided by all different types of people, it also connects neighbours and those who might not have spoken previously, connects people across cultures, provides important support for the

vulnerable in society, creates an important alternative local economy and can be incredibly useful as a network of volunteers in a disaster situation.

When planning your preparedness actions and plans, think about how one activity could serve more than one purpose. How many functions can your community garden or playgroup serve?

These questions will help you to maximise your actions in the community while hopefully not draining people's energy reserves.



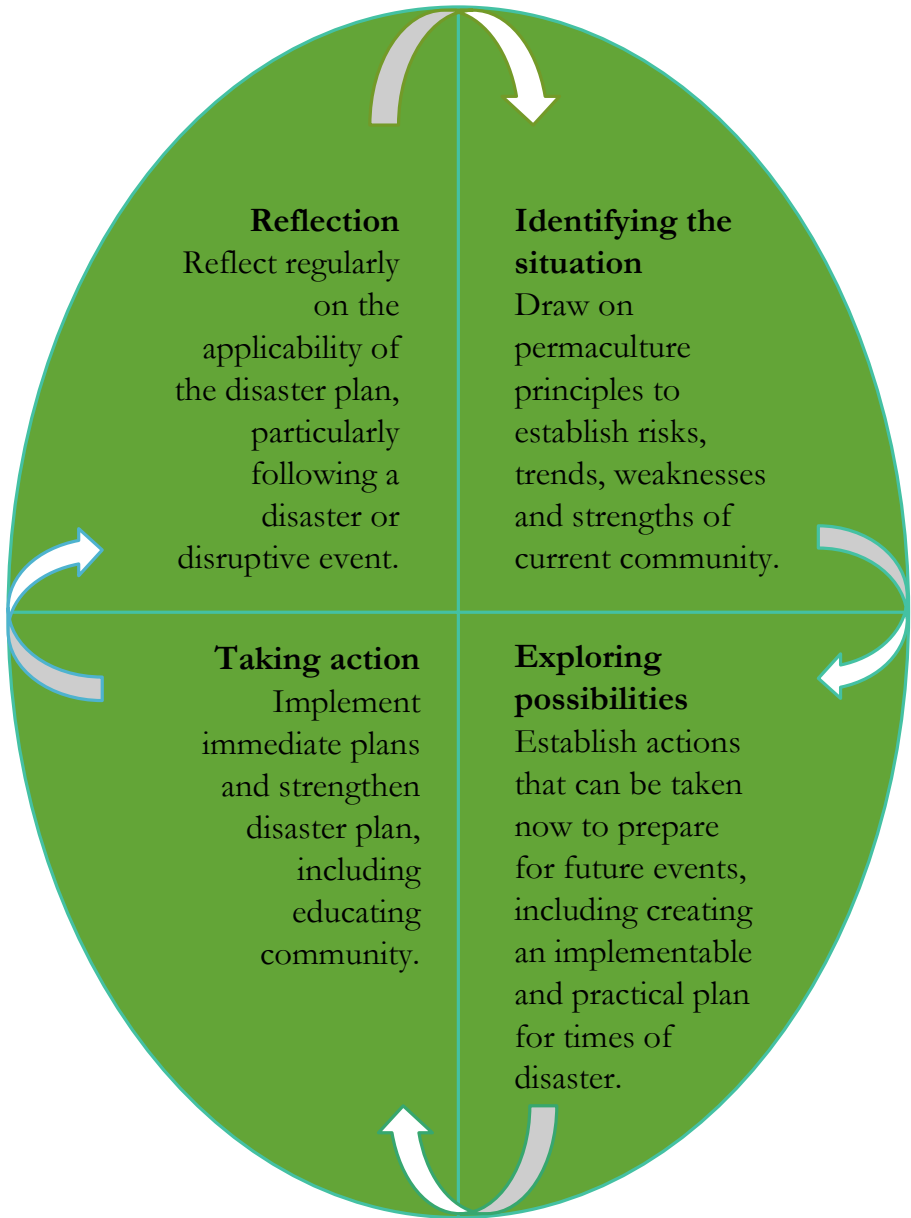
The Project Lyttelton community garden provides food for gardeners and the meals on wheels scheme for the local elderly, is a meeting space for celebrations and workshops (pizza oven and shaded area in right corner) and provided a common space for people to gather following the earthquakes in 2010/11 (Zack Dorner, 2012)

Action Learning Cycle

The action learning cycle is a useful tool as it provides a context and a planning process for engaging with ideas of preparedness in your community.

In this guide we can use the action learning cycle to combine the resilience framework and permaculture principles into a process that can be actioned by community groups.

The model below describes the way a community group could work through the process of creating and maintaining a preparedness plan.



Step 1: Identify the Situation

This step in the action cycle is about observing and identifying the resources and needs of your community. By working with a diverse range of community members you will be able to put together a situational map for your community that identifies the disasters that could happen, groups that may need extra help in an emergency, strengths the community can draw on in a disaster and the resources that may need to be sourced from outside the immediate community.

You could use the action templates at the end of this guide to run community meetings in which individuals discuss and workshop these ideas.

Step 2: Explore Possibilities

The ideas brainstormed in Step 1 form the foundation for this step, where you can explore the possibilities your community group can take to create or envision projects that ‘fill the gaps’ in your community situational map.

By ‘fill the gaps’ we mean identify the weaknesses in your community or the areas that could be improved on in the case of an emergency. Then you can explore what sort of projects you might be able to establish that could serve those needs.

Remember the permaculture principle of multiple uses? Try and think about how a project might be good in a disaster but also good for the long term vitality of your

community. For instance a timebank is a great way to get a lot of people active in an emergency, but day to day it supports people, values all types of work and provides a way for people to meet their neighbours and others in the community.

The other option with this step is to look at existing projects and identify how they might be able to have something added to them for an emergency. This could be as simple as creating a preparedness plan that is revisited every year to make sure it is relevant and current. Use the questions under the resilience section (also in templates) to guide some of the discussion around what your group could do to become more prepared.

For example a food bank could have a policy for what it would do in a major emergency to help provide food and perhaps be a focus point for distributing food to those in need. There are lots of options and opportunities out there!

Step 3: Taking Action

Next you can take action by working out a plan for enacting the visions for ‘filling the gap’ that you brainstormed in Step 2.

Start small and work your way up. The best thing you can do to start with is to use the situational map from Step 2 to create a plan for what your organisation can do in an emergency. See if there are any obvious ways you can link in with the Civil Defence structures in your region and make those connections.

Many groups are busy and overworked as it is and taking this small step of establishing a community preparedness plan can get people thinking about what to do in a disaster. All the thinking and preparing will come in handy both psychologically and practically if there is an emergency.

If after that you are keen to establish some of the fully fledged projects discussed in Step 2, start creating a separate action plan for those projects. Identify the individuals that want to drive those projects and source funding to implement them.

Check out some of the resources at the end of this guide for more information on successfully planning community initiatives.

Step 4: Reflection

Reflecting on progress is an important part of the action cycle as it allows us to celebrate the progress we have made and to look for possible areas of new growth and change.

For a community preparedness plan this is an essential part of making sure the planning is up to date and current. Hazards and risks change, and so do communities. By regularly reflecting on the community preparedness plan you can stay up to date and on top of the latest challenges.

For a project that has arisen to improve community preparedness, this can involve developing the project further or even stepping back the functions of the project if members are feeling burnt out or overworked.

Ultimately this process can feedback into Step 1 and the cycle can begin again under new circumstances or leadership.

Tying it All Together

The above tools are designed to stimulate discussion and plans for emergency preparedness. As mentioned at the start of this guide, there is no right or wrong answer for your community group. The way you choose to utilise these tools and the resources at the end of this guide is up to you. The more place and community specific your ideas are, the more likely they are to be useful and successful.

Here are some ideas for possible ways you could use these tools that focus around plans and brainstorming ideas:

- 1) Gather your steering committee (or equivalent), discuss what role your organisation would take in an emergency and set out a basic plan.
- 2) Choose to focus on an area of your organisation to strengthen (such as diversity or participation). This would not have an explicit emergency preparedness goal but will help your organisation respond if and when it is needed.
- 3) Invite someone from Civil Defence to come and talk to your group about what hazards there are in your area and what might be needed during an emergency.
- 4) Hold focus groups in your community group to brainstorm what the gaps are in services in your community and who might be able to help whom in an emergency. This acts as a way for people to network

and get to know each other, but also could form the basis of a database for who has what physical resources (e.g. spades) and skills (e.g. nurse) in an emergency.

- 5) From the above activities you could take things a step further to have an official organisational plan. You can use the templates in this resource and the action learning cycle to create this. You could then update this every year as hazards and circumstances change.
- 6) Another way to raise awareness and get people networking and thinking about emergency preparedness is to hold a community preparedness forum. You could invite people from different community groups to come together and discuss what would happen in a disaster. Invite local speakers and hold workshops on different elements of preparedness.
- 7) Link your organisation with existing organisations, in particular your local timebank (see the final section for information on how to do this).

If your group is really keen to strengthen your preparedness even further and also has the capacity to run a new project, here are some ideas for projects that have been found to be really useful in an emergency:

- Timebank
- Community garden
- Neighbourhood Support Network/Association
- Adding an emergency plan to an existing activity. For instance, a distribution plan if you run a food bank.

You can find more information about how to establish these groups and activities in the final section of this guide.

Final Comments

Through this guide I have attempted to lay out some useful information and tools for community groups to start the process of thinking about preparing for an emergency. This guide emphasises the power of the locally focussed community organisation to assess and address its own needs both prior to, during and following a disaster.

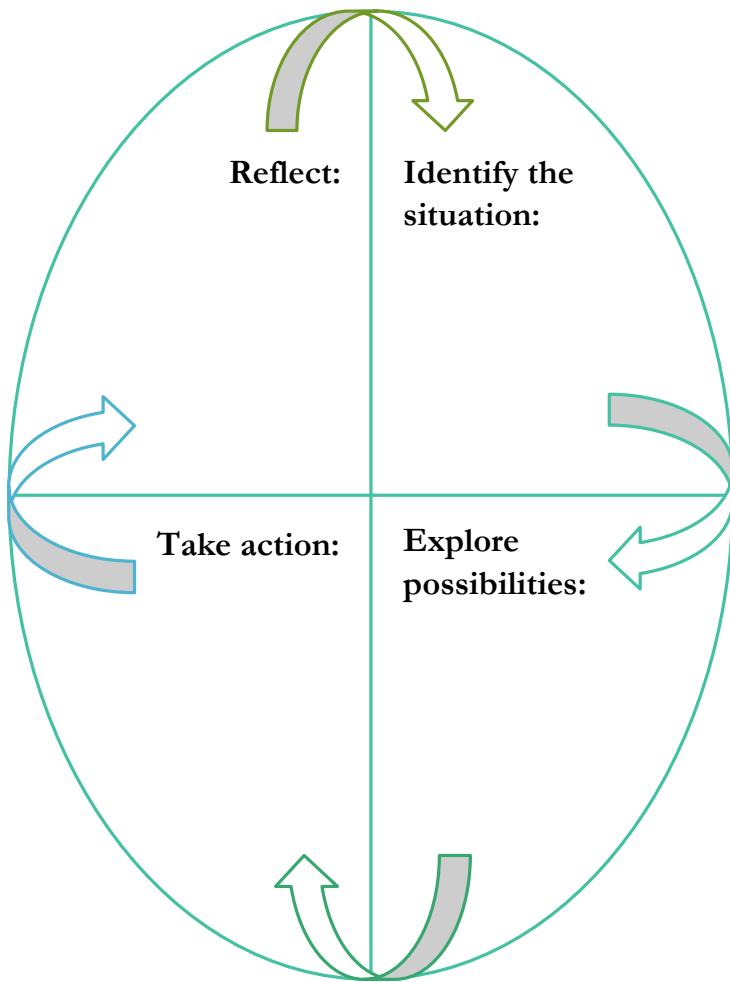
By drawing on permaculture, resilience theory and an action learning cycle, your community group can take control of emergency planning. From the foundational level of simple actions, such as storing water on your organisation's premises and educating individuals about household preparedness, to the complex project level of establishing or joining a timebank, every action taken at the community level counts.

These actions also contribute positively now – people build relationships and get to know each other. This not only helps all of us when we need it the most but also enriches our daily lives.

It is my hope that this resource will be useful to you in these practices to build community to improve the lives of individuals – not only in a disaster, but also in day to day situations.

Templates

Blank Action Cycle



Planning Questions

These questions could be used on their own to lead discussions or group brainstorms, or they can be used as part of the action cycle to plan an activity or project.

Identify the Situation

- What are we good at in our community?
- What are the hazards in our community?
- Do these hazards happen quickly, slowly, with warning or without?
- Who will need help in an emergency?
- What systems do we have already that would help in an emergency?

Explore Possibilities

Strengthening our organisation

- Who is involved in our organisation? Do we reach out to different communities within your geographical community?
- How can our activities and meetings be more accessible? What assumptions do we have about 'how' things should be run? Does this affect who comes to our meetings and group?
- How can we engage with older people in the community?
- How can we celebrate our successes?

Preparing for an emergency:

- What can we do to prepare ourselves as individuals?
- What can we do to prepare for each of the hazards listed in the first section?
- Who can help those who will need extra assistance in an emergency?
- What does our organisation do that could be of use in the case of each of the hazards listed in the first section?

What do we want to do?

- Are there any projects that people are interested in that would prepare your community for an emergency? Do you want to establish a new project?
- Do you want to add a plan to an existing project?
- Do you want to raise awareness about being prepared in your community?

Take Action

- Will your chosen action require funding? How will you apply for this?
- Are there people who want to commit to this project or plan?
- Take action!

Reflect

- What did we do well?
- What could we improve?
- Have any hazards changed?
- Are there new elements of our community that need to be taken into account?

Further Resources

Finding a timebank near you

- Living Economies timebank directory
<http://tinyurl.com/17lstdh>

Setting up a timebank

- No More Throw Away People, by Edgar Cahn
Essential Books, 2004
<http://nomorethrowawaypeople.org/>
- Project Lyttelton Timebank
<http://www.lyttelton.net.nz/timebank>
- Responding Together - Citizen's engagement in reducing inequalities and poverty – How to set up a timebank
https://respondingtogether.wikispiral.org/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=75
- Timebanking UK – A step by step guide
<http://www.timebanking.org.uk/>

Setting up a community garden

- Trapeze Collective – setting up a community garden
http://trapeze.clearerchannel.org/chapters/HandbookForChangingOurWorld_chap10.pdf
- Wellington City Council guidelines for community gardens (check out your local council/provincial area for more place specific guidelines – this will give you an idea of what NZ councils look for)
<http://wellington.govt.nz/~media/recreation/gardens/files/guidelines-community-gardens.pdf>
- UK Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens – Free start up pack
<http://www.farmgarden.org.uk/publications/128-community-garden-starter-pack>

New Zealand Civil Defence contacts and resources

- National preparedness campaign
www.gethru.govt.nz
- Contact details for local branches
<http://www.civildefence.govt.nz/memwebsite.nsf/wpgURL/Locate-the-nearest-council-Index?OpenDocument>

Technology for community groups

- TED talk about Recovers.org – computer software to manage community disaster response requests, offers and assistance.
http://www.ted.com/talks/caitria_and_morgan_o_neill_how_to_step_up_in_the_face_of_disaster.html
<https://recovers.org/>

More Information On...

Resilience

- Socio-ecological Resilience Alliance
<http://www.resalliance.org/>

Permaculture

- Permaculture New Zealand
<http://www.permaculture.org.nz/>
- Permaculture Principles
<http://permacultureprinciples.com/>
- NZ Lifestyle Block – A Beginners Guide to Permaculture
<http://www.nzlifestyleblock.co.nz/2012/03/permaculture-beginners-guide.html>
- Permaculture Institute
<http://www.permaculture.org/nm/index.php/site/index/>

Project Lyttelton

- Website
<http://www.lyttelton.net.nz/>
- Our Story
http://www.lyttelton.net.nz/images/documents/projectlyttelton_ourstory.pdf

Transition Towns

- Global Transition Network
<http://www.transitionnetwork.org/>
- New Zealand Transition Towns
<http://www.transitiontowns.org.nz/>

Contact

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