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Community, Health and Resilience: Reflections from the perspective of Living City (Chile)

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**Reflections for the
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and
The Fetzer Institute of Kalamazoo, Michigan**

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We were born to unite with our fellow men, and to join in community with the human race. Cicero

Hear me, four quarters of the world - a relative I am! Give me the strength to walk the soft earth, a relative to all that is! Give me the eyes to see and the strength to understand, that I may be like you. With your power only can I face the winds.
(1863-1950) Black Elk, Oglala Sioux holy man

One generation plants the trees; another gets the shade. Chinese proverb¹

1. Community

From across time and from different points on our planet, three voices speak to us about what community means. “We were born to unite with our fellow *men*,” wrote Cicero, and immediately he both includes and excludes, leaving women in limbo, a way of defining community as having a boundary that includes some and excludes other, as Isin and other social theorists have noted.

Black Elk, meanwhile, sensually weaves a people into a specific place containing both a social and a natural environment. He combines responsibility, strength, hope and threat into a seamless stance on life. The Chinese proverb defines community across time, from one generation to the next. History is essential, but a kind of history that, like shade itself, projects both backward and forward into a future that we must not only imagine, but build and sow.

The essence of community, then, involves inclusion and exclusion, rights and responsibilities, a unique combination of people and identity, nature and place, past and future.

Wright adds that the main human activity is “not merely to produce and consume, but also to give meaning to the world, to make sense of the world around us. And the giving of meaning to the world around us, as an area of human action that involves both discourse and embodied praxis, is the province of a deep legitimated collective representation of that world, the *social imaginary*”² Moreover, “The giving of meaning to the world, the province of the imaginary, the realm of dreams and fantasies, is itself conceived as a material force...”³

As Staeheli, deFelippis and others have noted, however, “community” is a much used – and abused – term. Defilippis and Shragge point out that often it is romanticized into a nice cuddly space that rarely, if ever, exists in our modern world (and probably never existed in history).

The idea of urban communities as incubators for civic consciousness is also increasingly questioned. Ash Amin, for example, heartily bashes the city as “polluted, unhealthy, tiring, overwhelming, confusing, alienating.

¹ All three quotations are from the wisdom quotes website, 25 Nov.2008, http://www.wisdomquotes.com/cat_community.html.

² p. 41, T Wright, *Out of Place: Homeless Mobilizations, Subcities, and Contested Landscapes* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997).

³ Wright, *Out of Place: Homeless Mobilizations, Subcities, and Contested Landscapes*.

Politically too, the contemporary city bears little resemblance to imaginings of the times when urbanism stood for citizenship, the ideal republic, good government, civic behaviour and the ideal public sphere.”⁴

But when we refer to “community”, what are we really talking about? There are academic, socio-economic, developmental, scientific, ethnic, religious, place-bound, professional, activity-defined “communities”, depending on which of an individual’s multiple identities we choose to highlight and connect to similar aspects within the identities of others.

One of my favourite mistakes is typing “untie”, when what I really mean is “unite”. The two words are not poles, but a single point, deeply embedded in each other. We cannot unite without untying. These reflections then, based on the papers by John Paul Lederach and Jill Simone Gross, and the contributions from other participants in this workshop, are part of my efforts, as community leader and doctoral student, to untie/unite the concepts of community, health and resilience, grounding them in the experience of a specific community that I know well, Living City (*Ciudad Viva*), in Santiago, Chile.

Our work is deeply rooted in three specific, although in some ways open-ended, views of community. We live and work in urban communities located in a shared territory on the north side of Santiago’s Mapocho River, which combines market, extremely poor, middle- and upper-income residents, *comerciantes*, artists, intellectuals, trades people, recyclers, craftspeople, street people and professionals. From our perspective, the simplest explanation for what turns a group of people into a community is a shared narrative.

When, for whatever reason, we choose to work with others we start to grow a common *historia*, a word in Spanish that, in a simple, lovely way, means both history and story.

In our experience to date this means we essentially work with three kinds of communities. Everything else is networking and networks connect communities but cannot replace or be them. For us, creating community requires both building and nurturing a whole universe of planets and relationships that rotate around a sun of committed participants, usually referred to as “leaders”, although we believe good leadership also requires knowing how to take one’s place in the ranks and follow, when someone new steps up with something special to contribute.

The whole requires constant care and irrigation and for this purpose we have a dense weave of communications, ranging from the grapevine (*el correo de las brujas – the witches’ post*), through e-mail, blogging, telephones, websites and for awhile fax. Our periodical, *La Voz de La Chimba*, began as a huge poster pasted on our doors and the frames of market vendors’ stalls. Distributed free on streets, squares, and at bus stops to walkers and cyclists, last year its circulation reached 20,000, next year remains to be seen. Occasionally we have a good year in the mass media, but we don’t count on them to get our messages across. Throughout, face-to-face contact is the most important and we foster this through a rich round of meals, street fairs, assemblies and festivals and other events, whatever the human and financial resources allow at any given moment.

We are ten years old, or 40, or four hundred, depending on how you count it. And we came together as Living City through a fight against Santiago’s first major urban highway concession, in post-dictatorial Chile in the

⁴ p. 1011, Ash Amin, “The Good City,” *Urban Studies* 43.Nos 5/6 (2006).

1990s. Today, somewhat to our surprise, we have discovered that some very prestigious academics and even conservative media, such as *Que Pasa*, consider us the most important citizens' group in Chile.⁵

Our organization, Living City (*Ciudad Viva*) works within the following definitions of community:

- (1) **Territorial communities:** Living City itself is a good example of this. After forming a broad, 25-organization coalition against Santiago's first, major urban highway project, members of four separate, neighbouring "communities" created Living City in 2000. This instance therefore covers a specific territory, which leaders rebaptized "La Chimba", to express the unity of four of Santiago's most diverse neighbourhoods: the Bellavista arts neighbourhood, the market street/kiosk/store vendors of La Vega, the well-to-do neighbourhood of Pedro de Valdivia Norte, and low-income Independencia, with its residents, owners and renters and *allegados* (homeless people who live with relatives, usually in overcrowded and difficult conditions). This process required remapping,⁶ since this newly defined citizens' territory crossed different municipal jurisdictions. It also required redefining a historical place, to reclaim a name associated with marginality and deviance⁷ to represent this new place. Thus, Living City's new old territory is called "La Chimba" (the other side of the river, in Quechua, and a traditional name for a colonial territory roughly similar to the one covered here). Interestingly, this remapping/rewriting essentially returned to geographical features as well as social identities for its main definitions: La Chimba (2008) is bounded by the Mapocho river, across from Santiago's powerful, official city centre, to the south; the city's largest hill (Cerro San Cristobal) and the General Cemetery on the north, a twist in the river to the east; and the oldest highway, the *Panamericana*, to its west. Even with these apparently "natural" features of the landscape to define this territory, however, cultural identities closely tied to both traditional and modern economic activities are clearly the main defining boundaries. Organizationally speaking, territorial groups tend to be represented by heterogeneous neighbourhood associations, market vendors' associations, or other community-based

⁵ In a recent edition of the *Que Pasa* news magazine, Iván Poduje, a well-known academic and consultant to real estate developers says (my translation) "The movement against the Costanera Norte is a landmark in post-dictatorial citizen participation. Its success meant it was quickly imitated by other groups, some to be fashionable, others out of duty." The journalist goes on to say that "according to a study by Poduje, Living City is today the most important citizens' group in Chile." María José López, "Fuerza Ciudadana," *Qué Pasa* (2008). E-version, accessed 10 November 2008. María Elena Ducci, architect and urbanist from the Catholic University, followed Living City's career during the early years, reaching a similar conclusion..

⁶ Having to redefine borders led Living City to produce Santiago's first Green Map, a major participatory GIS Project that involved hundreds of people from all over the metropolitan region in identifying the city of today, as part of being able to define a route to the city of tomorrow that they would like to live in or bequeath to their children and grandchildren.

⁷ The 20 or so leaders of the different communities that formed Living City and rebaptized our territory as the Chimba had a lengthy discussion about whether we should use a name with so many negative connotations, of marginality and deviance. In the end, we reached a consensus that we wanted a name that expressed our history and spliced this new era into our past. We also agreed that we were all accustomed to different kinds of stigmatization and were willing to "rescue" this traditional name, much as movements for the social equality of Black people eventually rejected the euphemistic "Negro" and returned to colour, or the way "gay" people claimed this word as their own name. One interesting point here is that in post-dictatorial Chile even the upper middle class Pedro de Valdivia neighbourhood, which should have felt (and been) part of power structures, felt (and was) marginalized in very real ways.

instances whereas thematic communities tend to organize in non-governmental organizations, small groups of like-minded people, with a powerful, shared agenda.

- (2) **Thematic communities:** This is a looser concept and I will not go into it in great depth. In Chile, examples could include the interlinking community of human rights organizations, lawyers and others who fought to save lives during the military regime and have since sought to heal some of the damage and bring those responsible to trial. Another example would be environmental organizations, such as Codeff, Chile's oldest civil society organization, which brings and binds together individuals concerned with protecting the many spectacular and unique wilderness areas in Chile and the flora and fauna that characterize them. More traditionally, urban indigenous people, Peruvian immigrants (2000s) or other ethnic groups (Germans, French, Austrians, "Turks", etc. who immigrated to Chile in the late 19th and early 20th century) would fall into this category, although Chile's largest group of new immigrants, the Peruvians, tend to be both spread out around the city, and focused within a single territory, the central Plaza de Armas area, around Chile's main cathedral.
- (3) **Mixed thematic-territorial communities:** Originally I developed the idea of thematic communities based on Living City's work with different groups of cyclists, treating them as groups of people united by a common interest, much like environmentalists. However, I have recently realized that the street is actually a territory, so omnipresent that we risk not seeing it for what it is. While it might be hard to argue that car drivers fall into the category of a "community", it seems to me that this is a useful way of looking at cyclists, because they share a common, often oppositional and even hate-fear-love relationship with their highly contested territory, public streets, sidewalks and other thoroughfares.

Another decision we made as an organization founded by and to serve very diverse communities was that we would not focus on poverty, but rather on building equality. We see a poverty-centred approach as too limited an agenda that tends to stigmatize and ghettoize people with fewer economic or educational resources. Many of our market leaders barely completed high school, but have contributed as much as anyone else to our vision and our achievements. We consider them graduates of the university of life and value their learning as much as we appreciate our irreverent visual artists and poets, our musicians, neighbours, and academic friends.

In this sense, we share John Lederach's love and respect for language, what it tells us and what it says about us and those with whom we speak. To some degree we also share his observations on violence, disappearance, being disappeared, although in that sense post-dictatorial Chile has improved substantially. In contrast to ongoing violence and rights violations in Colombia, however, we have had the luxury of reaching across the abyss between dictator and opposition: Living City's founders include people who stood for, against and in between. We have found this essential to healing.

We have evolved from grievance to the “cultivation of hope”, in John’s sense, or as we put it, from being the “victims” of so-called urban progress, to “survivors” and finally to protagonists.⁸ In 2000, once the highway battle was dying down, we held a round of reflection and decided that we wanted to stay together. First, because we had come to love each other. Secondly, because the problems in our neighbourhoods were getting worse. Thirdly, because we realized how much we had learned from this experience and we didn’t want to let go of that hard-won knowledge.

We did place a condition on this though. Because we realized that when you fight a defensive battle, even if you win, you basically end up exactly where you started. So the condition was that we would not wait around for governments and other sundry authorities to become concerned or come up with good ideas for our sectors. Rather, we would stay together and make our own proposals.

And so we have, and while the difficulties and the struggle is never ending, we have some major achievements under our belts to keep us going.

Health

So, our agenda takes up sustainability from an urban communities’ perspective. Essentially we work for:

- 1) Urban transport for equality, which gives priority to safe walking and cycling, and first-rate public transit (yet to be achieved!).
- 2) Recycling to live better, which means we want environmental measures to include recyclers and not replace them with big business or other models imported from the north.
- 3) Heritage, both tangible and intangible, which we view as the city’s memory, intimately involved in identities. In this sense we consider our markets and street fairs the city’s most important heritage, to be protected and enabled and supported, and not eliminated by poorly conceived, elitist definitions of “modernization”.
- 4) Empowerment of citizens’ organizations, as the crucial, cross-cutting instrument for achieving sustainability, defined as social equality, in a greener, more energy efficient, friendlier, safer city.

So, we take up health from a very similar point as Jill, both from the perspective of not only “allowing” but ensuring that communities can operate as both “agenda setters and implementation partners.”⁹ And also in the sense of “healthy cities and healthy communities” that became so popular after the global conferences in Toronto (1985) and Ottawa (1986). In Chile, this perspective has been taken up by the national health ministry as part of a major campaign for health promotion, which is fostered through local clinics (*consultorios*) and other instances.

We have expressed this through several major campaigns and projects – one of them inspired by Bogota’s experience with Transmilenio, cycle paths and improvements to pedestrian and public spaces – and our constant

⁸ A progression originally developed as part of an analysis of Canadian literature, Margaret Atwood, Survival : A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature (Toronto: M & S, 2004).

⁹ p. 2, Jill Simone Gross, “Sustainability Versus Resilience What Is the Global Urban Future and Can We Plan for Change?,” What Makes for Healthy Communities? Comparative Urban Studies Project (CUSP) (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and The Fetzer Institute of Kalamazoo, Michigan, 2008).

work to place people and their needs at the centre of urban planning. This, of course, is an ongoing task, but it is interesting (and from our perspective rather surprising) to note that just ten years after the government was threatening to sue us to death for opposing its flagship highway project, today we are partnering with Interface for Cycling Expertise (I-CE, The Netherlands) to teach Chilean government officials at the local, regional and national level to build better cities, using participatory methods.

For us, then, “health” involves a series of concepts and very specific ideas about place, space and community. *The most important is that we believe communities must lead and not follow in governing their own territories, proclaiming their own interests and needs. This is the only way to create better cities and happier people.* This does not mean eliminating other levels of governance, particularly regional and national instances that are essential to redistributing power and resources. It does mean that there is a governance gap that local governments will never be able to fill and that is better handled through coordination and respect with strong, democratic nose-in-the-asphalt local organizations.

In practical terms, we have concluded that *citizen participation*, while a term that has served us well in our development, is a poor cousin to what’s really at stake here. This is *nothing less than the daily practice of democracy*. Citizen participation may be “expensive”, “time-consuming”, “conflict-ridden” and therefore “problematic”, but it is probably the most stringent test for genuine democracy. In that sense, neighbourhood organizations should be independently funded and elected representatives should sit, with full voice and vote, on all planning instances.

Moreover, certain issues should be defined by neighbourhood associations and not local government, among them, for example, the issuing of alcohol licenses. This may seem like a minor sort of issue but in fact, in neighbourhood after neighbourhood, from Santiago to Toronto, alcohol is a major destroyer not only of people’s lives and health, but also of the integrity and safety of city streets and public spaces.

No system is perfect and citizens’ organizations will no doubt make as many mistakes as any other kind, but people are mostly equipped to live with their own mistakes. It’s when they’re constantly the victim of others’ that life becomes impossible.

The second component of health from our perspective is very tangible: we believe cities need plentiful green space, and that includes not only parks but green roofs and walls, community gardens, narrowing roads and reducing speeds on all but major highways. Pedestrians, cyclists and buses should take priority, with rapid bus systems rewarding the more environmentally friendly travellers by letting us travel *on the surface and not underground in expensive subways*. Government resources for infrastructure should go to collective transport and improving the conditions of those who face the worst barriers travelling around the city. Many people have no access to the schools, museums, jobs, markets and other urban benefits because they have no reliable or inexpensive transport to reach them. Others spend three to four hours (or more) daily travelling to and from work, an exhausting way of life that steals precious time away from recreation, children, education, rest.

Improving urban transport then is crucial to equality. Moreover, it can substantially improve quality of life in relatively short periods of three to four years.

In terms of waste management, another crucial challenge to health in cities, we value the contribution of recyclers and believe their organizations should be supported and recognized for the tremendous service they afford our neighbourhoods. Using silent, clean transport (usually especially equipped tricycles) they gather up and recycle paper, metals, glass and other items that make up most of our “trash” (unlike cities in the developed world, where packaging has gone mad). In this sense, we believe that the city of the 21st century will need its fruit and vegetable, flower and other associated markets and street fairs even more than it did in the centuries that saw them born. Far from being eradicated to allow cars to flow more quickly along our streets or to build skyscrapers and malls in the key locations that they often hold, markets are precious places laden with a rich urban culture, memory and sociability, aside from the very practical services they afford at very low prices.

Fresh produce from markets favours local and regional producers and the small- and medium-scale businesses that provide by far the vast majority of jobs in our society. This builds health along economic as well as nutrition-related lines, keeping the production, distribution and consumption of food in networks that foster human dignity.

Resilience

John Paul Lederach’s concept of “resilience” rather than sustainability, as a quality that enables something “to survive extreme conditions yet retain its capacity to find a way back to expressing the defining quality of *being* and the essence of purpose,”¹⁰ is intriguing, as is Jill Simone Gross’ critique of “sustainability” as potentially meaning of something so “stable”¹¹ it allows little flexibility for change. Or creativity.

But from Living City’s perspective these are not the most important elements missing from *sustainability*. As defined by the 1987 Brundtland Commission report, sustainability focuses on the *what*, but it does not attend to the *how*. And we believe that issues of politics and power are crucial in redressing this. In 2005, with no knowledge of similar movements elsewhere in the world, Living City brought together an assembly of citizens’ groups in conflict all over Metropolitan Santiago. That assembly developed an Urban Rights charter, which in many ways echoes “right to the city” movements elsewhere around the world, at the same time as it responds to the specifics of our efforts in our own city.

The issue of rights and the redistribution of political power to ensure increasingly democratic governance systems – and societies – is central to our concept of empowerment and our aspirations for a better, greener, more sustainably just world.

Moreover, from our perspective, we in Living City see this as a modest but essential contribution that we in citizens’ movements must make, if we are to break the cycle of violent, deadly response to legitimate movements for empowerment and inclusion that have characterized our history practically since we became a country.

¹⁰ p. 10, John Paul Lederach, “Resiliency and Healthy Communities an Exploration of Image and Metaphor,” What Makes for Healthy Communities? Comparative Urban Studies Project (CUSP) (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and The Fetzer Institute of Kalamazoo, Michigan, 2008).

¹¹ p. 11, Gross, “Sustainability Versus Resilience What Is the Global Urban Future and Can We Plan for Change?.”

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