

**Learning Together As We Go: Cross-boundary collaboration to grow
local living economy in South East Queensland**

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Building Community Centred Economies*

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Abstract

An exciting, informal and collaborative network is emerging in South East Queensland around catalysing and supporting the emergence of Local Living Economy (LLE) in the region. The network, called the South East Queensland Local Living Economy Network (SEQLLE), crosses local government boundaries and involves a variety of community and business sectors by bringing together local councils, the tourism sector, small business, NGOs, social enterprises, educators, international alliances and indigenous people. This paper and presentation tells an unfolding and evolving story about the SEQLLE network:

- How the network is emerging through collaborative relationships, regional change and adversity
- The aims, purpose and aspirations of the network within the regional landscape and political and economic context of South East Queensland
- How the network is enabling and supporting LLE onground
- How the network is learning in and from action

An important philosophical base for this paper and presentation is the exploration and application of systems thinking and ‘solving for pattern’ (high leverage and multiplier solutions) in the context of LLE at a variety of levels of policy and practice.

Relationships and Patterns

Quite recently when in the midst of drafting this paper in early Autumn, Sally (from the not for profit organisation the Ethos Foundation (1)), looked at the full moon rising above her mountain home and formed some questions about relationship and alignment. She wondered:

If there is a full moon over South East Queensland Australia, then in the same 24 hour period is there also a full moon over every other region of the Earth? That is, do the phases of the moon align right around the world?

And if they do, then do the tides of every ocean of the world synchronise with these moon alignments?

And if this is the case, do the cycles of the women of the world link as they align with the phases of the moon and the oceanic tides?

A word or two about women. Women own about 50% of all “privately held companies of all types – from construction and science to health care and environment... Women-owned and managed businesses now employ over nineteen million people” (Henderson, p xxv, 2006).

The Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, one of the world’s most inspiring and profound models of microfinance, social enterprise and poverty eradication, has 6.67 million borrowers, 97 percent of whom are women. The women engaged with the Grameen Bank run businesses in sectors as diverse as processing and manufacturing, agriculture and forestry, livestock and fisheries, trading, services, peddling and shop keeping. The foundation of the bank’s extraordinarily successful repayment rate of 97 percent lies in its methodology of women working together in participatory loan collectives of five people which are connected to the Grameen’s local and regional centres which train, communicate with and monitor the collectives. It is a banking system based on “mutual trust, accountability, participation and creativity” that in 2007 supported family, household, community and material wealth and health to a combined savings level of US\$430.39 million (Grameen Bank, 2007, Annual Report Foreword).

E. F. Schumacher is one of the founding fathers of local, human-scale economy and is the author of the seminal book “Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered”. In a chapter discussing the notion of Buddhist economics, Schumacher observes that “the keynote of Buddhist economics...is simplicity and non-violence...the marvel of the Buddhist way of life is the utter rationality of its *pattern* – amazingly small means leading to extraordinarily satisfactory results” (Schumacher E.F. 1973, p 60-61).

These notions of alignment, relationship, simplicity and pattern within place-based, small-scale economies are central to our discussion. In today’s rapidly changing and challenging global times, human ecology – our social, economic and political patterns, systems and structures – are in dire need of re-cognition, re-framing and re-creation in ways that acknowledge the era of cheap, accessible and abundant fossil fuel energy is rapidly coming to an end, that small (business) is indeed powerful and beautiful, and that local economies can be vital and living systems particularly within a context of energy and climate transition.

Here in South East Queensland, Australia after a number of years of information gathering and exchange, learning, relationship building, small-scale community-based experiments, climatic adversity and local government restructuring (at times presenting people with political and relational adversity), a most interesting alliance of people from government, business, industry, Traditional Owners, communities and not for profit organisations is emerging, with the express intention to learn in and from action as we consciously begin to understand and implement Local Living Economy (LLE) in our region. We are calling this alliance the South East Queensland Local Living Economy network or SEQLLE.

By the way, Sally has learned that the phases of the moon do align in 24 hour periods right around the world. However, her astrologer friend Terry tells her that there are

different relationships at play between the monthly phases of the moon and the Earth's 24 hourly rotations between day and night, sunrise and sunset, and the gravitational relationship between the moon and the oceans' tides around the world, though there are of course interconnections and relationships at every level. It may be best not to say anything more about women but we will be exploring human and ecological relationships in more detail shortly...

What is Local Living Economy?

Over the past six months the South East Queensland Local Living Economy (SEQLLE) network has been creating a shared meaning for the term Local Living Economy. In early 2009, catalysed by Nick McGuire the Business Manager of Logan City Council's Logan Office of Economic Development, we collaboratively developed a rationale (5) about LLE for our network based largely on the principles of the Business Alliance for Local Living Economy (BALLE), an international business network that promotes and exemplifies LLE in business circles. Here's what the SEQLLE network agrees upon based on BALLE's LLE principles (6):

- Living Economy Communities - produce and exchange locally, while reaching out to other communities to trade in those products they cannot produce at home.
- Living Economy Public Policies – are policies that benefit and support local economies.
- Living Economy Consumers - buy from local businesses, and if necessary are willing to pay a price premium to secure those personal and community benefits.
- Living Economy Investors - value community businesses, and as such accept a "living return" rather than a maximum return.
- Living Economy Media – are sources of news that are independent of corporate control, allowing communities to make decisions that are in the best interest of their local environment/region.
- Living Economy Businesses - are primarily independent, locally owned and strive to:
 - Source products from businesses with similar values, with a preference for local procurement.
 - Provide employees with a healthy workplace and meaningful living-wage jobs.
 - Offer customers personal service and useful, safe, quality products.
 - Work with suppliers to establish a fair exchange.
 - Cooperate with other businesses in ways that balance their self-interest with their obligation to the community and future generations.
 - Use their business practices to support an inclusive and healthy community, and to protect our natural environment.
 - Yield a "living return" to owners and investors.

By working cooperatively, locally owned businesses and conscious consumers can create an alternative to corporate globalisation that brings power back to our communities by building sustainable local economies.

In addition to the existing BALLE principles the SEQLLE network agrees that for our local region and its particular government, community and business context that:

- A local economy is made up of many contributors and those businesses that do not meet the principles of a Local Living Economy can also make useful contributions to local areas.

Based on this the SEQ Local Living Economy concept is not about discouraging consumers from buying products and services from these businesses it is more about an education process so that consumers make better informed decisions about their purchasing choices.

In some cases it may well be that some of the businesses that don't meet the Local Living Economy principles can be part of the local distribution solution. For example, a hotel/restaurant owned by investors from outside the region may choose to sell and use local products because they recognise the advantages of doing this. Based on this activity they need not be excluded from being part of the LLE process.

- The SEQ Local Living Economy is not restricted to Local Government boundaries. This initiative presents the opportunity to establish strong partnerships between the suburban, urban, peri-urban and rural communities of SEQ.
- A geographical boundary can be applied to this initiative to define the SEQ area. Based on the '100 Mile' concept it is agreed that where possible this initiative will include all areas within 100 miles or 160 km's (160.934 to be exact !).

To put this into perspective (as the crow flies), and using Beaudesert as the centre, 100 kilometres (not miles) from Beaudesert goes all the way out to Toowoomba and Warwick in the west, well over the border into NSW, and up to Caboolture in the north. This takes in all the high quality growing regions and major urban areas in SEQ.

- The SEQLLE network will work wherever possible, with the international BALLE network. Strong linkages have already been established with BALLE through the Ethos Foundation, and we are looking to explore a more formal partnership with this network.
- The SEQLLE network is not opposing the globalised market economy but rather, is promoting the legitimacy of LLE within policy, business and community environments (5).

Developing an SEQLLE Rationale was the first task the network set itself. We felt that if we could arrive at a shared agreement and understanding about what LLE is for the SEQ

region and our own local communities, then we could begin to speak with a unified, aligned and coherent voice to our colleagues, networks and bosses about the validity of LLE in policy, political, business and community arenas. And we could invite others into the SEQLLE conversation and network.

Patterns Within Systems – Elegance in Action

There used to be an exhibit at the Queensland Science Museum called something like “From Tiny to Huge”. It was an amazing series of computer images that zoomed progressively into the most microscopic cellular activity in a leaf on a tree, then back out through the tree, to the park, to the house, to the suburb, to the town, to the region and so on until it became part of the vastness of the universe. It was a fabulous story about tiny to huge that humans could understand.

If we think for a moment about a forest ecosystem, we can see its functioning as an example of the tiny to huge story. Within the forest are many, many smaller systems reaching right down into the teeming, microscopic life of the soil and then way out into the forest ecosystem as a whole system. Beyond our forest ecosystem is a regional landscape and a whole water catchment, and beyond that are a series of larger systems and cycles such as the water cycle, the soil cycle, the flow of sunlight energy and beyond these is the cosmos of which the Earth is just a tiny, tiny part. All of these systems are nested within each other like an immense and living Russian doll. There are relationships between each system that enable efficient, indeed highly elegant and integrated functioning to occur. This is the way of the natural world of which humans are a part, indeed we are dependent upon it. Nature is all about organising for maximum abundance, efficiency, sustainability and resilience via symbiosis, synergy, pattern, relationship and collaboration.

Farmer, philosopher and poet Wendell Berry explores the relevance and application of this natural world effectiveness to human systems – particularly food and farming systems – in the concept he calls “solving for pattern” (6). Berry describes three types of problem solving that humans engage in. The first provides solutions that cause “a ramifying series of new problems” as when industrial scale agriculture is introduced into dairy farming and creates major disorder when industrial-scale effluent and disease are created and chemicals and drugs are required to ‘deal’ with such problems. The outbreak of swine flu in May this year, generated out of just such factory farms, is the most recent example of the horrifyingly close connections and cascading problems caused by such systems.

The second type of solution Berry discusses is that which immediately worsens the problem it is intended to solve such as when soil compaction on farms is addressed by using bigger tractors which further compact the soil, which requires bigger equipment and so on.

Berry’s third type of solution solves for pattern. He says:

“The real problem of food production occurs within a complex, mutually influential relationship of soil, plants, animals, and people. A real solution to that problem will therefore be ecologically, agriculturally and culturally healthful.

Perhaps it is not until health is set down as the aim that we come in sight of the third kind of solution: that which causes a ramifying series of solutions – as when meat animals are fed on the farm where the feed is raised, and where the feed is raised to be fed to the animals that are on the farm. Even so rudimentary a description implies a concern for pattern, for quality, which necessarily complicates the concern for production. The farmer has put plants and animals into a relationship of mutual dependence, and must perforce be concerned for balance or symmetry, a reciprocating connection in the pattern of the farm that is biological, not industrial, and that involves solutions to problems of fertility, soil husbandry, economics, sanitation – the whole complex of problems whose proper solutions add up to *health*: the health of the soil, of plants and animals, of farm and farmer, of farm family and farm community, all involved in the same interested, interlocking pattern – or pattern of patterns” (Berry, 1983, p756).

As the SEQLLE network advocates the value of LLE in our communities across the South East Queensland region, we think it is vital to explore LLE principles and practices as part of a process of regional solving for pattern. For example, the Scenic Rim Region which is west of Brisbane and the Gold Coast, has long been an agricultural stronghold in SEQ. In recent State Government regional planning processes and local government reform, the Scenic Rim Region has been identified as an area of significant natural landscape and valuable rural production. For a while yet at least, urban and suburban development in the Scenic Rim will be restricted and the region’s 10 or so villages and townships will be maintained within their bowl of farmland and forest landscape.

In this political and planning context, the Scenic Rim is well-placed to support a rapidly-emerging interest in sustainable, local food growing and production; sustainable nature-based and eco- tourism; sustainability research and education; and sustainable lifestyles in ways that connect closely with the interests and needs of the cities that border it such as the Gold Coast, Brisbane and Ipswich.

Can a region support and grow a network of living local economies based on sustainability in food, farming, tourism, research, education and lifestyle that protects and enhances the very assets that enable this potential – healthy soils, clean waterways and catchment, connected functional landscapes and healthy communities? We certainly hope so and that’s where SEQLLE is beginning to focus our attention. At the same time, we recognise the imperative to support this potential in ways that enable adaptation to changing weather patterns, climatic destabilisation and water insecurity as well as to create regional resilience in the face of oil and energy vulnerability. If we focus on integrated sustainability, solving for pattern, small-scale economies, decreasing fossil fuel energy reliance, smart design and cooperation we’ll be off to a great start.

The Tamborine Mountain community is already demonstrating its capacity to create a sustainable, local food economy through the success of a not for profit, community enterprise called The Green Shed. Seven years ago The Green Shed was established by the Tamborine Mountain Local Growers Association to help build up local smallholders' capacity in organic production for local consumption. In 2007-08 The Green Shed (8) was named Queensland's most successful small business food retailer. It has some 150 local growers under its umbrella, turns over more than \$200,000 per annum and is a collective supplier to Australia's largest community supported agriculture scheme in Brisbane – Food Connect (9). The Green Shed is a living example of a successful LLE enterprise that can be adopted or adapted throughout the region and indeed, Tamborine Mountain's neighbouring mountain Beechmont has already done so with its community food enterprise B-Fresh (10).

Emerging activities underway within the SEQ LLE Network

The SEQ LLE network sees the local or regional food economy as a high-leverage entry point to implementing LLE in SEQ. We recognise that there are many existing, regional, enterprise-based strengths in this area including Food Connect, The Green Shed, numerous farmers markets and Northey Street City Farm (11). Currently our interest is focused on identifying some of the emerging new initiatives driven by business and community and in the short to medium terms, mapping and connecting existing and emerging LLE activities and organisations, particularly within the sustainable food and farming arena.

100 Mile Diet

At our network's first meeting in December 2008, the SEQ LLE network gravitated towards food – literally and philosophically. We met at a café in Nerang and before long, our conversation moved towards the centrality of food in the LLE landscape, led by the enthusiasm of tourism operator Robyn Fortescue. As the Secretary of Scenic Rim Escapes (12) – one of the peak tourism industry associations in the Scenic Rim Region – Robyn had stumbled upon the “100 Mile Diet” a regional food project which originated in Canada. She decided that Scenic Rim Escapes (and indeed her own B&B business Wallaby Ridge Retreat (13) would spearhead a 100 Mile program onground amongst regional tourism and hospitality operators. By late February 2009, she had pitched the idea to a members meeting and received resounding support. By March, Robyn had taken on the development and implementation of the project for her own business and for Scenic Rim Escapes in a partnership with the Ethos Foundation and its Building Sustainable Small Business program. She rapidly developed a project plan and in the course of her business life is now beginning to roll out the project within her own business and across the Scenic Rim Region. Her efforts are watched with great interest by Tourism Queensland and the Scenic Rim Regional Council.

The project aims to have Scenic Rim tourism operators source, purchase and serve food, wine and produce from within a 100 mile (160km) radius of their premises and in this way help to showcase and commercially support local produce.

The first program within the SEQ LLE network leapt off the ground early, driven by Scenic Rim tourism operators. It arose from the grassroots and was based on commercial imperatives.

Creating the Beginnings of a Community Food Economy

Around the same time that Robyn and Scenic Rim Escapes began their 100 Mile Diet initiative, the Ethos Foundation's consulting service was engaged by a Scenic Rim housing developer to help create and implement a community enterprise and economic development project based on food and participatory community research and engagement – at the small township of Tamborine. With enthusiastic backing by the developer – Neville Volker of Riemore Downs – plus high interest from local government Councillors, the project “Growing Prosperity in the Tamborine Community” was conceived in March 2009. Its aim is to create a community enterprise hub, community food gardens and production facilities, a community recreation area and eco-friendly family resort that economically leverages the Tamborine economy for local residents and visitors alike, to help plug the considerable economic leakage in this village. Community gardens, local produce, local food, shops and commercial enterprise are all at the heart of this initiative as are cooperative relationships between business, community and not for profit organisations.

The SEQ LLE network had its second member project off the ground, driven by a commercial and community partnership.

Strategic and Policy Conversations

Logan Office of Economic Development Supports Innovation

Up the road from the Scenic Rim Region is Logan City, home to 261,000 residents, 63 suburbs, 2,056 kilometres of roads and a local economy worth about \$13.58 billion. The rail sector employs 22 percent of Logan residents and the manufacturing sector generates about 28 percent of Logan's income (14). Within the Logan Office of Economic Development are two Local Living Economy champions – Nick McGuire the Business Manager and his colleague Tony Chadwick. Together they catalysed the creation of the SEQLLE network and together they are putting LLE on the policy table at this large, urban local government.

In late April 2009, the Logan Office of Economic Development courtesy of Nick and Tony's leadership, launched the Innovation Café initiative at Logan – a regular gathering of local businesses to explore some of the large and local issues of our time. The project launch brought strategic foresight specialist Stephen Tighe to the café where he outlined some of the key driving forces for economic and social change, and innovation including natural limits to growth such as climate change and resource scarcity.

Logan's Innovation Café is continuing to bring local businesses together in the city in ways that enable purposeful conversation, exploration of social and economic drivers,

emerging trends, learning and the development of informed future perspectives. Its June 2009 Café is hosting LLE champion and co-founder of BALLE Michael Shuman and will focus on opportunities for Logan City to bring its local economy home.

The BALLE-Ethos Collaboration

In May 2008, the Ethos Foundation brought LLE pioneer Judy Wicks to Australia for a two-week speaking tour. Judy is founder, owner and operator of the White Dog Café in Philadelphia, a world-renowned example of a local living business as well as co-founder of BALLE (with Michael Shuman). Following a most successful and inspiring tour, Judy invited the Ethos Foundation to spearhead the development of an Australian BALLE hub. With the creation of the SEQLLE network later in 2008, Ethos saw that there was regional interest and support to move forward on building an Australian chapter in close collaboration with BALLE and in June 2009 will consolidate a number of collaborative processes to leverage the formation of the Australian hub.

The Ethos Foundation's involvement in the business arena is founded upon both its own operation as a not for profit enterprise (including a sustainability and community development consulting service) and its regional program "Building Sustainable Small Business" (BSSB) (15) which coordinates small business workshops, a mentoring and training program, a sustainable small business directory, and networking events. BSSB has been piloted in the Scenic Rim Region and Gold Coast City during 2008-09 with the assistance of a federal government AusIndustry grant and local government support.

Scenic Rim Regional Council Brings LLE to the Policy Table

The Scenic Rim is a local government area of 4,250 square kilometres with a population of 35,000 residents and 3,864 businesses, 93 percent of which have a turnover of less than \$1 million. It is located an hour's drive west of the Gold Coast (Australia's tourism capital) and is about the same distance south west of Queensland's capital city Brisbane. It is a region made up of World Heritage listed forests with some of the most biodiverse natural landscapes in Australia and the world. It contains many small rural villages and townships and has two main commercial centres – Beaudesert and Boonah. Its most commercially productive industry is agriculture (contributing 21 percent of industry GDP to the region) followed by retail (17 percent), construction (12 percent) and manufacturing (11 percent). Tourism, hospitality and home-based businesses are recognised as important emerging industry sectors for the region which also align with the region's increasing clean and green image (16).

At a small business workshop in March 2009, Scenic Rim Regional Council's Regional Development Manager Genevieve Windley (a member of the SEQ LLE network) overviewed Council's priorities in the area of economic development. Beautifully, thankfully Genevieve understands the principles of LLE and is actively integrating them into the region's economic development blueprint. For example, Council's Farm and Nature Tourism (FANT) initiative is designed to help develop the identity of the region through its natural landscape, produce and people in ways that also create authentic

experiences for visitors to the area. FANT aligns well with the tourism sector's own LLE initiatives, particularly within the 100 Mile Diet project. It is hoped this will be a great springboard to local economic development that pays attention to LLE.

Learning Together As We Go

It is crucial to make clear that the LLESEQ network is not initiating or driving any of these onground projects. These are the brainchildren of our network members who are following the heat in their own areas of influence, activity and expertise.

What is important about the network is that it is providing a means for people to keep in touch with each other – to let each other know about what they're up to and how things are going. The network is something of a communication container that is collecting and disseminating information in an informal, real life and people-friendly way. It is helping to grow relationships between policymakers, businesses, industry players and community-based enterprises.

It is also, in its articulation of the validity of LLE for the SEQ region through the LLE rationale and discussion of onground, commercial, community and policy-based projects, publicly legitimising LLE innovations. Project leaders are starting to see the value of their own work within the LLE framework, and 'outsiders' in the halls of power and business are also seeing this work in a new light – in a context of legitimate, small-is-beautiful, local economic development.

In this time of great challenge, uncertainty and vulnerability it is vital to remember that our civilisation's structures and systems of governance, economics, business and community have been constructed by humans. As such, they can be consciously dismantled by humans – the transformation of South Africa's system of apartheid into a more democratic form of government is one recent example.

As the great edifice of global, industrial capital begins to fracture and in places collapse, human beings have an opportunity to look to the natural systems around them and mimic, adapt and apply their patterns to our own systems and structures of civilisation. Relationships, patterns, alignment, cooperation, innovation, creativity, beauty, connectivity, integrated sustainability and localisation are all parts of nature's lessons for us. These things make up the "Law of the Land" as Yugambeh Elder Mary Graham describes it (17). It is crucial for us all to observe, borrow and apply these lessons from nature, to work with them and create businesses, economies, communities and governments that support life and health for all.

As the emerging SEQLLE initiatives seek the light of day, they are beginning to grow and thrive in the spaces becoming available to them as old economic development paradigms begin to shift. These local projects are beginning to demonstrate their viability and are encouraging others to discover LLE as a real opportunity for local businesses and regional economies. The emergent SEQLLE activities are living proof that there are alternatives to globalisation and that in the words of Michael Shuman, local ownership

and import substitution (LOIS) is a very real and viable alternative to globalisation (18). We don't actually have to fight globalisation we simply have to get on with what we do well and are built for – local business at a human scale. We simply need to come home. As Bill McKibben, author of “Deep Economy” so poignantly says:

“We want and deserve the delight that comes with working communities. Wandering into a cavernous Wal-Mart is a desolate experience. Cheap, but cheap in every way. Wandering through a town where you depend on the people around you, and they depend on you – that's called living. Humans were built for it...” (McKibben, 2007).

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