



New Zealand  
**R**esilience  
**T**rust

# Building Resilient Communities

## Part 1: Defining Resilience



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# Defining Resilience

## Building Resilient Communities

Building Resilient Communities: Defining Resilience was written by Jarrod Coburn with input from members of the North Wellington Resilience Trust and various others.

This is the first publication in a series that examines ways of helping communities in Aotearoa New Zealand become stronger.

The North Wellington Resilience Trust is a pilot project initiated and supported by the New Zealand Resilience Trust (NZRT). Should this pilot prove successful, the Trust will work with communities and external agents to develop similar projects around Aotearoa/New Zealand.

*He kino te tokomaha ki te kainga a kai, tēnā kia tū  
ki te mahi ka aha hoki? <sup>1</sup>*

# Defining Resilience



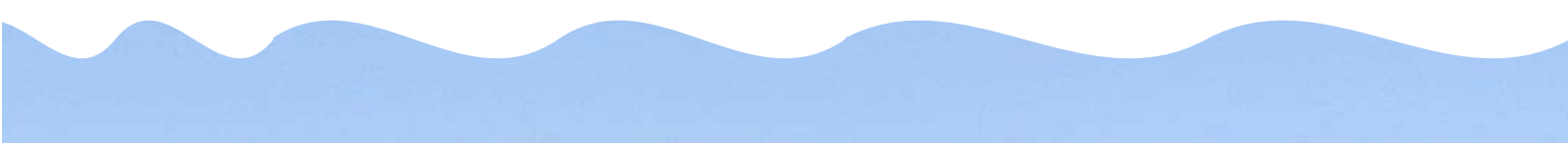
## The Journey Is The Destination

Imagine six people who have met for the first time. It is important (for whatever reason) that these six people get to know, **trust**, and **respect**, each other. To achieve this outcome we send them on a journey together. They will start out at one side of a metaphorical woodland and travel through to the other side.

We could send them off with the hope that on the way they will form a bond through overcoming adversity and celebrating achievements. But there remains a danger that they will fight, form cliques, or simply refuse to co-operate.

To make absolutely sure they have the best chance possible to succeed we send a Guide along with them: a background entity that gives encouragement and advice from time to time. The Guide anticipates the problems ahead and clears the path, or at least highlights any hazards. It talks to the other woodland inhabitants and paves the way for the six to achieve their goal safely. The result is the six people achieve their goal and feel **confident** working with each other in future – come what may.

This, metaphorically, is the approach the New Zealand Resilience Trust applies to building resilience among communities.



# Defining Resilience

## Community Resilience Comes From Within

What is “resilience”? It is the property of an object that allows it to return to its original shape if it has been deformed. It represents a ‘memory’ of an original state of being. It is the ability to return to what is normal.

What is “community”? Community is a grouping together of similar objects. In a human sense, community can be represented as a geographic area, shared interest, or common experience, whether that be individually or organisationally. People are often members of multiple communities, but there is often no compulsion to be active within them. One of the key issues facing us today is that many individuals demand the right to receive a service, but few accept the responsibility to provide such a service. In other words, most communities have a few ‘doers’ and a number of ‘hangers-on’.

Geographic area: The street you live in; Your suburb.

Shared interest: Rugby club; Scouts or Guides; Freemasons

Common experience: Seniors; Parents; People with a disability

## Bouncing Back From Adversity

We choose to define community resilience as the ability of that group of people to ‘bounce-back’ from an adverse experience.

In this context an *adverse experience* might be:

- A group of young children killed on a pedestrian crossing
- A large local employer closing down
- A spate of teen suicides
- Major earthquake or other disaster
- A place of worship burns down
- The loss of a major service (such as the only bank)
- Serial arson in the area

“Resilience is a subject which has long intrigued me because resilience gives us the strength and the flexibility to deal with the kind of changes we now confront. Massive changes affecting a world that's beset with growing inequality between rich and poor, with wars and terrorism, and with destruction of our environment.”

**Anne Deveson**

## Where Do You Find Resilience?

Resilience is an *emergent property*. In other words:

1. there are things that create it; and,
2. there are situations that call for it; and,
3. it is the outcome of an *environment*; but,
4. it cannot be isolated or measured *before an adverse event*.

Think of the human voice. We know that it is created by the lungs, vocal cords, mouth, and tongue... we certainly know there are situations that call for it... and the voice is an outcome of the *environment* we live in (we can't effectively talk underwater, for example).

But you can't operate on a human and remove the voice: it doesn't ‘exist’... it is an *emergent property*.

## Making Nothing Out Of Something

It is nigh impossible to ‘create’ resilience. Resilience is a combination of many things: beliefs; behaviours; and environments. For resilience to exist there must be the right environment, plus there must be the tools in place to help create it, the behaviours have to be right, and all of this has to work in synchronicity.

So if we can't create resilience we must create an environment where resilience can develop. To do this we must recognise the things that can contribute toward required beliefs, behaviours, and environment: called Attributes of Resilience.

# Defining Resilience

## What Are Attributes Of Resilience?

Look at the following suggestions and see if you can identify how they contribute to a resilient community. They are highlighted in green later in this document, so as you read on you can see where they might be achieved:

- **strong and clear communication between many groups**
- **a feeling of safety and security**
- **respect for one-another, and for one's environment**
- **neighbours trusting neighbours**
- **no petty crime, and no tolerance of petty crime**
- **a large degree of self-awareness**
- **self-reliance; a willingness to develop and draw-on resources within the community**
- **confidence**
- **the ability to react rationally to adversity (orderly, no panic, no hysterics)**
- **pride and a sense of place**
- **active participants in democracy**
- **a well-understood common vision**

These attributes don't define resilience: they *contribute* to its development.

## Use What You Have

In the Greater Newlands Area (for example) there already exist a number of assets that, if utilised and guided well, will create Attributes of Resilience. These include:

- Schools
- Churches
- Volunteer fire brigade
- Businesses
- Service groups
- Community college
- Sub-communities (e.g. ethnic communities)
- Early childhood education centres
- Civil defence
- Youth groups
- Neighbourhood support
- Community patrol
- Residents' groups

## Agents Of Change?

Outside of the community there are agencies that have the potential to either help or harm the development of resilience. These agents – when working in a co-ordinated manner with the mandate of the community – can have a positive impact on developing Attributes of Resilience, because they can affect the community's environment. Some of these External Agents include:

- Local Councils
- Regional Councils
- Police
- Politicians
- District Health Boards
- Other Government agencies
- Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

# Defining Resilience

## Cure The Disease, Not The Symptom

It is important to remind the reader that resilience is a state of 'being' – such as good health is a state of 'being'. And just like our health, if we do not continuously look after our communities they can become sick.

In many cases External Agencies enter into a community to 'heal' or 'fix' a problem. Once the problem is 'fixed' the funding, resources, promotion, etc., are withdrawn; often to be used to fix another problem for another community. This is akin to a doctor prescribing life-giving drugs to a patient that suppress the illness but don't cure it: the patient is fine so long as they take the drug. As soon as they stop they develop serious problems again. In other words the solution must be one that is *ongoing* and *sustainable*.

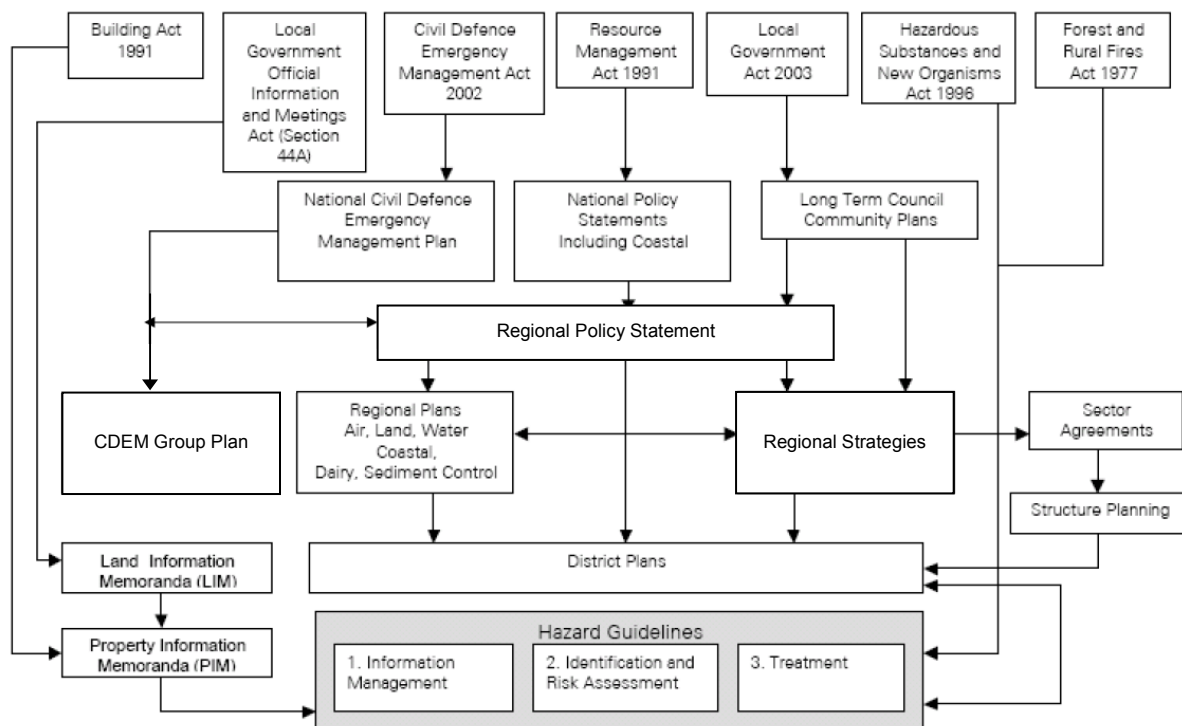
To ensure that the solution is not removed or altered by an External Agency it is important that the community develops and controls the solution itself. Otherwise funding cuts, politics, or a change in staff will damage the attributes that contribute to resiliency.

**Self-reliance** and sustainability are *conditions* that a community requires to become – and remain – resilient.

## An Example Of Corporatisation And Loss Of Community Control

In many cases good tools and the resources needed to achieve Attributes of Resilience exist. Yet sometimes the attributes do not appear. Why? The reason is the environment does not involve the community. Consider this visual interpretation of the inputs into of Civil Defence as an example.<sup>2</sup>

Relationships between Key Legislation and the Hazard Guidelines



Hazard Guidelines

Hazard Guideline No. 3 – Risk Treatment Options for Hazards

This shocking diagram shows complex relationships that are all top-down with very little option for input from communities. If the concept of Civil Defence is an *individual* responsibility, why should individuals be expected to understand and negotiate such a complex path? How do people become active participants and make a difference for their community? Without understanding the process shown above people can never truly have input into the solution. What has happened to Civil Defence – as with many other areas of public good – is what is described as “Corporatisation”: First responsibility is taken away from citizens and then control follows close behind.

# Defining Resilience

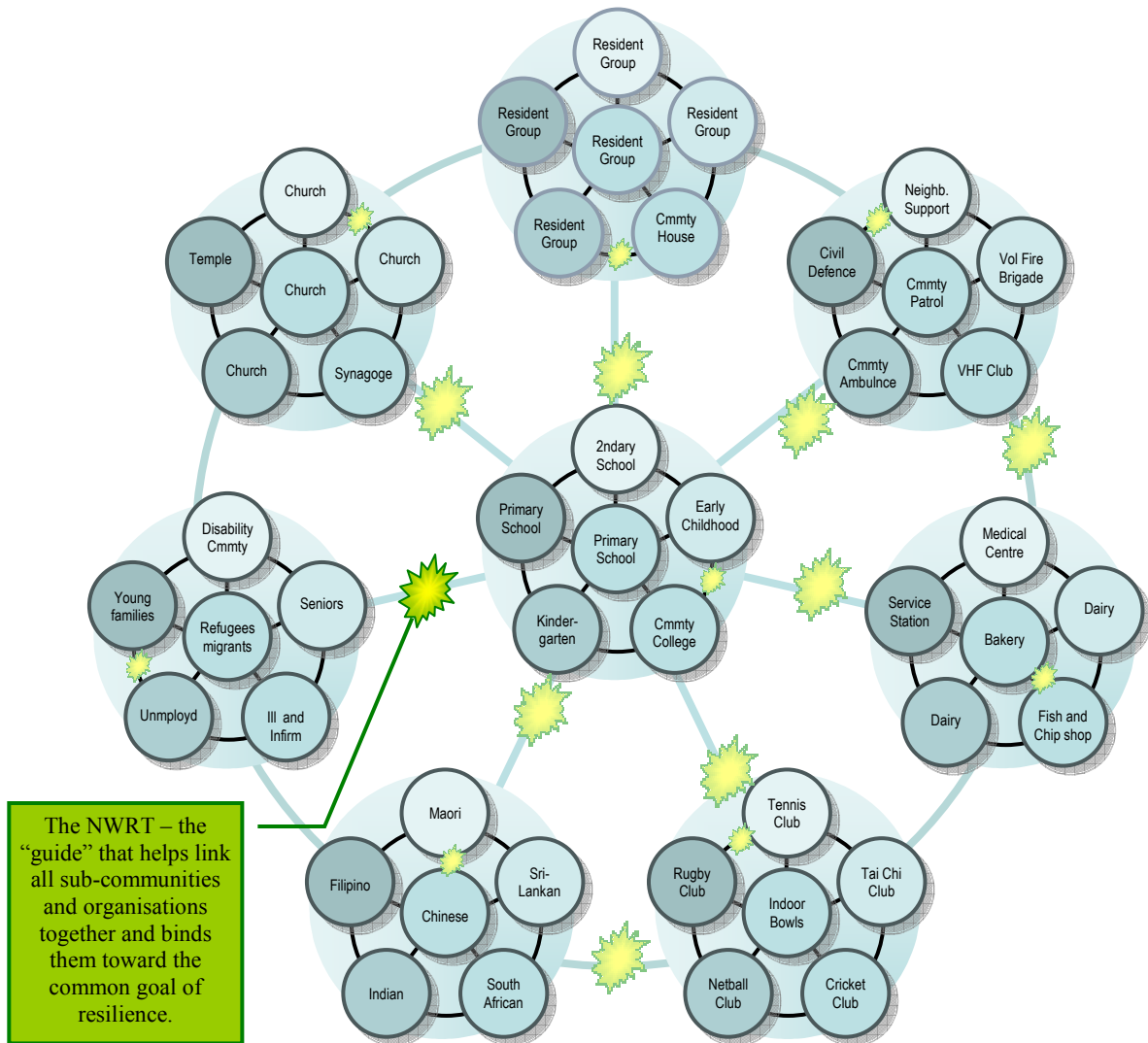
## Work The Way Communities Work

It has already been stated that the North Wellington Resilience Trust (NWRT) aims to provide co-ordination, with the goal of encouraging the community at large to develop and own the tools it needs to achieve Attributes of Resilience.

It is important that the individuals of the community feel they have achieved these goals themselves; without any outside help. This contributes to **confidence**.

It is equally important that there is a **common vision** along with a high degree of **communication** amongst the sub-communities and organisations in the area.

This concept can be presented visually, thus:



# Defining Resilience

## Things Important Enough To Repeat

A community can be an area, or a group (of people or organisations) who share something in common. Belonging to a community is not optional: all people can be attributed to multiple communities whether they like it or not. However, *participation* in a community takes a conscious effort and is often voluntary.

Resilience is something not easily identified prior to an adverse event. It is an emergent property and as such cannot be isolated or created directly. It is made up of elements, or Attributes of Resilience. These attributes can be isolated and created, and it is argued that through this it is possible to increase the resiliency of a community.

“All of this impossibility of having two ideas at the same time, you wouldn't have thought that is too complicated, we are not cows, after all. Two ideas at the same time that we could debate as if both had some merit.”

**John Ralston Saul**

Attributes of Resilience within communities include activities and actions that involve humanistic – versus realistic – properties (such as common sense, ethics, intuition, creativity, and memory). Examples include activities that promote helping one another, communicating across social boundaries, a sense of place, and having confidence to take ownership.

Often times External Agencies enter into a community to help and end up making matters worse. However these agents can be powerful forces for good, so long as they co-operate and communicate with citizens, and allow communities to take ownership if they so desire.

Thus, an organisation that spans the country would be ineffective at developing resilience. This activity must be undertaken and owned from within a community, and with the mandate of its sub-communities. This not only addresses issues of trust and apathy toward External Agencies, it also puts the onus firmly upon the community itself to take responsibility and ownership for its future.

“The passivity that runs through our society today, the furious passivity that one feels in our society today, is, in effect, the result of [a] division into ... structures which make it very difficult for this highly sophisticated and educated society to be active, for the citizen to be active without being punished.”

**John Ralston Saul**

# Defining Resilience

## An Exciting Future Lies Ahead

The future is an exciting place, and great changes across the globe are afoot. There is anecdotal evidence that individuals are starting to become more aware and reactionary, demanding much more from governments, businesses, and institutions.

In this country the opportunity exists to inspire people to retake responsibility for their lives. The NZRT intends to be an agent of change, consulting with communities across Aotearoa/New Zealand and assisting them to set up their own Resilience Trusts.

These 'micro-trusts' will eventually form the basis of a network stretching the length and breadth of the country, self managing and self directed with support from the national body.

As the micro-trusts grow they will take on increasingly higher levels of responsibility. First, the low hanging fruit of Neighbourhood Support groups, Community Patrols, Response Teams, and Civil Defence. Then, undertaking research in their area and identifying needs. Providing adult education courses through community colleges. Developing services (such as the community ambulance service in Newlands). The micro-trusts will have all the control and may decide to do as much or as little as the community requires.

The outcome will be a network of highly-focussed community owned organisations, dedicated only to improving outcomes for their community, totally free of interference from External Agencies (but able to work with them), and self-funding.

The impact on communities will be a greater level of citizen involvement in democracy, community affairs, crime prevention, education, and business. A national intelligence network that can be accessed by academics for quality research. A new vision for the country that is generated by- and for- the citizenry, as it should be.

## Some Things We Read That Inspired Parts Of This Document

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Deverson, A., (2004) *Resilience*, from Occasional address from the graduation ceremony at the Bathurst Campus: Australia. [www.csu.edu.au/division/marketing/graduation/2004/bathdeveson.htm](http://www.csu.edu.au/division/marketing/graduation/2004/bathdeveson.htm)

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Ralston Saul, J., (1992) *Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason*, USA: Vintage Books.

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## Two Important Notes

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<sup>1</sup> "It is inconvenient to feed many mouths, but turn mouths into hands what then?" from Te Ohore and Kaa W. (Eds), (1997) *Nga kōrero a Reweti Kohere Mā*, New Zealand: Victoria University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Daly, M., (2007) *Resilience – Awareness to Actions* New Zealand: Presentation to the Civil Defence Minister's Forum, September 2007, p14.