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Turning to Community in Times of Crisis: Globally Derived Insights on Local Community Formation

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Turning to community in times of crisis: globally derived insights on local community formation

**Glen Kuecker, Martin Mulligan*
and Yaso Nadarajah**

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Introduction

An extraordinary community gathering held in an Australian rural/regional centre in June 2008 brought together scholars and activists from several parts of the world who share a conviction that a 'turn' to community is essential in the face of gathering global crises. Indeed, it seemed a little surreal to be sitting in a rather breezy, overgrown art studio with an array of farmers, 'greenies', community leaders, health workers, writers and artists from the district centred on Hamilton, Victoria (population 10,000) to listen to a presentation by internationally renowned conservationist Carlos Zorrilla about how a resolute community in the high country of Andean Ecuador had managed to block construction by transnational mining companies of an open-cut mine in their biologically rich cloud forests. Listening in were two professors from the University of Madras in southern India, two more from Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University in Melbourne and an associate professor from DePauw University, IN, USA.

Of course, all these people did not meet at the Second International Food and Thought *Mela*[1] in Hamilton by accident because paths had already crossed elsewhere in the world, in places stretching from Ecuador to Papua New Guinea, Sri Lanka and India. The two *Melas* held in Hamilton (in 2006 and 2008) have been the product of a process of engagement between local community activists and academic researchers from RMIT University in Melbourne, and this process is

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1 The term *mela* is taken from an ancient Sanskrit word for a festival in which people come together to share food and conversation.

described in a paper by Mulligan and Nadarajah (2008). This process has
been influenced by a model of community engagement developed in the
'community action plan' research that Professor Thangavelu Vasantha
Kumaran has been conducting with a wide range of local communities
in southern India over a much longer period (Vasantha Kumaran, Bala
and David, 2004). Yaso Nadarajah and Glen Kuecker met at a conference
on sustainability held by Professor Vasantha Kumaran at University of
Madras in 2006 and discovered a shared interest in working with and
within local communities that are feeling the full impact of globalization,
in its many manifestations. Kuecker who deploys what he calls an 'aca-
demic activist' pedagogy (Kuecker, forthcoming) brought into play
Carlos Zorrilla and his community in northern Ecuador, where Kuecker
maintains a human rights observation team. Therefore, conversations
about community action that were begun in different places across the
globe were brought into focus in a community gathering in Hamilton,
with an emphasis on the 'turn' to community in the face of growing
global crises and uncertainties.

The participants in this converging conversation acknowledge that the
very idea of community is hotly contested in western academic literature
(see Shaw, 2007). In 2005, for example, Martin Mowbray bemoaned the **Q4**
rise of a 'new communitarianism' and reiterated a critique he had
made with Lois Bryson as early as 1981 of the ways in which commu-
nity is evoked to depoliticize social problems and mask the need for
'wholehearted socio-economic reform' (Mowbray, 2005, p. 264).
However, this critique of the way that the state has co-opted the dis-
course on community development to justify cuts in government ser-
vices and responsibilities does not allow for the way that community
is frequently evoked to challenge neoliberal cost-cutting agendas. To
cope with this paradox, a number of writers (for example, Mayo 1998;
Shaw 2007) have suggested that two opposing conceptions of commu-
nity—essentially top-down and bottom-up—result in very different 'poli-
tics, policies and practices' (Mayo, 1998, p. 48). This distinction is made
to justify a community development practice that focuses on 'the world
as it could be' rather than 'the world as it is' (Shaw, 2007, p. 34).
However, it does nothing to *explain* why the term community can be
used in such contrasting ways and this bipolar conception of community
does not help to explain why the aspiration for community has such an
enduring appeal. For this, we need to return to Gerard Delanty's concise
yet masterly review of the literature on community (Delanty, 2003)
which does not seem to get the attention it deserves from those who
continue to write about the paradoxes of community development. By
going back to the time of the ancient Greeks, Delanty has argued that

85   a concept of community has always had 'persuasive power' because it
'exerts itself as a powerful idea of belonging in every age' (Delanty,
2003, p. 11). In this paper, we aim to demonstrate that Delanty's norma-
tive conception of community helps to allay fears over contested mean-
ings of community and, indeed, his review of the literature helps to
90   explain why a 'turn' to community is inevitable in times of crisis and
uncertainty.

This paper is based on the view (discussed below) that a crisis of unsus-
tainability will bite more deeply in the global north in the years ahead and
that more people living in the global north will come to understand that we
95   have much to learn about resilience and adaptability from people living in
the global south than we have previously thought. It is a stretch to suggest
that the English word 'community' can be used to capture a sense of
belonging in very different cultural contexts across the global north and
south. However, if the term is used to refer to an unquenchable desire for
100   a secure sense of belonging in a changing world, then it can clearly have
a currency that transcends cultural boundaries. In this sense, the struggle
to create community can operate at all levels from the local to the national
to the transnational and this gives it much more useful flexibility than a
word such as 'neighbourhood'. We need common language to compare
105   diverse human experiences, and it is our aim here to look at the ways in
which the aspiration for community can play out in diverse settings
across the global north and south. The need to compare such experiences
has been given greater urgency by the understanding that we are facing
multiple yet interlocking crises that are truly global in scale yet local in
110   their impacts.

This paper begins by examining a study conducted in Australia on the
creation of community in four diverse local settings. That study gave rise
to a way of thinking about community formation in the contemporary
world that is outlined below. The paper then goes on to explore the rel-
115   evance of this conception of community in very different local settings in
Malaysia and Ecuador, where authors Nadarajah and Kuecker have
carried out extensive research. While the focus on Australia has been on
making local communities more visible, it is interesting to note that it has
been impossible to segregate community formation at local and national
120   levels in Malaysia and the most remote community, in the mountains of
Ecuador, has integrated itself most directly into global debates about sus-
tainable development. This highlights the importance of having a con-
ception of community formation that works at all levels of social
integration, from the local to the global, and the case studies in Malaysia
125   and Ecuador provide a stern test of the conception of community that
arose from the Australian study.

Dimensions of the global crisis

We use the term global crisis to refer to several separate but interlocking crises facing all of humanity. Obviously, climate change presents an immense threat to the human condition, and it requires an immediate response in order to mitigate its most serious consequences (McKibben, 1989; Kunstler, 2005; Brown, 2006; Homer-Dixon, 2006; Monbiot, 2007). Cal- **Q4** culations suggesting that the fast approaching 'peak oil' production clearly presents the challenge of altering the fuel base for transportation, industry and heating, but they also point to the need to substitute petrochemicals at the core of modern manufacturing. This means contending with deep changes in the agricultural system because our method of feeding 6.7 billion people is petroleum dependent (Kunstler, 2005; Roberts, 2005; Brown, 2006; Homer-Dixon, 2006). We have already seen how substituting bio-fuels for petroleum can actually exacerbate the global food crisis, which is, of course, also linked to the problem of climate change. At the same time, we also face multiple ecological crises, especially those caused by extensive resource extraction in remote and delicate ecological zones; places that provide earth with its most basic elements of life (Assadourian, 2006). The growing need for raw materials is partly driven by unprecedented demographic shifts, especially projected growth of the global population from 6.7 to 9 or 9.5 billion people by 2050. Adding 2 billion people will continue the process of hyper-urbanization in the global south and will increase resource pressures and stress to the food system (Davis 2006; Homer-Dixon, 2006). Furthermore, the impact of such demographic transitions will be felt most in the global south where the resources needed for coping with new pressures are limited.

While the global south contends with population growth, the north faces declining populations and this has serious economic implications for nations in the north and for the global economy. The continued AIDS epidemic and the resurgence of once contained diseases—such as malaria and tuberculosis–may merge with a highly probable flu pandemics in presenting humanity with overwhelming public health challenges (Garrett, 2005; Osterholm, 2005). Economic stresses within the global capitalist system are at a level not seen since the Great Depression and this triggered the global financial crisis that began unfolding in October 2008. Even economists are using terms like 'meltdown' to describe the onset of global recession and doubts have been raised about the capacity of capitalism to sustain itself, let alone address the emerging inter-linked crises mentioned above. Huge sums of money are being used to bail out banks and other financial institutions and to stimulate flagging consumption in the hope that unsustainable economic systems will eventually fix themselves. This is diverting

attention and resources from the urgent need to radically change the ways in which we address human needs globally without exacerbating the impacts of climate change.

Of course, humanity has faced profound crises in the past—including global wars and the Great Depression—but what is so daunting about our current situation is that multiple crises are unfolding with great speed and on an unprecedented scale. For nearly a decade, some scholars have been warning that we face catastrophic systemic collapse (Korten, 1999; Meadows, Meadows and Randers, 2004; Brown, 2007; McKibben, 2007). Others agree that we are already in a state of global collapse, but they see some light at the end of the dark tunnel (Kunstler 2005; Homer-Dixon, 2006; Kuecker, 2007). Regardless of the terminology we might use, the authors of this paper agree that business as usual is certainly not an option and that profound changes will be required to avoid future catastrophes. Provided that 'community' is understood as a dynamic process of formation and constant reformation, we agree that it can be a source of strength in times of crisis because it enhances capacity for resistance and adaptation. Properly understood, 'community' can be seen as a key driver of the systemic resilience required to avoid catastrophic collapse.

Our conceptual starting point

Two of the authors—Mulligan and Nadarajah—were involved in a major study of community wellbeing across four diverse local communities in Australia in the period 2003–2006, which resulted in a research report titled *Creating Community* (Mulligan *et al.*, 2006). This report found that as local communities have become more directly exposed to the unsettling processes of globalization there has been an increasing desire to find a more secure sense of belonging. There has also been a growing recognition on the part of government agencies and health and welfare agencies in Australia that globalization can create new forms of social isolation and that there needs to be an emphasis on social inclusion to avoid new divisions and new social tensions that can have a mix of local and global origins. In conditions of great flux and uncertainty, static or romanticized conceptions of community identity can create or exacerbate divisions in local communities that have become more socially and cultural diverse as a result of increased intranational and international migration. In such circumstances, top-down approaches to social inclusion can actually make things worse.

The *Creating Community* report argued that it is critical to think of community as a constant process of formation and reformation in response to ever-changing local and global conditions. At its best, community

formation at a local level can involve an attempt to weave together individual and collective narratives that can create an inclusive sense of identity and belonging. As well as drawing on the work of sociologists such as Bauman (2001) and Sennett (2006), the *Creating Community* report drew on the work of human geographer Massey (1999) who has stressed that shared space creates a common in which very complex local communities must negotiate an inclusive sense of belonging if they are to avoid tension and conflict. Of course, this is not easy work and it frequently fails when interest groups promote divisive, reactionary or parochial conceptions of local identity. What Massey is pointing to is the possibility of a 'politics of space' in which people try to turn 'coexisting multiplicity' into a strength rather than a weakness (Massey, 1999).

In looking at a range of experiences of community across the global north and south, our starting point, then, is that community must be seen as a dynamic process of constant formation in which good outcomes cannot be guaranteed. We suggest that this should be combined with a focus on inclusiveness as a necessary orientation to avoid unnecessary division. However, the possibilities for inclusion need to be contextualized and negotiated rather than imposed from above because it is not always possible to reach agreement on issues related to identity and not all differences need to be resolved. The ultimate test of inclusiveness might be the capacity of a particular conception of community to mobilize people to defend what they hold in common. However, this can still result in division and conflict, or a refusal to grapple with the profound challenges now confronting the global community. Therefore, it is important to ensure that conceptions of community identity can be contested from the perspective of broader discourses on sustainability. It is here that Jeffrey Alexander's conception of the 'civil sphere' is useful (Alexander, 2006) because it is interested in ways of making 'solidarity' or 'feelings for others' a stronger and more overt social norm. Alexander suggests that after so many years of relying on free market economics to order social relationships we have much work to do in 'civil repair' in order to change the prevailing norms.

The findings of the *Creating Community* report coincide with much of what Gerard Delanty concluded from his review of western literature on community (Delanty, 2003). As already suggested, Delanty's book comes as a useful antidote to the sterile debates in western sociology in which the notion of community is often counterposed to a broader, and supposedly more modern, conception of society. The two terms should be seen as ontologically distinct and community should not be historicized because, as Delanty points out in his opening chapter, a concept of community 'exerts itself as a powerful idea of belonging in every age' (Delanty, 2003, p. 11). According to Delanty, the 'ambivalence' that lies at the 'heart

of the idea of community' is that it refers to both 'locality and particular-
ness' and also to a sense of a 'universal community in which all human
beings participate' (Delanty, 2003, p. 12). He goes on to argue that the 'per-
sistence' of this dual notion of community through the ages 'consists in its
ability to communicate ways of belonging' and that this is becoming
increasingly important 'in the context of an increasingly insecure world'
(Delanty, 2003, p. 187). This repositions community as being constructed
by communicative practices rather than by social structures or cultural
values and Delanty thinks of community as being 'an open-ended system
of communication about belonging' (p. 187). It is useful to see community
as a normative concept, Delanty argues, because it 'offers people what
neither society nor the state can offer, namely a sense of belonging in an
insecure world' (p. 192).

Because community has such evocative power, it is not surprising that
state instrumentalities try to regulate or contain it in some ways so that it
might become a tool of social management rather than something that is
almost inherently unpredictable. However, if it is seen as an open-ended
process for capturing a sense of belonging in a changing world, then
expressions of community can always be contested. This is what gives com-
munity a kind of perennial subversive capacity that appeals to those on the
left or right of politics who want to transform prevailing social practices or
institutions. Of course, some expressions of community will have a greater
power to mobilize a greater number of people than other expressions, and
this allows for a less managerial way of thinking about social inclusion.
However, Delanty's dynamic conception of community—which coincides
with the conception outlined in the *Creating Community* report—means
that an enduring sense of community must be constantly refreshed or revi-
talized as circumstances change and the challenges mount.

However, there is still a problem in working with the word community
because it is used so widely and loosely that it has come to have a 'high
level of use but a low level of meaning' (Walmsley, 2006, p. 5). For this
reason, the *Creating Community* report suggested a typology of coexisting
forms of community. There have, of course, been many ways of naming
types of community that extend from local neighbourhoods to global inter-
est groups (and other kinds of 'virtual' community). The following typol-
ogy seeks to distinguish some different ways in which community can
form at a local level with the possibility to extend beyond the local. These
forms are:

- *Grounded communities* in which the sharing of place and the possibi-
  lities of face-to-face relationships are the factors around which a
  sense of community can be forged. This kind of community is

295 bound to place, although people who move away from such com-
munities might carry with them an ongoing sense of belonging to
their 'home community'.
- *Way-of-life communities* which emphasize particular norms for 'right
living' and, of course, these can extend beyond the local; and
300 - *Projected communities* which are seen as forming within creative
spaces that are established to encourage expressions of community.

Of these three forms, way-of-life communities are probably the easiest to
identify because they actively promote the norms that give community
305 members their sense of belonging. In contrast, grounded communities
have to negotiate a sense of belonging to shared space and writers such
as Bauman (2001) and Massey (1999) have argued that such local commu-
nities tend to be more complex and multicultural than at any other time
in human history. Geographers are interested in place-based communities
310 because it is at the level of the local that people most directly confront
their relationships with the non-human world, even if our environmental
impacts are much more widely dispersed, and so negotiations over the
sharing of space are likely to raise questions of ecological sustainability as
well as social sustainability. However, even if negotiations over the
315 sharing of space result in peaceful coexistence the norms for this kind of
community formation are likely to remain implicit rather than become
explicit. This is why a focus on projected communities can help to make
conceptions of community more explicit and, as the name also suggests,
local conceptions of projected community can be linked to non-local con-
320 ceptions and discourses. If a projection of community can help it to
become more self-conscious, it seems reasonable to assume that this form
of community might also be more resilient, provided it has attended to con-
cerns related to inclusion and relevance.
If we combine a dynamic and normative conception of community with
325 this typology of community forms, then we might be able to draw a useful
distinction between mobilization and community, in that the negotiation
and articulation of what is held in common for the creation of a shared
sense of community needs to be more extensive and linked to complex
questions of identity and belonging in a fluid world. New or renewed con-
330 ceptions of community might *begin* as a reaction or resistance to some kind
of threat but resilience is added through a successful negotiation of the
norms that can hold the community together, even in times of crisis.
Within any community there will be fault lines—old divisions related to
things such as class, ethnicity, or tradition—and these are likely to open
335 up under pressure. A truly resilient community might anticipate this and
look to create norms that might transcend such divisions; norms that are

linked into global discourses on diversity, social justice and peaceful coex-
istence. A perception of crisis can, of course, focus the mind on difficult
tasks and in this paper we argue that anxiety about the uncertainties
facing people living in the global north will sharpen into such a perception
of crisis. In these circumstances, it will become even more important to find
the common ground in the search for resilient communities in the global
north and south.

Creating community in Australia

A team of seven researchers was involved in the aforementioned study of
community wellbeing across four very different local communities in Vic-
toria, Australia (Mulligan *et al*. 2006). As mentioned earlier, this study
reached similar conclusions to Delanty (2003) about the search for commu-
nity in the contemporary world. More than Delanty, the *Creating Community*
report emphasized the art involved in giving expression to community in a
changing world and in focusing on the role of community arts it focused on
the ways in which projected communities can be used to mobilize complex
grounded communities. It noted that projected communities which demon-
strate a capacity to mobilize local sentiment are likely to be based on a selec-
tive celebration of local narratives; as seen in the way that the popular rural
townships of Daylesford and Hepburn Springs have been able to celebrate
in a variety of ways the contribution of 'Swiss-Italian' migrants who helped
to found these towns in the nineteenth century while more difficult narra-
tives regarding the indigenous people, Chinese market-gardeners and even
the loggers who had worked the local forests until recent times have been
neglected. Nevertheless, the vibrant community arts sector that had been
nurtured in Daylesford and Hepburn Springs since the late 1970s created
wide interest in the ways in which diverse local stories – past and
present – might be woven together to create a dynamic sense of local iden-
tity. The interest in diverse local stories helped this community to cope with
the phasing out of logging in the surrounding 'state forest' because people
who had made a living from the timber industry could see other possibili-
ties for their children and grandchildren. The cultural vitality of the twin
towns has attracted urban 'refugees' and this, in turn, has increased the
local cost of living, putting new stress on people with low incomes. In
other words, one kind of 'success' can create new social divisions and exclu-
sions and this highlights the fact that the creation of inclusive communities
can never be completed.

Whereas Delanty ended his book by suggesting that place is *probably*
important because the 'revival of community is undoubtedly related to
the crisis of belonging in relation to place', the *Creating Community* report

found that people–place relationships are at the heart of many projects aimed at creating a more inclusive sense of community identity. For example, in the outer-urban neighbourhood centred on Melbourne's Broadmeadows – where a third of all residents were born outside Australia – an annual 'Multicultural Planting Festival' attracted enthusiastic participation from a wide range of 'ethnic communities' because it gave them the opportunity to participate in work aimed at restoring degraded local ecosystems while, at the same time, celebrating a sense of belonging to a community which has a high level of cultural diversity. There are clear manifestations of Massey's 'politics of space' in Broadmeadows.

While the study looked at a range of specific projects that had achieved some success in reaching out to socially isolated sectors of the local community, it also found that community celebrations – ranging from funded festivals to more organically organized gatherings – played an important role in reminding people that the community is there if and when it is needed. In countries like Australia people are more likely to turn to their local community at particular times in their lives – for example, when they have small children or if they experience prolonged periods of unemployment – and our survey of people attending celebratory gatherings suggested that such participants wanted to 'avow' the existence of a community that might otherwise be hard to detect. The study also identified occasions when community came to the fore at times of crisis. For example, an inter-faith committee was formed in Broadmeadows when anti-Muslim sentiment erupted in the wake of September 11 and the subsequent bombing of tourist resorts in Bali. As a result, Christian leaders made a point of attending mosques and events held by the Muslim community and the local newspaper was flooded with letters asserting the need to practice cultural tolerance. A very large Eid Festival, held in Broadmeadows at the end of the month of Ramadan, was thrown open for non-Muslim participation and an Anti-Racism Action Band (A.R.A.B.) – which was formed in Broadmeadows to enable young people to expose racism with humour and non-western cultural performance – quickly found itself in demand right across Melbourne. Similarly, at a time when many farmers in the Hamilton region were struggling with low market prices for their products, a very creative community ball to raise money for the local hospital managed to raise a staggering $A269,000. As Mowbray (2005) pointed out, an avowal of community does not address the 'structural' causes of underlying social problems. However, the study found that it can reduce social isolation; foster the creation of mutual help networks; and enable conversations about issues that could otherwise provoke local tension and conflict. When 'space' is opened up for contestable expressions of community, it is also

open for more public dialogues about the things that can unite and divide local communities.

Of course, the research in the four diverse local communities across Victoria took place before public discussion about the impacts of climate change had really taken off in Australia and before the crisis of the global financial system had begun to unfold in October 2008. The general anxiety about being exposed to high levels of uncertainty as a result of globalization, which underpins much of the discussion in the *Creating Community* report, is sharpening into a more focused concern about how to prepare for very challenging times that lie ahead. The engagement of Globalism Research Centre researchers with the community centred on Hamilton extends beyond the study that resulted in the *Creating Community* report and the Community Reference Group that we work with in this area nominated the local impacts of climate change as a research priority at the end of 2006. The resulting Climate Change Adaptation project has involved a scenario mapping exercise and the development of a range of plausible yet challenging future stories to engage a broader spectrum of the Hamilton region community in thinking about the challenges ahead. In this context, discussion about how to create inclusive and resilient communities is taking on a more urgent tone.

Dislocation, resilience and resistance in Malaysia

When Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed announced, in 2001, that Malaysia is an 'Islamic state', it caused a public uproar and many commentators now say that it began a stealthy weakening of the secular and pluralistic character of Malaysia as a nation. Of course, there had been earlier echoes of this sentiment; indeed with hindsight we can say that the 1969 'racial riots' marked the beginning of an incremental shift in the way that 'ethnicity' plays out in Malaysian politics. The period between 1969 and the federal elections in 1979 saw the consolidation of National Front governments under Datuk Tun Razak and later under Datuk Hussein Onn and significant amendments to the constitution (Datar, 1983; Hua, 1983). This was the period when the seeds of ethno-nationalist identity and ideology were being sown and as the 'communal' political system became more dominant, the Indian community, and particularly the Tamils who were originally introduced as labourers on rubber plantations, began to find themselves at the periphery of political processes. Indeed, many have argued that the ethnic composition of Malaya (now Malaysia) was manoeuvred in order to prevent the emergence of class-based solidarities (see Jomo, 1986; **Q4** Stenson, 1980; Hua, 1983; Willford, 2006).

However, the national elections of March 2008 presented a real surprise. The loss of 5 out of 13 state governments by the ruling coalition and the election of 82 opposition candidates to the national parliament represented a break from the closed, racialized politics that had prevailed hitherto. It is ironic that a significant trigger for this historic political shift was a series of protests organized by a new collective called HINDRAF (the Hindu Rights Action Force) operating within the marginalized Indian community. Such protests were not only an overt show of discontent with the ruling coalition, but they also mobilized the sentiments of many others who also had felt marginalized ever since the enactment of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971. The NEP may have enriched the Malay middle class and stabilized the rule of the Malay elite; however, it also fuelled the growth of opposition political parties (Scott 1985; Brown 1994).   **Q4**

In a country where civil disobedience and protest is dealt with harshly under the provisions of the Internal Security Act (which allows for imprisonment without trial for up to 2 years), the HINDRAF-led mobilizations were a show of bravery and unexpected agency. They were made more powerful by the involvement of professionals, such as lawyers who were campaigning for citizenship rights for some excluded lower-income Malaysian residents. This meant the mobilizations cut across old class barriers. Indeed, a significant impetus for the mobilizations that shook the nation came from the disenchantment of Indian residents who had lived in squatter communities in an around Kuala Lumpur before being forcibly relocated into 'modern' high-rise blocks. By coincidence, the author Nadarajah had begun a study of the squatter community along Old Klang Road in Petaling Jaya – part of a rapidly growing satellite city of Selangor – in June 2005, before their old dwellings were demolished, and this study provides insight into the impetus for the mobilization activities.

The study began in an area of around 12 interacting villages that were crisscrossed by little streets and lanes. It was not always easy to know when the boundaries of one village finished and another began. Places of interaction and community gatherings were usually centred on little coffee shops and corners of lanes. When the research began, Nadarajah and her colleagues in the Globalism Research Centre at RMIT University were interested in finding out how these people would react to being relocated as a result of plans made by the Malaysian government and urban authorities for the development of the Kuala Lumpur/Petaling Jaya corridor. This appealed as a study in the way that local communities might respond to processes of global economic integration but because the people living in the squatter villages were primarily the descendants of Indian labourers brought across to Malaysia by the British to work in the

505   rubber plantations it was also clearly a study in the political and social
integration of an ethnic minority.

Initial findings of the study suggested that people facing great
uncertainty – as in relocation into a very different way of living – were
likely to increase their participation in religious festivals and cultural
510   associations. This was certainly the case for the lower-income groups, but
the study also noticed an increase in volunteering by middle-income
Tamils to help lower-income Tamils. However, once people had moved
into the high-rise units, interviews and focus group discussions began to
suggest that the emphasis has shifted from requests for services and infra-
515   structure to questions of entitlement and citizenship rights. At the same
time, HINDRAF began to distribute material about the rights of second-
and third-generation Tamils living in Malaysia and this material found its
way into the households in the study area. While old caste divisions are
still at play, particularly in regard to the conduct of religious rituals and cul-
520   tural activities, they did not stand in the way of political mobilization.
Tamils were united by a strong sense of purpose and it is interesting to
note that in the March 2008 elections, the ruling coalition suffered its great-
est losses in the area covering the study site, with two key ministers losing
their seats to opposition candidates.

525   For some commentators, the emergence of HINDRAF has highlighted the
slow erosion of what many had taken for granted – i.e. the plural nature of
Malaysian society – and it pointed to a growing divide between the rich
and poor. However, as HINDRAF-led mobilizations began to win the
support of moderate Muslims and non-Muslims fearful of an extension of
530   Islamic 'Shariah' law into their private lives discussion turned to recovering
Malaysia's secular constitution. By early 2007, the Malaysian Bar Council
and a coalition of 14 non-government organizations were calling for the
reaffirmation of the original constitution as a way of reaffirming a plural
society and a non-theocratic state. Of course, struggles over the political
535   future of Malaysia have a long way to go, and the strength of the ruling
elite should not be underestimated. HINDRAF has been declared an
illegal organization and a group of lawyers who supported the campaign
for citizenship rights have been imprisoned under the Internal Security
Act. However, the story is not following the script that Prime Minister
540   Mahathir Mohammed and his successors had prepared and this is largely
because marginalized communities continue to refuse to give up their
struggle for identity and belonging.

Clearly, HINDRAF is a political movement, not a community. However, it
gathered strength when it gave the relocated squatter community the
545   opportunity to vent its anger at the latest attempt to force them to
abandon their cultural heritage and communal identity. The resistance

movement created a new sense of Tamil community identity that extended from the local to the national and cut across class divisions. It projected the nation as a community that values plurality and tolerance. This, in turn, encouraged the members of the relocated squatter community to assert their identity as a Tamil community at the local level even though they had been dispersed into a wider population. However, the struggle to rebuild and sustain a sense of community at the grounded level, dispersed as they are into the broader community of high-rise dwellers, will be very difficult, with the focus shifting from neighbourhood solidarity to participation in religious and cultural activities. If a political movement such as HINDRAF loses its base in grounded communities, it may fragment along class and even caste lines and lose the political potency it showed in the 2008 elections. It is more powerful when it intersects with, and nurtures, community formation.

A victory for community in northern Ecuador

Tucked away in the pristine cloud forests of Ecuador's northern Andean mountains, the community of Junín, with fewer than 40 families, has defeated two transnational mining companies that had planned to build a large-scale, open-pit copper mine within community lands. The Junín community that mobilized to stop the mine endured the violence of paramilitary attacks, animosity from some within the community who support mining, and the hardships of sustaining resistance for nearly 15 years. As Kuecker (2008) has shown that Junín's twice-won victory was due to the strength of community, a force that proved more powerful than neoliberal transnational capital. However, that said, we need to look more closely at what made this particular community resilient enough to win such a remarkable victory.

The key to understanding Junín's resilience is in seeing how it developed remarkably strong components of each of the three forms of community – grounded, way-of-life and projected. First, people living in this community are grounded, because they have long occupied a marginal position within Ecuador, and when this is combined with the experience of being *colonos* (land squatters) we can begin to understand the historical roots of their sense of belonging that is defined by a culture of autonomy linked to the places in which they live. Secondly, a struggle that began as a defence of agrarian life morphed into an environmental struggle to preserve a precious and endangered ecosystem. This change projected an agrarian community struggle into a transnational environmental social movement. Thirdly, *campesino* (peasant) way-of-life merged with the marginalizing experience of being *colonos* to foster strong familial and communal bonds that were

defined by mutual dependence and reciprocity. Furthermore, the Junín community won because the Ecuadorian government and its financial backers underestimated the community's tenacity and sense of purpose.

The challenge that confronted the people of Junín is all too familiar to those who have followed developments in the global south in recent decades. In response to series of economic crises during the 1990s, the Ecuadorian government turned to the International Monetary Fund and World Bank for help and, in doing so, it had to accept the recipe for economic 'restructuring' advocated by those global agencies. This included drastically reducing funds for state programs with the consequence that state initiatives to alleviate rural poverty were curtailed. According to the neoliberal economic development strategy, small and isolated rural communities, such as the one at Junín, were expected to compete in the global agricultural market and if they failed in that arena they simply became irrelevant. In the void left by the state, people in Junín had to provide for themselves. They were well equipped for this task, because that is what they had always done. Most of them are second-generation rural squatters who came from other parts of Ecuador in search of land and the security it can provide. They carved space for their community out of the dense forests, with no external assistance, and this imbued them with a fiercely independent consciousness. In the rough and tumble world of the *colonos*, the people of Junín took control of decision-making processes that would directly affect their living conditions, and they became attentive to detrimental changes.

Campesinos, in places like Junín, are accustomed to working their own land under their own direction. They are able to sustain food security through their own labour but they have very limited opportunities for selling surplus production in local or regional markets. According to the neoliberal mantra regarding economic development, they are trapped in poverty but they themselves set a high priority on food security and this involves fiercely protecting their access to the land that can provide them with that security. The community of Junín is grounded in that its members stand ready to fiercely ward off any perceived threat to their food security. The idea that this struggle to defend an agrarian way-of-life can also be projected as an environmental campaign to defend threatened forests came from outside actors, including a liberation theologist priest and representatives of national and international NGOs. However, the community was very quick to add this discourse into their own rationale for resistance and with it, the isolated *campesinos* struggling to protect their own agrarian based autonomy emerged as international environmental heroes. They were certainly helped in this campaign by the self-educated expert in cloud forest ecology, Carlos Zorrilla, who settled in the area after travelling across Latin America. They were also helped by the

human rights monitoring program established in the United States and
Canada by Glen Kuecker. However, the battle could not have been won
unless the Junin community forged and projected a unified sense of
purpose.

It certainly seems surprising that a community of just 40 families could
win what seemed to be a very uneven battle. However, the scale of the com-
munity was also a strength because they all knew each other so well – in
their human strengths and weaknesses – and had strong bonds of
mutual dependence and reciprocity. Many households are, of course,
linked by family ties and in their *campesino* culture this creates a network
of obligations and expectations. Beyond this, the long and difficult task of
building a settlement in a remote, high-altitude location led to the use of
a system of rotational labour, called the *minga*, in which each community
member is called up to provide community service when it is needed. Reci-
procity is the key because those who give service will receive support at
other times and this is an important kind of insurance in an economy of
scarcity. Bonds of mutual dependency have a cultural articulation in
Junín in that there is a strong code of honour to value the 'word' of each
person. To keep one's word also means fulfilling community obligations.
In conditions of relative poverty, the keeping of one's word is the foun-
dation for a social-cultural system that also keeps each community
member grounded. Faced with new external threats, the community had
strong traditions to call on in resisting disruptive 'development'.

Conclusions

The case studies of community formation in countries as diverse as Austra-
lia, Malaysia and Ecuador suggest that there is something universal and
unsurprising about a 'turn' to community at times of crisis. As Delanty
put it (2003, p. 192), this is because community 'offers people what
neither the state nor society can offer, namely a sense of belonging in an
insecure world'. Of course, the 'compression' of space and time that
results from the accelerating process of globlization means that for many
people – especially those living in the 'global north' – there is no automatic
sense of belonging to a local community in the 'modern' world. However,
the study conducted across four diverse local communities in Australia
suggested that constant attempts are being made to give expression to the
identity of local communities because the desire for a secure sense of
belonging has not diminished, particularly for those have reason to fear
the uncertainties of a globalizing world. Of course, it is very difficult to
give expression to the essential identity of very complex local communities
and any attempt to do so will be open to contestation. However, this process

of articulation and contestation can greatly enrich the sometimes sterile notion of social inclusion. In conditions of great uncertainty, successful
675   community formation can be seen as a creative process that aims to mobilize an inclusive sense of belonging and we can be sure that the intersecting global crises discussed earlier will make this work even more important in the global north. We predict that the creation of inclusive communities will become more a necessity than a luxury in the global north.

680   The Malaysian case study shows that communal resistance to imposed change can morph into a mobilization against attempts to impose narrow concepts of national identity on a complex, pluralistic society and this can, in turn, destabilize an established national order. This demonstrated how community formation at a local level can reverberate at the national
685   level and back again and it shows that claims about identity and inclusion reflect an ongoing process of community formation from the local to the national level. In 2008 the contest over national identity played out through democratic processes but if marginalized communities continue to feel excluded by the nation then we may well see a return to the 'race
690   riots' of 1969. In Ecuador, the outcome seems to be a victory for the local community over transnational corporations but, of course, there can be no guarantee that a similar threat may not re-emerge in the future. The Junin community was able to draw on a long tradition of resilience, but it also succeeded because it managed to project itself into the centre of a
695   global struggle to prevent further degradation of the global biosphere. Here we see the interpenetration of the local and the global in an overt form and the interesting thing is that one global context – a global market for a particular resource – threatened the maintenance of community in Junín while another global context – the movement to protect
700   endangered ecosystems – made it even stronger. Once again, however, the struggle to assert community is never finished.

As the intersecting global crises bite more deeply, the search for community in countries of the global north is likely to become more urgent and, in these conditions, it will become more apparent that people living in the
705   global north have much to learn from people living in the global south about building and maintaining resilient communities. It will become more apparent that the search for community is a universal one. On the basis of our three case studies, we conclude that it is useful to use the English word 'community' to describe struggles for identity and belonging
710   in a very uncertain world even if it is very difficult to translate the word into languages such as Tamil. Furthermore, the conceptual framework we outlined has helped us to make some meaningful comparisons between very diverse local experiences. A richer understanding of how community formation can operate at all levels from the local to the global can enrich the

715   global dialogue on how humanity might deal with the profound challenges
that lie ahead.

Funding

Q5

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