

Roots and Shoots

*the application of permaculture principles
to the development of a community organisation committed to permaculture*

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11 December 2013 – Revised 4 April 2014

Introduction

In the spring of 2009, about six months after completing a permaculture design certificate, I dreamt up an idea for a community currency project. This currency is not yet realised itself, but it served as the seed idea for an organisation that eventually became RECAP: the Society for the Resilience and Engagement of the Community of Ashhurst and Pohangina Inc. In February 2010, RECAP formed as a group of interested persons. In July, RECAP incorporated. I served as founding chairperson until June 2013.

My work as Chairperson of RECAP is the basis for this paper. This paper reflects my experience, but also my indebtedness to my many collaborators in RECAP, from whom I have learnt so much. In this, I discuss the applicability of standard permaculture principles to the development of community organisations.

1. Balance Roots and Shoots

The injunction to balance roots and shoots may not be a canonical permaculture principle, but it is nonetheless the superordinate principle in this paper. In reality, it is a special case of working with patterns derived from nature, using plant development as a pattern for healthy organisational development.

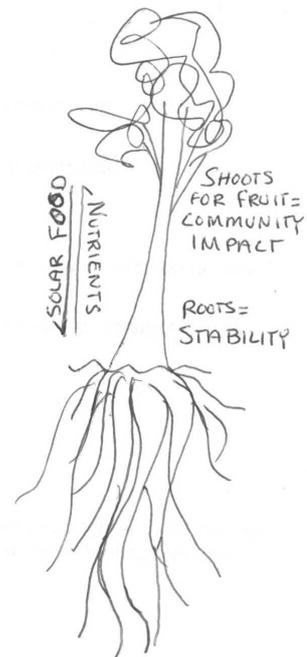
My reliance on this pattern was cultivated in me almost two decades ago. At that time, I lived in an intentional community whose members often cautioned each other: “roots before shoots.” Did we have enough volunteers and funding to expand our services? Did we have sufficient stored organisational resources to sustain growth?

We know that a seed roots before it puts out shoots. Similarly, it takes a bit of seeding energy to get an organisation going. At minimum, people need to be gathered to a common cause. Then they need to put down roots—a bit of commitment, a bit of trust in one another.

Once a plant roots, it will usually balance root and shoot development. One provides stability; the other carries the fruiting part of the plant. Organisations would do well to be equally balanced. An organisation's fruit is the realisation of its purposes—its community impact, the yield of projects that have seen the light of day—its visible shoots. Sometimes this fruit gets all the emphasis, but it's also important to keep growing organisational stability.

In nature, plant roots and shoots don't just have complementary functions. They're also designed to feed one another. Nutrients flow upwards; stored solar energy flows downwards. In the intentional community where I lived, our “roots before shoots” concern was that we'd get out of balance by offering more social services than we could sustain. Often, though, organisations face an opposing concern. Will those activities that increase organisational stability—such as keeping books and minutes, writing grants, working out policies, communication (meetings!)—take needed energy away from “real” projects? This question is worth asking, however, too much worry about caring for an organisation is a bit like begrudging roots the energy they take from the visible part of a plant.

The solution is to consciously design organisational activities so that roots will feed shoots and shoots will feed roots. This is my superordinate organisational principle—my guiding pattern derived from nature—and it implicitly informs the rest of this discussion and the whole of the way I apply permaculture principles to organisational settings.



Consciously design organisational activities so that roots feed shoots and shoots, roots.

Designing Organisational Culture and Structure

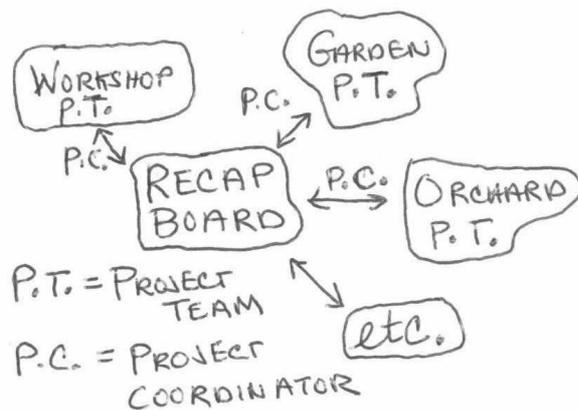
2. Design from Patterns to Details

When it comes to building an organisation, there's no need to re-invent the wheel. Follow established patterns, then adapt details to suit.

Example: RECAP borrowed the constitutions of similar organisations as guidelines for drafting its own set of rules. You can download the rules of any registered New Zealand charity from the online Charities Register. CommunityNet Aotearoa also has lots of useful online resources.

Example: A small organisation can be run entirely by its board, but as an organisation increases in size, it faces new challenges. What organisational patterns make it easiest to scale upwards?

The figure below shows an organisational pattern that RECAP “invented” in response to its growth. Only then did we discover that other organisations had long histories of working with this pattern. Organisations within the 1980s Main Street movement, for example, often include a number of volunteer-run project committees, with a staff person who attends all meetings, takes minutes, and reports back to the Board of Directors. In the *Transition Handbook* (2008), Rob Hopkins recommends that Steering Committees be composed of (at least) one active member from each project group. This pattern allows for communication and the flow of helpful resources.



In RECAP, some, but not all, of our Project Coordinators are on our board. In all cases, the board delegates certain responsibilities to the Project Coordinator or to a Project Team chaired by the Coordinator. Our guidelines call for monthly reporting from the Coordinator to the board to maintain open communication, mutual practical support, and cooperation.

3. Design with Zones

One of the challenges faced by organisations is to balance streamlined action with good governance—to balance appropriate member autonomy with collective decision-making. How can people work as a collaborative collective while honouring each other's unique strengths, without getting bogged down in endless meetings? To answer this question in practical terms requires a clear sense of what is suited to each action an organisation takes, plus a willingness to “place” each type of action within a set of organisational “zones” with different guidelines.

Example: Delegation depends on understanding the importance, priority, and frequency with which decisions need to be made. In RECAP, we have decided that our board—our “zone 1”—must be involved in all financial risk decisions, all decisions that have a bearing on the purposes of particular projects, all matters of policy, and all contracts. We delegate a large number of logistic and operational decisions to Project Coordinators, so long as those decisions stay true to project purposes. We may delegate purchasing decisions within a set budget.

4. Apply Self-regulation and Accept Feedback

Applying self-regulation is essential to learning; accepting feedback is a critical way of developing the humility necessary to work well in social contexts.

Example: Participant evaluations (for example, workshop evaluations) can reinforce strengths and identify where an organisation could use more resources.

Example: In my youth, a mentor told me that discernment isn't just about what an individual thinks it's right to do, it's also about finding out when a community will respond with a 'yes'.

When I first thought to develop a community currency project, my idea felt inspired to me. However, before committing to the project, I decided to check whether there was a community that would say 'yes' to it. What I found is that my carpool partner, Harvey Jones, immediately joined me as a full project partner. Next, my husband, Phil Stevens, shared his enthusiasm. Soon two not-for-profit organisations had signed onto the initial project grant, then Palmerston North City Council gave us the grant. Next RECAP formed as a new group of people keen on increasing community resilience. Each of these 'yes' responses confirmed my intuitive impulse to run the project.

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Example: The board of an organisation serves as an excellent regulation device. Ideally, board members should be diverse, independent thinkers who are prepared both to listen with open hearts and to share their thoughts in an open discussion, even when their views seem to go against the grain of the group.

5. Use and Value Diversity

Any time you want a variety of behaviours and yields, you need to cultivate diversity. In the case of organisations, this means human diversity. Don't look only for people with diverse skills to fulfil diverse functions; look also for people with diverse personalities, ages, cultural backgrounds, and genders.

Example: There came a time when I thought that RECAP members needed to do something social, within the context of our purposes, but without the ever-present emphasis on outcomes. Something relaxing. Something fun. At an Australasian Permaculture Hui, I mentioned this to a friend, lamenting: "We need to do something social, but I just can't catalyse social." I turned from that conversation to a chat with RECAP member Linda Shannon, who told me: "I just watched the greatest movie by Bill Mollison! I want to share it with everyone in Ashhurst! I know, we'll host pizza and movie nights at our house." Linda and her husband, Tom, hosted a couple different pizza and movie nights that winter, bringing a new type of participant into the RECAP mix, and developing a new way of being together.

6. Use and Value the Marginal (Part 1)

The centre and the margin is a matter of perspective. With respect to humans, the only thing that makes a person marginal is a failure of community. If people enter into / are brought into relationship, they cease to be marginal.

Example: In our society, people without paid employment are often considered marginal. Yet people without jobs, families, etc. are what sociologists call "the structurally available", and they can be crucial parts of an organisation's backbone.

Example: One of the intentional communities I lived in when I was younger—the one that taught me this manuscript's titular principle—was a L'Arche community devoted to integrating learning disabled (and sometimes physically disabled) adults into community, many of whom had experienced far too much social rejection in their lives. Our practical commitments to inclusion and to welcome changed the way all of us—disabled and temporarily able alike—related to one another. Through those commitments, we invented new forms of community.

7. Creatively Use and Respond to Change

Organisations change. Board members come and go; volunteers come and go. New people bring new energy but also new priorities.

It's worth growing organisational roots so that change can be an asset, rather than a problem. Develop clear purposes; develop processes for managing conflicts of interest; take measures to ensure that any projects that warrant a long-term commitment—such as an orchard or a permanent garden—are resilient and sustainable. This type of groundwork can make change safe and exciting. Ideally, permanence and change will be held in graceful balance.

Example: My idea for a community currency project received sufficient positive community response to lead to the development of RECAP. In time, however, it became clear that RECAP did not yet have the capacity to launch the currency. We needed to adapt RECAP's strategic plan, and ultimately to revise our constitutional purposes, to focus our energies on education and practical projects with a leading educational component, for this type of project is what we did have the resources and community uptake to develop. With our changed purposes, the currency will need to be the task of another community organisation sometime in the future.

Example: When our first group of reliable board members finished their terms and moved their energies to new endeavours, I found myself sad to see them go. Yet I have since found that these people stay involved in RECAP in other ways, and I can almost always call on them for help with a discrete project that requires their unique skills. New people have filled the vacancies left by outgoing board members, and these new people bring new skills, perspectives, and energy to the organisation.

Working within the Organisational Landscape

8. Maximise Edges

Some of the most unpredictable ecological interactions happen along the edge between ecosystems, often leading to great biodiversity. The same is true of human systems: when organisations cooperate without trying to convert one another, the interactions can produce unplanned for, positive results.

Example: The Ashhurst Cubs and Scouts Troop approached my husband, Phil Stevens, to ask if RECAP could support the troop's work toward earning a conservation badge. I had recently received an email from a former RECAP contractor, Liz Besley, who was working with Project Crimson to help get more northern rata planted in the area. Liz was able to get some rata to us, and Phil supervised the Cubs and Scouts as they planted these rata at McCrae's Bush, a bush remnant adjacent to RECAP's Olsson Community Orchard.

With this relationship in place, we called on the Cubs and Scouts the following year for help making compost at the orchard. A stream between the orchard and the bush remnant was being choked by weed. The children waded into the stream to gather this weed for the wet, green layer for a large compost heap. The work also gave the stream a chance to breathe more freely, serving as a natural extension of the troop's earlier conservation work. The area would still benefit from a more systematic approach to conservation, and possibilities for putting this into place are being considered.

In general, an organisation that consciously embeds itself within an organisational landscape will be stronger than one that sees itself as a lone plant in the middle of a barren or hostile landscape.

9. Use Elevational Planning

“Edge” interactions such as those just discussed under principle 8 can be understood as a type of horizontal cooperation amongst organisations.

Just as it's useful for organisations to cooperate horizontally, as RECAP does with the Cubs and Scouts, it's possible to make good use of more “vertical” organisational structures as well.

Example: Organisations need shelter-belts too. RECAP benefits from the canopy of the Environment Network Manawatu (ENM), a charitable umbrella organisation with 41 members, including RECAP. ENM maintains a regional e-mailing list and runs columns in the local paper, so that RECAP has been able to get wide publicity with very little effort. ENM also runs shared stalls at community events, so that organisations without the volunteers and other resources to host their own stall can still participate in this type of public outreach. ENM has helped RECAP build region-wide relationships, and they have directed us to funding sources. Similar networks or “Environment Centres” operate in most areas of New Zealand, and there are signs that a Wellington-based organisation is working to form a nation-wide network.

10. Plan for and Use “Succession” (Changes in Landscapes Occurring over Time)

In permaculture, we work with four dimensions, thinking not only about vertical space but also about time. Timing is crucial in organisational work, affecting all aspects of organisational development and strategic planning.

The organisational landscape also changes over time. It's easy to become attached to a particular organisation, but what matters is the system as a whole and the fruits that it bears.

Example: One of the first steps in forming RECAP was to write a project grant. As RECAP was not yet in existence, this was signed off by the Ashhurst Action Group (AAG), an organisation that I had joined a few years earlier with the explicit intention of connecting to people who were exercising civic agency and who might share some of the values I associated with Transition Towns. About half of RECAP's initial network was drawn from AAG. In RECAP's first year, AAG held our accounts and provided a second sounding board for our plans.

Interestingly, AAG is itself now in partial abeyance following the death of its long-term Chairperson, Noel Olsson. Yet I can think of at least three active community groups, besides RECAP, for whom the AAG served as a sheltering and nurturing nurse tree.

Strategic Planning

11. Plan for Each Element to Serve Multiple Functions – Integrate rather than Segregate

When deciding which project to take on, consider how many yields it will produce for your entire organisational/community system.

Example: About a year and a half after our incorporation, it became clear that RECAP needed a fundraiser. I was loathe to put our energy into anything that didn't directly serve our purposes, especially given the organisational situation described in my upcoming example. We decided to run a permaculture home and garden tour on a koha basis. This yielded sufficient funds for web hosting, a volunteer BBQ, and other small operational costs that weren't included in project grants. The tour also yielded community outreach and education, with some of those who took the the tour later becoming volunteers and participants in future workshops. The role of tour host also provided a significant volunteer role outside of board activities, and all hosts from both our 2012 and 2013 tours are now playing leading roles in the organisation, regardless of whether they were doing so prior to their tour participation.

Example: We started planning for our Olsson Orchard at the same time we decided to run our tour. After putting considerable energy into start-up and our as-yet unrealised local currency project, I felt like we really needed to “feed our roots” by running a project with tangible community impact. The orchard became a first permanent, physical project that we could point to and celebrate our meaningful community action.

The orchard serves several functions. It is an ongoing education space where we run regular planting, composting, and pruning workshops. Our first planting was done in cooperation with Ashhurst School, helping to develop that community tie. The orchard is also a source of free community food.

12. Use and Value the Marginal (Part II)

Whenever our society labels something “marginal”, that thing is likely to be an underused and more available resource.

Example: When RECAP wanted to establish an orchard on public land, we needed to work with city caretakers to agree on what land we could use and how it would be managed. We eventually agreed on land at the town margins, because the caretakers, who were worried about tidy mowing, felt less need to keep this area looking park-like.

13. Integrate Existing Flows and Cycles into Designs

When designing in community, consider the flows of that community, such as the movement of its people.

Example: RECAP is installing a permaculture education garden at the Ashhurst Library in order to make the best use of people flows. While this garden is set back behind a fence (and therefore is a destination rather than a thoroughfare), the library itself is the heart of the village—it is the most neutral high-traffic public space at the centre of town. (It's not a church, or a school, or a shop). The library is a key location for making RECAP's activities more integrally a part of the town culture.

Example: The year has a human cultural cycle that is not identical to the seasonal cycle. This past 23 November, RECAP held a herb spiral workshop at the library. We had twelve attendees—fewer than expected—and five people went out of their way to say they would have come if not for the date. While the workshop was still worthwhile, it may be inadvisable for us to run future workshops at this time of year, when schools are finishing up and everyone is preparing for Christmas and the summer holidays.

In contrast, RECAP worked better with the human cultural cycle when it held pizza and movie nights on dark winter evenings, then put these gatherings on hold over the summer months.

14. Capture and Store Energy

There comes a time when an organisation—like an organism—should switch from a focus on growth to a focus on maintenance (and perhaps eventually decline). RECAP is still in a growth phase. Growth requires capturing external resources, keeping them in the community, and obtaining a yield from them. One of our strategies is to choose projects that leave us with more energy and resources for our organisation and community system than when we started, with a particular emphasis on engaging new people.

Example: In 2011, I made a commitment to myself to step down as RECAP Chairperson in 2013. Changing leadership before it is urgent can increase both organisational resilience and community ownership.

My intention to resign also highlighted for me my need to make plans for board renewal, and I suggested we run a modular permaculture design course as a likely way to grow up local people with deep commitments to what RECAP was doing.

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Through the permaculture design course, we were able to capture many key external resources:

- We brought in highly experienced, well-regarded out-of-town instructors Gary and Emily Williams and Lisa Talbot. Although RECAP member Tom Shannon and myself both had our permaculture design certificates (and so could technically teach), it was better to bring people with more varied permaculture design experience into the community.
- Unexpectedly, Palmerston North City Council decided to offer eighty percent scholarships for city residents who wished to take our permaculture design course. As a result, we had full enrolment at the outset of the course, and likely more diverse students than we would have enrolled otherwise.
- The majority of the course participants were external to RECAP at the outset of the course, but many of these—and all who live in Ashhurst and the Pohangina Valley—have now become core participants in our organisation.

15. Obtain a Yield

As just discussed, organisations need to obtain a yield from projects: compost from a composting workshop, or a new community garden herb spiral from a mini-design workshop on small gardens and herb growing.

Sometimes yields are unexpected gifts, but in their broad contours RECAP tries to plan for multiple project yields. Our permaculture design course had high yields that were along the lines of what we had hoped for:

- The recruitment of two new board members, as well as the up-skilling of others;
- The recruitment of several new core volunteers;
- Increased local, social connections focussed on sustainability;
- The satisfaction of a successful and meaningful project;
- A design for a community education garden, which we are now installing at the Ashhurst Library;
- A Project Coordinator for that library garden, as well as a team of supporters for her work.

The course also had direct benefits for the participants (and for those with whom they interact). These benefits exceed those yields reaped by RECAP.

16. Put Everything to its Highest and Best Purpose

This principle holds true for all system elements, and it is particularly true for humans. Responding to this principle may, in fact, be the biggest challenge of our lives. Do our lives serve their highest and best purpose? My personal rumination over that question was critical to my decision to stick with RECAP when it became clear that my life needed some pruning.

Example: All members of an organisation have intrinsic worth that exceeds anything they can give their organisation. The best volunteer managers will remember this and place the person over the function. People care is a core permaculture ethic, whereas the injunction to obtain a yield is only a principle.

Sometimes the highest and best purpose for someone is to **not** be involved. Remember this, and celebrate the person.

Managing Projects

17. Use Slow and Small Solutions

This permaculture principle—one of my favourites—may very well apply to all aspects of organisational development. It's key to organisational stability, and there are plenty of examples of what happens when organisations move too quickly:

- RECAP's intended first project (the community currency) missed the first, naive deadline I had set;
- I've seen community gardens installed without upkeep;
- I've seen organisations secure large grants, central office buildings, and notable positive publicity, only to flounder because the years of groundwork hadn't been done first.

But our world also abounds with examples of the huge positive results that can be reaped through small step by step steady action, through slow perseverance.

Example: RECAP has been discussing the installation of a community garden at the Ashhurst Library since 2010. In 2012, we started working with the library to develop a Memorandum of Understanding, which sets our agreements on the garden's purposes and how it will be designed and managed. In 2013, as her project for RECAP's first permaculture design course, Toni O'Brien designed the garden. That spring we planted the most accessible part of a feijoa wind break, and we installed a herb spiral during an afternoon workshop. We have now added composting and a worm bin, and a ground-breaking ceremony celebrated our first vegetable beds.

It will likely take several more years until all of the main design features for the garden are fully in place. The slow garden development will allow us to grow interest and a volunteer base at the same pace as the garden, so that we can sustain what we build and plant. In the meantime, we're less likely to burn out core volunteers by trying to do everything at once, and we have time to learn and adjust the design if needed.



Acknowledgements: This paper has been written for the partial fulfilment of a New Zealand Permaculture Diploma, under the supervision of Gary Williams from Waterscape. The principles I discuss are drawn from Bill Mollison's Permaculture: A Designer's Manual (1988), David Holmgren's Permaculture Ethics and Design Principles Poster (<http://permacultureprinciples.com/resources/free-downloads/>), and Rosemary Morrow's Earth User's Guide to Permaculture (2nd ed., 2006). In some places I use these writers' words verbatim. In others, I blend and adapt. The application of these standard permaculture principles to organisations is my own.

The practical element of my diploma project is my involvement in RECAP as its Chairperson. During my years in this role, I learnt from the people who shared in the work of RECAP's development. I am indebted to those who worked beside me at all stages of this journey. My ability to write these pages owes much to them, although, in the end, what I present here are my own views, and they do not necessarily represent the RECAP board or membership. I am grateful to the RECAP board's 30 January 2013 decision to support my use of my experience within RECAP—a collective endeavour—to pursue a personal diploma.

18. Ensure each Function is Met by Multiple Elements – Integrate rather than Segregate

In ecology, resilience is created by having a dense network of relationships, with multiple ways to keep core ecosystem flows and functions working. The same is true in community resilience.

Example: The Olsson Orchard is served by the following:

- A Project Coordinator, who visits the orchard regularly, tends it directly, and reports back to the board when more action is needed;
- Two other core volunteers who at times take initiative to care for the orchard, and who the Project Coordinator routinely calls on for extra working support; these volunteers could conceivably step directly into the Project Coordinator's role if needed;
- Two other volunteers who are also regularly involved in orchard care outside of publicised RECAP events;
- A board to negotiate with the council that owns the land, to write grants, to decide funding, to plan and run larger volunteer events and orchard workshops, etc.;
- A wider community of groups and individuals who can be called on for working bees.



Image: Ashhurst School children prepare the ground to plant an orchard