Blog Archive

Building a Place-Sourced Regenerative Economy: Co-Evolving Relationships between a Regenerative Organization and its Socio-Ecological Environment

by Beatrice Benne | Aug 16, 2018

What Role Can Organizations Play in Regenerating their Communities?

What if every business, non-profit organization, or social entrepreneur was able to actively participate in the revitalization of the neighborhood, city, and even region within which it operates? What if through its activities, it could improve community members' livelihood, increase the economic vitality and resilience of the place, and create healthy natural ecosystems, thereby facilitating the development of a local regenerative economy? This is precisely what the Brattleboro grocery co-op in Vermont, United States, was able to accomplish, transforming its role from a grocery store to being a catalyst for "creating a regenerative marketplace" that helped revitalize their region and foodshed.



A rendering of the Brattleboro Co-op Building

The Brattleboro co-op is one of several organizations that have embraced *regenerative development*—a whole systems approach developed by the Regenesis Group that "partners

people and their places, working to make both people and nature stronger, more vibrant, and more resilient." Regenerative development is grounded in an evolutionary perspective in which humans have a role to play in contributing to the co-evolution of the social and ecological systems within which they are embedded; by unleashing the potential of larger living systems humans can bring new life into those systems while producing an energy field that can carry out the regenerative transformation of the systems over time.

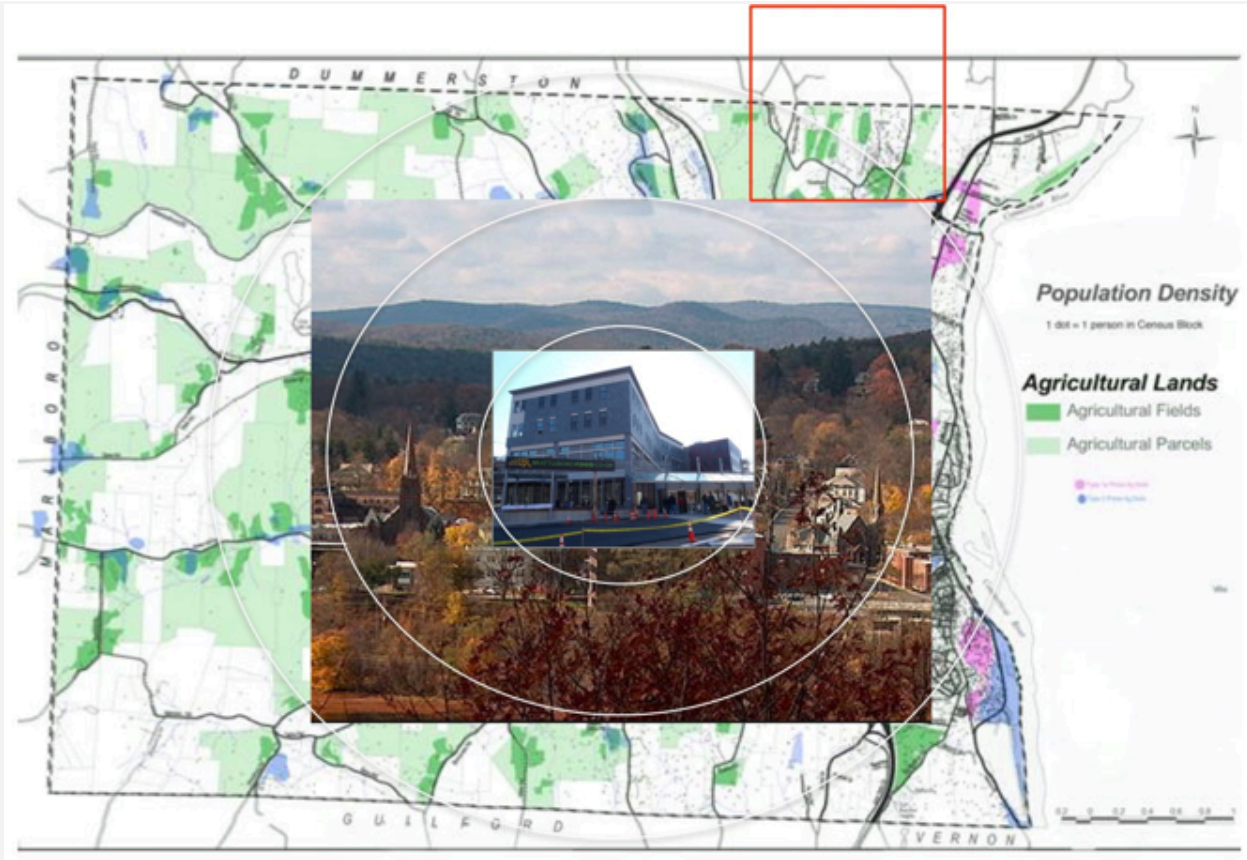
The leap from grocery store to being a key player in regenerating the community required a mind-shift toward regenerative practices and the development of three essential capabilities: first, the co-op had to shift away from focusing on sustainability problems to, instead, uncovering the potential of its place and community; second, it had to be able to manifest this potential as a source of higher order value and define the value-adding role it could play in within the community; and third, it had to create a vitalizing energy field to enable the evolution of the community and region over time. These capabilities are briefly discussed below and illustrated within the context of the Brattleboro Co-op.

Uncovering Place-Sourced Potential

For an organization to play a regenerative role, it must learn to see its environment in terms of potential rather than problems. Problems are grounded in existence; when we focus on them, we try to fix things that have degenerated. In contrast, focusing on potential helps us see new possibilities or ways of doing things that don't exist now but could in the future. The potential of a system can be conceptualized as the gap between what the system *is* and what it *could be* if it fully realized its *purpose*—that is, if the system could make a beneficial contribution to the working of a larger system. Here, we see the importance of *imaging* the potential of a living system nested within larger systems (as in a holarchy). Imaging is the ability regenerative practitioners have to mentally place themselves within a situation or living system in order to see and experience it alive and working.

The potential of a place has to do with what makes the place unique and the value that this uniqueness can bring to the world. To see the potential of a place, one needs an accurate image of the place working within its larger context and ask: What contribution could this place make to the regeneration of the larger system within which it is embedded? And, what value-adding

role could I or my organization play in order to help this place realize its potential? These are the initial questions that the Brattleboro co-op needed to answer.



The co-op project within its local context (three nested systems)

After operating as a buying club for decades, the co-op's growing business required a new building that reflected its identity and sustainability values. In 2002, it initiated a process for replacing its existing store with a new LEED-certified building and hired Regenesis to help them with developing a design strategy. Considering the co-op within its larger context—its community and region, Regenesis realized that, like most food stores in the US, almost all of the food on the shelves came from far away—1,500 miles on average. This made the co-op vulnerable to any disruptions of its supply chain from crop failure, fuel price, or truckers' strikes. At the same time, the Brattleboro community, which had once been a rich agricultural community was degenerating due to soils depletion, an aging farmer population, and a growing trend toward urbanization. Furthermore, there was rumors that Whole Foods, one of the largest natural foods supermarket chains in the country, was considering coming into town.

It became obvious that the focus on the design of a new, energy-efficient building—as desirable as that might be—was addressing the wrong problem. It was a narrow goal that had little or no potential. The co-opneeded to play a value-adding role that reflected Brattleboro's unique nature as an agricultural community. But then, how would it assume this new role as a catalyst for regenerating local agriculture?

Manifesting Potential as a Source of Higher Order Value

When it manifests its potential, an organization is able to generate *higher order value* in the community it serves. Regenerative value is created when the organization is able to increase the *ablenesso*r capacity of its community in such a way that people become better able to pursue their aspirations and live healthier lives; local institutions contribute more meaningfully to the well-being of the community; and natural systems increase their health, resilience, and diversity. Overall, the whole community improves its ability to adapt to change and evolve over time. Higher order value implies that the level of complexity in the community increases—that is, the level of effectiveness in integrating all the elements of the community together in a coherent and harmonious whole is greater.

In order to manifest its potential, the co-op had to define what it needed to put in place if—in the words of co-op member Mark Goehring, "we were to lift [the] project from "green building design" to "creating a regenerative marketplace." One must point out that this was a big leap for many of the co-op's leaders and it took some time for them to embrace it. Yet, the seed of an idea had been planted and those in the organization who really saw the potential continued to explore how they could take on their regenerative role while asking the question: "What is worthy of us as a co-op and as a community?" This effort awakened a new vision of who they were and what they should be working on. Eventually, as Mark Goehring said, they came to realize that "systemic change requires more than a band-aid of simple green building concepts. It requires that we become engaged in how our entire nutrient or energy delivery systems work. . . .it was apparent that greening the store's products and purpose . . . would have much more significant long-range impact than looking at the store by itself." In summary, to see the potential of the co-op, they needed to see its value and role in the context of its unique place; to harvest that potential for the benefit of both co-op and its place, they then needed to see the reciprocal relationships that could be made possible.



A local farmer and his cat on his land.

Hence, to support the revitalization of its community, region, and foodshed, the co-op began to look for ways to grow the value-generating capability of local farmers, landowners, and food processors as well as for ways to grow its own internal capability to truly serve all of its stakeholders. This led to the creation of a hundred-year plan as a source of direction. The co-op went to work on creating the leveraged programs and systems that it could see would make a difference right away, and it became intensely involved in community building with more than a dozen other cooperatives in its region. From this, the co-op began to envision a local credit union, an agricultural education program, ways to involve youth, a cooking school emphasizing local foods, and much more. As it turned out, producing food locally would save far more energy than the building alone.

Creating a Vitalizing Energy Field

To sustain the long-term work on all the initiatives it helped launched and bring them to a successful completion, the co-op needed to create a vitalizing energy field in order to galvanize the process. Experiencing a vitalizing energy field is similar to entering a work environment full of people bursting with life and creatively working together. The energy field creates the conditions for altering both thinking and behavior: it inspires and enlivens people who see themselves working to make something important happen. By focusing on what was possible, the co-op brought in new energy, spirit, and greater vitality that fueled the engine for change. This increased the local stakeholders' sense of ownership and commitment and helped them coalesce around the goal of revitalizing the local community.



Inside view of the Brattleboro co-op building after project completion

Now, ten years later, the new co-op building is finally in place in downtown Brattleboro. Its design and construction were a cooperative project of the food co-op, the Windham and Windsor Housing Trust, and Housing Vermont. It occupies an entire city block, with a 14,580-square foot natural foods market and deli on the ground floor, and on three floors above, the co-op offices, a commissary kitchen, a cooking classroom, and 24 residential apartments. There are solar panels on the roof, and the heating system for the entire structure is based on recycling the heat produced in the store by refrigeration.

But more than green and co-operative, the most important thing about the building is that it fully supports and helps to continuously regenerate this 6000-member co-op's commitment to regenerative community-building, and a vital local food system.

In Summary

The Brattleboro co-op case study shows how an organization can become an instrument of regenerative change. For this to be possible, the organization needs to take an outward focus: it must see itself as a living system nested within the larger living systems of the community and the region. Only then can it becomes an integral member of the community, able to participate in the regeneration of the whole for the benefit of all. By uncovering the unique characteristics, identity, and potential of the place in which it operates, the organization can then translate this understanding into genuine regenerative strategies that are sourced from, and in harmony

with, the local environment. Considering its own uniqueness and potential and those of the community, the organization must identify the value-adding role that it can play in the process of regeneration—in particular, growing the value-adding capability of the players involved and generating a vitalizing energy field. When the organization acts as a collaborative partner in the service of the community and engages in mutually beneficial relationships with its environment, both the organization and the place are able to co-evolve and thrive.

This article is available to in German here / Dieser artikel ist hier auf Deutsch verfügbar.

Acknowledgements

The content for this article is adapted from The Regenerative Practitioner Series distance learning seminar offered by Regenesis. a distance-learning seminar for worldwide practitioners interested in integrating regenerative development into their practice. Participants learn how to become transformative agents for growing the capacity of social and ecological systems to work in harmony with one another to create greater resilience and abundance.

Carol Sanford Institute provides education for businesses that seek to develop regenerative practices.

About the Author

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