

CONFERENCE REPORT

At the Australian National LETS conference over 60 delegates gathered over a particularly wet weekend in May at Quinola Lakes near Malanda, an idyllic little venue with a hall, kitchen, cabins and a gorgeous private lake.

Tableland LETS is the biggest and most actively trading exchange in Australia and we showcased our thriving system at the conference. A bumper trading market took place on the Saturday afternoon, and a great variety of items changed hands without involving money. Conference meals were catered by LETS members using local produce, and other members contributed with transport, billets, beautiful musical entertainment, workshops and much more. It was impressive and exciting. Jenni, Katrin and Bel and their team are to be congratulated for their brilliant work in putting together this fantastic event!

Most of the conference talks were recorded, and videos will be available for viewing. The speakers covered an inspiring mix of topics ranging from the bigger picture to more personal stories of trading experience. Historical and international information was shared in the context of the conventional economic system characterised by the growth model that is surely coming to an end of its useful existence because of its inevitable results of environmental destruction.

Reports of local trading from exchanges around Australia and also New Zealand and South Africa stimulated useful discussion of problems and solutions. A number of brainstorming sessions were held on subjects including, how to increase membership, encouraging active trading, administration issues, the benefits of LETS, the role of LETS in the community, LETS in Business, community networking, international travel with CES, and so on. Notes from the workshops will be published on our web site, along with links to the recorded talks here.

<http://www.tablelandlets.org/events-page/2015-conference/>

Summaries of just a few of the themes are as follows:

Tim Jenkin

The special guest at the conference was Tim Jenkin from South Africa, on his first visit to Australia, funded by a crowdsourcing campaign. He is a most interesting and inspiring person. When you meet him he seems rather quiet and modest, but he has an astonishing history of extraordinary heroic action! He worked with the ANC in the 1970s and was arrested for distributing information leaflets that criticised the government. He was sentenced to gaol in Pretoria and his incredible escape is documented in a thrilling video on Youtube here.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0WyeAaYjlxE>

- Have a very clear goal
- persue it single-mindedly
- always believe in the impossible

These are the hints Tim shared with us at the conference, learned from his experience escaping from prison.

Once free, Tim continued working to free Mandela and topple the brutal regime. His role included developing a system of encrypted messages so the collaborators could communicate secretly under the noses of the oppressors. His fascinating story of this early form of internet is described in a documentary here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSOTVfNe54A>

After spending 10 years in exile, Tim returned to South Africa but felt very disillusioned by the lack of improvement in living conditions for the majority. There must be something else going wrong, not only apartheid. Tim claims the problem is money, as the current financial system has been corrupted. It is not simple sharing of resources around the community. Tim challenged the inequitable economic system by introducing LETS to his home town. Eventually Tim created the software that makes accounting so much easier in LETS and allows members to instantly communicate their offers and wants. This is the CES program now used by 800 local exchange groups around the world including 60 groups in Australia.

While in Australia for the conference, Tim travelled to Brisbane, Sydney and Adelaide where he

gave talks and met with locals (including business and government representatives) to share his perspective on alternative economics.

Prehistory of exchange and money

Economics books usually claim that money has been around forever in one form or another, as if barter came first, then money was invented to replace it. However, Tim explained there's no evidence for this - it's a huge myth. Archaeology reveals that exchange has been around forever but money is much more recent. Prehistoric artifacts show people were keeping score of how many animals or bags of grain were contributed to the community. The earliest records were in the form of notches on wood, bone or stone and this appears to be the origin of numbers and writing. Actual money, or tokens with little intrinsic value used as currency, was created around 700BC as a medium to pay obligations to the large public institutions. There is always potential for a power imbalance with money.

LETS is different to money

Community exchange systems (such as LETS) are a return to the basics of looking after the well-being of the community, and fundamentally different to the conventional money system. In community exchange the system is in balance.

Some think of LETS as simply a local currency, equivalent to money, but with the advantage that it's off the radar, mostly keeps the wealth in the local community and can't be siphoned off to big companies or governments elsewhere. True, these are advantages of community exchange systems, but there is another important difference. The system has qualities of balance and equity. It is an experiment in sharing resources in the community without getting hijacked by greedy people.

There is no obligation to trade in LETS, and trading leads to win-win outcomes. This contrasts with the money economy which may be unbalanced as follows: *"I've got the money, and therefore the power, so you have to work for me and I'll set the rate of pay."* The nature of the LETS network tends to level out unfair extremes in prices. People usually price each other's skills and contributions closer to their intrinsic value, rather than at an artificially inflated rate.

In countries around the world where there has been an economic crisis, the ones that fared the best have been those with some sort of local exchange system in place.

While LETS and CES may take over the world when the monetary system collapses, we know they are a wonderful complement to our budgets right now, putting food on the table and building trusted networks in communities for support and problem-solving. That's what we mean by the exchange of energy – goods and services and support. LETS isn't perfect, but it does seem to be successful in maintaining balance and serving the community's needs.

Zero Hero

There was useful discussion at the conference about setting trading limits, reminding members to keep their earning and spending in balance. We learned that in a New Zealand exchange they reward a 'Zero Hero', anyone whose account goes through zero during the year. In LETS and CES a healthy account is a zero account and everyone is encouraged to aim for a zero balance. This is one of the features that sets community exchange systems apart from the conventional money system, rendering it less able to be derailed by greed. Also, adding the balances of all the accounts in a group should always come to zero. You can see how this emphasis on zero is the difference for maintaining equity. There is not much incentive for corruption as LETS is not a way to line your pockets.

Transparency

Trader records are available for all CES members to see online, and this can help fairness and sharing. For example, say you want to hire a trailer and there are several people offering this in your local system. You might decide to look up the account balance of each trailer owner, then choose to trade with the person who needs to earn units, not someone with a high credit balance.

Demurrage

From Western Australia we heard about the option of applying Demurrage to inactive accounts with a high balance, eroding by a percentage over time if the account holder doesn't spend.

CES software upgrade

Tim, Annette and Karel reported that the CES software is undergoing an upgrade with Druple 7. There will be many improvements to the program, fixing old problems and making it easier for users, while also allowing open source sharing of management and maintenance in future.

Resource booklet

A handy user-friendly guide to using CES was shared by Catie Lou from the Wairarapa Green Dollar Exchange in NZ. It can be downloaded from this page

<http://wais.org.nz/index.php/members-handbook>

and printed as a proper paper book for those who prefer it, perhaps with editing for local use. (If you download it, please make a donation in CES units to Catie's exchange to pay for her work in preparing this document.)

How does a strong exchange work?

Many visitors were inspired to learn about the successful methods employed by Tableland LETS. Everyone admired our effective system of drop-off points and couriers. We told them how local areas across the region are identified as hubs, each with a local coordinator and regular trading events, with the advantage that our meetings are numerous and varied, including working bees, workshops, film nights and other social occasions. At the end of the conference, delegates were invited to say what inspiration they were taking away to their exchanges, and top of some people's lists was a memo to put on a dance and hold more parties, such as the good time hosted at the conference with outstanding entertainment!

Conclusion

Personally it was my first LETS conference and I loved it, it was so informative, interesting and inspiring. Who wouldn't want to spend a weekend with a crowd of imaginative and practical optimists? I recommend it for prevention of admin burn-out or an antidote to feeling jaded. The positive atmosphere at the conference, the hugs at the end and the follow-up feedback indicated it was truly a great success.

Alison Bird was a founding member of Tableland LETS and has been a keen trader for the group's 24 years. Most of this time she was also running a small business selling her art, although in a previous existence she studied marine science.