

**Regional-Scale Permaculture:  
Forming a WNC Mutual Aid Society (& Mutual Aid Society Network)**

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**Mutual Aid Societies as Societal-Scale Permaculture**

How can we apply the transformative ecological and cultural design principles from permaculture to our communities in a way that addresses the deepest challenges we are facing as a species? Members of the permaculture movement have worked hard with imagination and determination for 40 years (alongside other scientific and social movements and indigenous cultural lineages) in many unique experimental directions, seeking to respond to this question and to bring into view a desirable future for our species based on co-operation and ecological integrity.

Sadly, we seem to be failing. Catastrophic climate change and species extinction are about to be un-stoppable, if they aren't already, and the inter-connected pressures of economic collapse, war, ecological loss, depression and cancer, loss of cultural diversity and hostile takeover of power structures by fundamentalist ideologies are getting more intense, not less intense. We appear to be headed for an un-necessary and entirely self-made extinction.

In my opinion, if we want to grow a different future, we've got to get more effective, imagine more daringly, think more deeply and transformatively, and address the underlying economic and political dynamics that prevent us from growing a diverse global community of life-giving cultures whose norms are sanity and beauty.

**Mutual Aid is a proven cultural survival strategy**

The Mutual Aid Society Network applies the bio-cultural design insights of permaculture on a regional and societal scale. As we seek to do in permaculture when presented with a set of challenges, I first looked into what successful patterns exist already in natural ecosystems and traditional cultures, successes that we might mimic and adapt for our current conditions.

Brushing away just a couple layers of dust from our cultural history, Mutual Aid Societies pop out as a major successful pattern that our ancestral communities have used for thousands of years to take care of basic needs of human members, exert power in the face of hostile governments, and pool resources to collectively grow the positive future they envision for themselves.

**Interestingly, many MAS's in the world, such as gadugi in Cherokee culture, or mutualistas in Latin American culture, or Via Campesina (a kind of meta-mutual aid society involving 200 million peasant farmers around the world), are based first and foremost in sustainable agriculture as the core co-operative activity. Other co-operation then arises from the rhythmic community heart of collaborative land management.**

MAS's have arisen in a diversity of forms, from land-based indigenous cultures, to Russian peasants in World War I, to Jewish MAS's resisting the Nazis in the Warsaw Ghetto, to African-American communities weathering Jim Crow and planning the civil rights movement, to the mutualistas of Latin American immigrants resisting police brutality and helping their members start farms and businesses and become home-owners.

### **What is unique about a MAS**

The scale and set of explicitly shared values within a MAS allows a group of people to organize into a flexible political/cultural/economic organism that, relying on varying degrees of radical co-operation, meets its members' needs better than any individuals or families could accomplish on their own, and in some ways better than large-scale social welfare programs. Mutual Aid Societies allow common people without massive wealth or political power to stand up to whatever forces tend to erode our self-determination, whether those forces are famine, racism, environmental change, epidemic depression, sexism or economic oppression.

The closest thing that most of us in contemporary American society have experienced to Mutual Aid Societies is a religious or activist community, but these communities usually do not have the size or mission scope to accomplish the economic and political functions that a MAS can accomplish. A MAS fills a giant functional gap that exists between intimate close family/friends on the one hand, and large anonymous society on the other hand, with a mid-intimacy, functionally interdependent organization whose strength in numbers has proven effective enough to be a primary cultural pattern for most of our ancestors.

### **How it works**

The central organ which enables the other functions of this kind of Mutual Aid Society is a mission-oriented, community-owned Credit Union. Thousands of people take our money away from the banks who are funding the destruction of our planet, and re-invest in a radically empowering credit union that funds life-giving projects that we support.

Around the retail banking, fair-interest mortgage and start-up loaning functions of the Credit Union are clustered other primary features, often funded by low-interest loans to MAS members from the Credit Union, such as:

- a health-care co-op including rural/urban urgent care centers;
- a community land trust
- a customized, ad-free, digitally secure social media platform;
- a bricks-and-mortar regional media and education hub (or multiple);
- a farming, food security and land use education hub;
- combined child care and elder care centers;

- civic participation initiatives which help more people get informed and involved in existing democratic institutions and take them back from the fascists and corporatists;
- emergency response teams which take care of people dealing with financial, physical, social or legal emergencies;
- creative housing collaboratives which provide affordable housing and ecologically innovative building construction expertise;
- renewable energy micro-grid co-ops;
- start-up advice and funding for small businesses, focusing on worker-owned co-ops

### **These Features Are Delivered Through Two Main Integrative Hubs**

- 1) Website and homepage “dashboard” - “The personal clearinghouse approach”- imagine logging into one website with banking, healthcare, elder care/ childcare/food/political information organized by a non-profit group of mutual aid peers for your benefit and ease of interface, with direct accountability.
- 2) Mutual Aid Community Centers- physical locations strategically located, containing banks, urgent care center commercial kitchen/cafe, elder community center and day-time care, kids school, adult education, night-time events, political events and information sessions, food distribution and so on. Built by MAS members, run by renewable energy, installed and managed by MAS members. Integrated housing.

### **B. MASNet Vision**

In mature form, MASNet is a national and international network of nested and inter-related Mutual Aid Societies (MAS's). Each MAS harnesses the power of scale and collaboration to take care of its' members human needs, at a human scale (approx 5-15,000 members per MAS), through traditional and alternative economics as well as informal mutual aid. MasNet organizes within each MAS, and within MASNet, to imagine and enact a desirable vision for humanity's future, based on a coherent framework similar in scope and longevity to the conservative political framework enacted in the U.S. since the 1970's.

In addition to providing for its members' needs and for the jumpstarting of innovative bio-cultural initiatives, MASNet fills a vacant niche in the progressive movement by providing a long-term political organizing modality for local, state and national politics, similar to what the so-called conservative movement has done via evangelical churches.

MASNet begins with “nuclei”- geographically distributed pilot MAS initiatives in locations identified based on greatest human need, and for optimal social-political impact. As this network grows to fill gaps, it serves as the cultural-economic scaffolding for a long-term innovative strategy for retrieving participatory democracy and establishing a bold, earth-based progressive vision for Renewal Democracy in the U.S. and for a hopeful planetary future.

Phase 1 of this process is implemented with a timeline, and at a scale, which allows for meaningful financial re-investment options quickly, and can provide affordable health care (and other core needs) for MAS members before current political developments have a chance to fully destroy the social safety net.

This project is pursued at 3 simultaneous and inter-connected levels:

- 1) Design, funding, and creation of a WNC Mutual Aid Society
- 2) Identifying and jumpstarting MAS nuclei and leadership in other parts of the U.S., and internationally, via strategic partnerships with existing organizations.
- 3) Develop and research the theory, practice, precedents, existing expertise and networks related to MAS, for future scaling up and innovation.

### **C. WNC Mutual Aid Society Draft Mission**

WNC MAS uses visionary regional collaboration to grow a Mutual Aid Society which helps its members to meet core needs and find transformative responses to existential ecological and political challenges while taking back power in our existing political system.

#### **Directives of the MAS vision**

**Provide for basic needs in an uncertain future-** provide an accessible option for a diverse array of individuals, families, and communities to meet their basic human needs through large-scale collaboration, as uncertain political-economic-ecological developments make it otherwise difficult to meet these needs. Basic needs include food, housing, healthcare, clothing, mental health, safety, access to information and education, access to companionship and cultural life, participation in self-governance, and support in finding meaningful personal action.

**Change Our Story-** re-allocate resources, attention, support and narrative control away from dominant movements and power structures which are reinforcing dynamics of human conflict, economic inequality and ecological devastation; re-invest these resources and narrative vitality into compassionate, effective, life-supporting endeavors.

**Timely Action-** proceed with a phased plan of implementation on a timeline that matches real-life constraints and needs imposed by current political-economic-ecological conditions.

**Climate Change Resilience and Ecological Design Innovation-** each operation, investment and project of MASNet is designed from within a deep systemic analysis of climate change dynamics and ecosystem health. Actions emerging from this framework extend far beyond the mitigation of isolated environmental issues, instead focusing on the implementation of regenerative, biocultural approaches which actively adapt to ecological change while deeply meeting human and cultural needs.

*An example idea:* a regional MAS votes to fund an urban agro-forestry collective which employs low/mid-income MAS members to propagate, plant and intensively manage 50,000 diverse, fast-growing trees per year on municipal and private properties within the MAS territory. In addition to growing food and herbal medicine ingredients for sale to other MAS members' businesses, these trees provide carbon-sequestering biomass for a pyrolytic electrical generation plant, also run as a for-profit business by MAS members; this business provides carbon-negative electrical generation for a renewable energy micro-grid co-op, as well as charcoal for sale as bio-char to MAS farmers and for urban soil bio-remediation projects in low-income neighborhoods to prepare for expanded urban farming.

**A Culture of Resilient Inter-connection-** create a flexible vehicle for radical economic/social resilience, inter-dependence and collaboration, encouraging inter-reliance between previously isolated economic, cultural, ideological, geographic, urban/rural, and academic disciplinary realms.

**A Think Tank For Eco-democratic Renewal-** Innovate, vision and experiment with all the dimensions of activity we need to germinate a renewed, life-supporting political and economic system. Gather resources, ingenuity, imagination, vision and expertise to focus on visioning, testing, vetting, improving cyclic iterations of indigenous/progressive strategies for bio-cultural survival, thrival and adaptation.