

The Rocky Road To A Real Transition

The Transition Towns Movement and What It Means for Social Change

TRAPESE Collective

Any sound ecological perspective rests in great part on our social perspectives and interrelationships; hence to draw up an ecological agenda that has no room for social concerns is as obtuse as to draw up a social agenda that has no room for ecological concerns. (Murray Bookchin)

There's been a lot of talk about Transition Towns (TT) lately. In a nutshell, the TT approach offers a permaculture-influenced model for a transition to a low carbon society. The original idea grew out of a full time permaculture degree in Kinsale, Ireland where in 2005 Rob Hopkins and his students developed a town wide Energy Descent Plan for a ten-year period. The idea spread quickly to Totnes and Lewes and now there are neighbourhoods, villages, cities and whole islands embarking on the journey. There are currently over 35 towns and cities who are officially part of the transition network, and more than 600 are considering joining in the UK alone. TT foregrounds the big twin threats as climate change and peak oil, (the point when the maximum rate of global production is reached and begins its terminal decline.) TT argues that these problems, can be tackled only if we develop robust community responses, forming local groups that grapple with issues like food, health, transport, energy, textiles, and waste and working out how they can become less fossil fuel dependent on a local level. There are twelve steps to transition which are laid out in their 'Primer'

document and the aim is to draw up and implement an energy descent plan following this model which involves local businesses, councils and participation by everyone. Local groups can ask to affiliate to a national network, which offers national co-ordination.

We have written this booklet as part of a debate about this movement as it emerges. From the beginning we want to make it clear that we really welcome what the TT initiative is trying to do and that this response is meant as a constructive but critical intervention as to what exactly a 'transition' might mean for social change. We write this as people who fully support and work hard with grass-roots initiatives who are tackling climate change through a whole raft of responses: community food projects, sustainable living through appropriate technologies, autonomous health initiatives, do it yourself bike workshops, social centres for education and debate—you name it! We are not calling for a rejection of the concept of Transition Towns, nor a halt to their expansion. Quite the opposite. We support any transition away from the hugely ecologically unsustainable and socially unjust structures and ways of life that dominate in our towns and cities. But we also believe that we should be prepared to fully engage with and challenge the causes of these problems. As popular educators we believe that asking questions, knowing our collective histories, understanding root causes, encouraging public debate no matter how uncomfortable, and inspiring action are an essential part of this process.

Over the past few years there has been an unprecedented level of media coverage and initiatives around climate change. Arguments that environmentalists have been making largely ignored for decades have rapidly moved in to the public debate since Blair chose climate change to top the G8 agenda in 2005. Since then the scale of the problem, media attention and the striking evidence of the rate of

A Transition Initiative is a community that is unleashing its own latent collective genius to look Peak Oil and Climate Change squarely in the eye and to discover and implement ways to address this BIG question:

“For all those aspects of life that this community needs in order to sustain itself and thrive, how do we significantly increase resilience (to mitigate the effects of Peak Oil) and drastically reduce carbon emissions (to mitigate the effects of Climate Change)?”

“If we collectively plan and act early enough there's every likelihood that we can create a way of living that's significantly more connected, more vibrant and more in touch with our environment than the oil-addicted treadmill that we find ourselves on today.” — www.transitiontowns.org

change have left many scared and anxious. People desperately want ideas for positive action, for how we can turn things around and somehow limit the scale of the disaster facing our world. The Transition Town model is, as Rob Hopkins says, “unleashing a spirit and a depth of engagement” with this practical action. While this is clearly a welcome development compared to the total denial of the previous decades, let’s not shy away from asking problematic questions, even when they may not always have clear answers. As thousands of hours of precious human resourcefulness are poured into these projects around the UK, we want to ask: a transition to where, and from what? And what models of organising can help us along the way? As authors, we make no excuses for this. Yes, now is the time to act. But there are powerful forces to confront and it is essential to learn from past experiences and be clear about our aims. TT could be merely the latest fad, a ray of hope in an otherwise despondent world. Or they could offer something to be genuinely excited about. There are no easy ways round these issues. And only by being realistic about the scale of change needed and what change might really mean, as well as feel and look like, can the difficult times ahead be tackled. Putting the transition movement in its historical and political context can help to deepen and strengthen the important conversations happening in Transition meetings all around these islands.

Of course there are many people who are already familiar with the arguments we are making, our intention is not to patronise or thoughtlessly snipe from the sidelines. We also recognise that many of the problems discussed here are not exclusive to TT, and that some of the suggestions could take years to incorporate in to the TT model. But as an open and developing process we hope that this booklet provokes constructive debate and provides some points for reflection for all those who are engaging or not with this exciting new movement.

So TT is about change. But is it about political change?

While preparing a recent workshop with a Transition group about climate change, one of us from Trapeze suggested the issue of Rossport as a possible point of discussion and action. For the past five years, the local community in Rossport, County Mayo, Ireland, has been struggling against Shell and a consortium building a high-pressure gas pipeline through their community. People from around Ireland have supported them and their situation has been brought to international attention through many solidarity actions. The people helping to plan the workshop explained that according to the TT model,

this was not an appropriate topic. In order to be as accessible as possible, Transition groups do not support particular campaigns but rather develop a model that forms around what many different people have in common. It's a model about positive responses and not something that takes positions 'against' institutions or projects. While it may seem obvious to try and limit political wrangling in a burgeoning movement, this position raised some serious questions about the effectiveness of a depoliticised movement and was one of the motivations for us to write this booklet. Perhaps in this particular instance it was not relevant to talk about a campaign, but there are many reasons why it is important to be more confident and defiant when calling for transition and actually take a stance against the exploitative and polluting corporate practices that are happening all around us.

How can we talk about climate change and peak oil and not deal with politics or side with communities struggling against the expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure? If we want to avoid catastrophic climate chaos we must leave the majority of remaining fossil fuels where they are—in the ground. Yes, finding ways of dramatically reducing our personal consumption and demand is one part of this, but it is only one side of the equation. It seems naïve to assume that companies such as Shell and Stat Oil, BP or Esso will easily give up and go home or fundamentally change what they do while it is still so enormously profitable. Shell by the way, makes £7 million clear profit, every day! The experience of the communities fighting Shell around Rosspart is one of corruption, police collusion and profit hungry multinational companies riding roughshod over every safety and environmental concern. This pipeline project is not about merely meeting expanding consumer demand for energy, but is an aggressive, profit motivated project, which has needed the collusion of malleable politicians. It is also about a grab for the last remaining energy reserves as access to oil fields abroad become more geo-politically unstable. Around the globe, in Wales, Nigeria, Georgia, Mexico and Alaska, to name a few, people are struggling against energy multinational corporations in similar ways. Their lives and livelihoods are directly threatened, not just by future climatic catastrophe but also by pollution, repression and loss of land as the extraction happens. Those who challenge or try to prevent these things are often portrayed as needlessly angry or violent which is a divisive tactic that we should guard against. Providing support for communities who are resisting the efforts of the industries to extract and burn ever-increasing quantities of fossil fuels is one of the most important strategies in dealing with climate change and this

solidarity and exposing the companies and the political systems that facilitate them must surely be a central part of transition.

Being against climate change doesn't have to be political position. But the analysis of how we got into this mess, and the best way to move on, does bring us back to politics. It involves taking on power and those who hold wealth and influence. People could be drawn to TT for a number of different reasons - fear, solidarity, a desire to rebuild communities, looking for direction, or as a platform for their own political pet project. While this is fine and to be expected, problems will occur along the way if big political debates are brushed aside because we only talk about what we already have in common. Communities must face up to issues such as nuclear expansion, market based solutions to climate change such as carbon trading and offsetting, agro-fuels and food scarcity, developments such as airport expansion and resource extraction. These things all occur through active government policies, which try to maintain the economic and political, "business as usual" scenarios. Unfortunately, left unchallenged they could also wipe out the best efforts at local sustainability, like a tsunami in front of a sand castle. In these difficult times, it's not good enough to say that TT doesn't have an opinion on these issues, or does not want to alienate people by discussing them. As well as building local resilience, these struggles are the bread and butter of what our future will look like and therefore these political debates need to be at the heart of TT. This does not have to translate into a 'party line' or other dogma. Information can be presented with space for questions, dialogue and groups can develop their own responses to these issues. But it is fundamentally important to identify and name the enemies in the battle to make a real transition.

Responding to climate change could mean new niche markets for capitalism, greater social inequality, closing borders and strengthening state power. An agreement "not to rock the boat" will not help TTs long term viability, as it would mean not really changing anything. People are generally aware of the bigger political and economic forces influencing their lives and only talking about these issues honestly will build true momentum for change. One major challenge are the enormous budgets and state-of-the-art PR campaigns that have already swung in to action to positively influence the public perception of everything from the coal industry, agro-fuels to nuclear power. This greenwash tries to make an unsustainable, polluting industry appear environmentally friendly to preserve its legitimacy in the eyes of the general public. It's essential that these unsubstantiated arguments are challenged; they do not tackle the root causes of the problem and in many cases make things a lot worse. (E.g. see carbontradewatch.org)

One half of TT is about tackling climate change. So what are its root causes?

Frequently the Transition line, and perhaps the lowest common denominator, is that the problem stems from too high a concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and this needs to be lowered. But this focuses attention on the 'effect,' not the 'cause' of the problem. Of course high concentrations of atmospheric carbon are a reality that reflects the scientific consensus, but too much carbon is a symptom of a bigger illness that needs a particular cure. The problem boils down to too much production—too much economic activity (simply making things and transporting them, often over thousands of miles) and the energy inputs that go with this. But it's also the WAY we organise production that is the problem—what we can call free market capitalism. This economic set up relies on ceaseless economic growth and many things, including short-term political electoral cycles and the legal duty of large companies to constantly increase profits, underpin this. Those in power are unable to make many of the changes needed, because of an established set of economic "truths", known as the rules of the game that are a real barrier to change, whether from above or below. A chief executive cannot reduce shareholder profit, or not without risking their job. A politician cannot win an election by saying they will make the country poorer by reducing export earnings. Reducing production is presented as leading to a downward spiral that would curb the money supply, increase unemployment and create a

There's a strong business case for adopting more sustainable practices, and it's gradually finding its way into mainstream business thinking.

The emphasis on CSR and triple bottom line accounting may be steps in the right direction, and carbon trading could yield substantial cuts in global CO2 emissions.

However, none of these address the way that Peak Oil will make itself felt on businesses that have long supply chains, or serve markets in distant locales. Businesses that have a long term perspective and are aware of the constraints fossil fuel depletion will have on the globalised economy need to be looking in general at oil dependency throughout their organisation and at four specific areas: supply chain, waste, energy usage and markets.

(From the Transition Initiatives Primer.)

deflationary and recessionary situation (and who wants that? Think back to the hunger of the 1930s). So we are seemingly stuck in an economic system, which needs to grow otherwise the whole thing will collapse like a house of cards. This ceaseless need to produce more economic output is the real driver of climate change, and only when the rules of the game are changed can carbon dioxide concentrations and all the associated problems be truly tackled.

But are there different rules to play by? Well the Soviet model of state-planned production and

consumption didn't offer anything progressive—it was a disaster based on corruption and hideous repression. Nor does the vast modern day China or the rapidly growing India seem to offer anything different that can meet people's needs without exploiting them. What is at fault is the wider 'development era' that really got going after the Second World War and was dominated by the USA and its global bully boy ambitions. This unleashed an economic model based on the ideas that 'growth is good' and the 'West is best'—that our way of organising the economy should be rolled out across the globe. The liberalisation of the economy was presented as equating to freedom and democracy and was offered as the only medicine for the illness of the Global South's "under-development." It has now pretty much become all encompassing through what has been called the 'Washington Consensus' where global trade policies are directed through a small number of US controlled institutions—the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation. The old colonial way of doing things - 'gunboat diplomacy' - has now morphed very neatly into a sweeter pill of 'neo-colonialism' where big western corporations continue to asset strip and exploit the resources of their majority world neighbours, while telling them that it is the only way their economies can grow. Structures are put in place such as international trade agreements, aid conditionality and intellectual property laws to enforce this regime worldwide. Meanwhile the infamous 'trickle down effect' where everyone will eventually benefit from increased wealth at the top, fails to materialise. In fact the gap between rich and poor continues to grow within the industrialised countries and the richest country on earth, the US, has around 13% of its population living below the poverty line at any one time. So this is the growth paradigm of the development age—a whole way of organising economic activity around the globe that has to expand or die, and every day becomes more and more inter-connected.

Sounds like the only game in town? But there are countless ways to organise economic activity—ultimately all we are trying to do is find an optimal way to allocate the goods and resources we really need. It shouldn't be that difficult and it doesn't have to be done at the expense of exploiting people and our environment. For example, there is really illuminating work coming from thinkers like Michael Albert and his ideas of participatory economies that show us that there are different and appealing ways to organise trade and the economy. These draw upon producer and consumer councils who agree the types and amounts of goods to be produced through work that is meaningful, fair and equally paid. Workers cooperatives like the huge one in Spain

called Mondragon are also inspiring here—they are fully controlled by their workers and produce goods according to need.

New ways to organise the economy will have to take social and environmental sustainability and energy efficiency as central principles. So there will certainly be less production, resource use and extraction, as these are achievable and relatively quick ways of significantly decreasing carbon emissions. Although politicians and business leaders make statements to the contrary, it really isn't possible to decouple economic growth from carbon emissions—to in effect have high growth but a low carbon economy. Continuous technological improvements mean that jobs are lost at about 3% per year, so the economy and output has to grow by this amount just to maintain the current amount of jobs. Contrary to accepted economic logic, this doesn't have to mean that mass unemployment is inevitable, but that jobs will be different—geared more towards local and regional activity and less tied to export industries and consumer goods. This isn't to say that changes to the economy will be small. It will be transformed beyond recognition and there is very little evidence to suggest that it will be able to sustain the lifestyles that many have become accustomed to in the West. It also means moving away from conventional measure like Gross National Output (GNP) towards indicators that measure quality of life and protecting the atmosphere, soil, water and other species. Environmental improvements and protection and rebuilding local economies will also be a huge new area of job growth. Basically, there's a huge amount to be done to prepare our society for the changes it needs to make—a lack of work is the least of our worries. In a low carbon economy there will be less of the unfulfilling or non essential jobs that service the highly connected, mediated economy, think of all the wasted energy that goes into advertising, free newspapers, shifting throw away goods around the planet or making useless plastic packaging. At the same time there will be more human labour necessary than in previous years to make up the energy input that has come from cheap fossil fuels and we will need to move towards a culture of repairing, reusing, sharing, skill swapping and relearning tools for greater community sufficiency. As well as learning how to meet basic needs communities will also have deal with many different kinds of problems and crises. The impacts of the waste and pollution from high consumption lifestyles have been externalised to other places or ecosystems for years, but the impacts are about to be felt in the form of increased extreme weather events, economic instability etc.

So what does all this mean? While it is clearly important to support projects for sustainability and improve our local communities'

resilience, this should not be confused or conflated with tackling the root causes of climate change or 'peak oil' energy scarcity. Given the reality of the global economy, to what extent can TT initiatives alter the current rules of the global economic game? It is possible that removing a significant proportion of consumers from the equation would ultimately weaken and threaten economic growth. However, it is more likely that low carbon community initiatives could happily exist without challenging causes such as high levels of economic output, highly concentrated ownership in the hands of a few multinationals, lack of democratic control, rampant resource extraction and the search for new areas of profit. The popularity of Corporate Social/Environmental Responsibility (CSR) is also a key part of this debate. Large corporations are certainly being held more accountable, at least on a superficial level, for their effects on people and the planet. But on one level, of course they would be. It's not in their interests for the economy to become too harmful to people and the environment because then who would buy their goods? CSR also allows corporations to give themselves a more human friendly face so they can maintain what they are doing, deflecting arguments about their right to exist, extract resources virtually for free, and take home a huge profit. Responses which focus on individual consumers, market based mechanisms or reinforce the role of business-friendly central governments will not help us to tackle the root causes of climate change.

Peak oil is the other half of TT, and it's all about energy running out isn't it?

Peak oil says that half the world's reserves of oil and gas have been used and that we are about to enter the downside of the energy curve. A report from the US office of petroleum reserves last year stated,

World oil reserves are being depleted three times as fast as they are being discovered. Oil is being produced from past discoveries, but the reserves are not being fully replaced... The disparity between increasing production and declining discoveries can only have one outcome: a practical supply limit will be reached and future supply to meet conventional oil demand will not be available.

This is true without much doubt. But with half the energy left we can hardly say that the problem is one of scarcity. If, as estimates say, there are roughly a trillion barrels of oil left then the problem we face is about resource allocation and distribution. The problem with peak oil

is that currently we are in a system that demands ever increasing amounts of fossil fuels (for the expanding economy, further industrialisation of agriculture, increasing population etc.) but at some point soon the amounts of available energy will decrease daily. There is still debate about when this point will be; some people believe we have reached this point already. Talking of a peak could be misleading, more likely is a series of price rises and shocks rather than one isolated event. As we write prices of crude oil are increasing daily, breaking previous records and shocks are felt throughout the international financial markets. The current credit crunch could well be linked to the decreasing supply of cheap oil.

The global elite, the really rich people across the globe, will find ways of ensuring access to the remaining supplies of oil. The G8 for example was set up partly as a response to the oil crises of the 1970s and one its main remits is to secure access to energy reserves for the most industrialised economies. Oil wars across the world and recent BP plans to extract oil shale from Canada are two signs of the lengths that the rich will go to preserve their lifestyles for decades to come. In the short term decreasing supply will increase prices and benefit the very rich. At the same time the increasing price of food, home energy bills, etc will be passed on to individuals, hitting the poorest hardest. Whilst this will increase the gap between rich and poor in the UK, these inequalities are more fully understood on a global North-South divide level as billions of people are left with no access to the basics such as land or clean water. The main point is that there is little point in creating a sensible plan for using the remainder of easily available fossil fuel supplies if in the process the environment is pushed over its tipping point of 'dangerous' climate change, defined as global warming of 2 Celsius above pre-industrial levels. There is a 50% chance of this kicking in at about 450ppm of carbon in the atmosphere. Energy use at its current rate, globally and in the UK, would bring us head to head with such limits within the next decade or so. This is why energy use based on carbon sources has to pretty much come to a halt in the next couple of decades.

The question of how to ride this energy descent roller coaster on the way down is one key component of TT. As groups grapple with their own energy descent plans, an alternative model which has gained international recognition is 'Contraction and Convergence' which provides a model for how all countries can make a move towards a 'convergence zone' of lower carbon emissions and then continue to contract downwards to zero carbon use within the next fifty years. 'C and C' recognises the enormous disparity between industrialised nations' contribution to current levels of greenhouse gases and those

of the majority world. However, it proposes this can only be achieved via an austere programme of carbon rationing where individuals have little control and which is regulated through strong state action and large centralised global institutions. What is relevant to TT here is that as communities start, of their own accord, to embrace more sustainable living in their food, energy, waste and transport this will compete with models that impose these limits through state coercion. In contrast TT should be a model that fights to preserve freedom, autonomy and rejects top down models that further increase social inequality.

To get to a low carbon future, there will be some tough arguments. One is about how social justice and human rights are protected while also taking global action on climate change. The concept of 'climate justice' is useful here as it recognises that the global poor face a triple whammy—having the smallest carbon footprints but being hit hardest by many of the effects of climate change.) At the same time having been stripped of their natural resources they have no financial means to mitigate against its adverse effects. In the US groups have mobilised around the idea of Environmental Justice. Research revealed that communities of colour were suffering disproportionately high levels of air pollution and associated health problems, as heavy industry was more likely to be located in their localities (See www.ejmatters.com). These movements remind us that corporations will try to locate themselves where social and environmental laws are weakest and where local opposition can be overcome. It is therefore important to guard against pushing problems out of one area and on to another group, who may for structural reasons be less able to resist them.

In the current model it is possible to put a price on everything. As evidence mounts of the number of lives being put at risk through dangerous climate change, grotesque calculations are made that literally compare the financial cost of taking action on reducing emissions with the human cost of not doing so, this was the method used by the high profile 2007 Stern Report. While addressing local energy efficiency is one aspect, it is also important to drastically reduce high levels of consumer goods, cheap flights and unnecessary car journeys that have become second nature to many. Campaigners who are using direct action to shift public opinion and de-legitimise the right to profit from such climate changing business are increasingly targeting sectors such as the aviation industry, which is the most rapidly expanding carbon industry and shows no signs of giving up growth. Challenging new fossil fuel infrastructure is also an important part of work for an effective transition. For example, the new proposed

coal fired power station at Kingsnorth, Kent, will be the site of the Camp for Climate Action, 2008. Resisting a return to coal power in the UK will be a key site of struggle if we are serious about avoiding catastrophic levels of atmospheric carbon. At the root, it is about delegitimising the right of large corporations and industry to emit carbon into the atmosphere, even if they pay credits to allow them to pollute; life is priceless.

So it's all about transition, then. What will it be like?
Will it be peaceful?

We can only hope that we can make a peaceful transition. Using dialogue and non-violence to get what people want is, of course, preferable to slipping into further violence and conflict between groups. However, a look at the history of significant social change gives some clues about the nature of the transition that we might expect. Looking back to look forwards if you like. So what do the experiences of other groups and places tell us? There are countless times when people have tried to make a break, a transition, away from oppression or threatening life conditions, or merely safeguarding what they held dear to them—the Luddites who defended their workplaces during the bloody transition to the factory system in England, the Diggers or True Levellers who demanded equality and land after the English civil war, the indigenous Zapatista communities who have set up autonomous villages in the mountains of south east Mexico in the face of state repression and expropriation of resources, the Paris Communards who didn't give up fighting to defend their gains in the wake of the Franco-Prussian war, or more recently in the UK the poll tax demonstrators, the miners and the Dockers strikers who fought Thatcher's policies. What these examples tell us is that to win concessions, to get what they want, ordinary people have to organise and propose alternatives, but they also have to resist and challenge those who want to preserve the way things are - 'the status quo'. Many of the rights that are nowadays taken for granted in the UK - the 5 day working week, the Factory Acts, the labour movement, the suffragettes and demands for universal suffrage, - all these were born out of struggle, of ordinary people doing extra ordinary things. Meaningful social change comes through political organising, rupture and struggle and a lot of mobilising at the local level. The reality of social change might be difficult to face up to, but it essential if we want to make a root and branch transition, not just a cosmetic one.

There's a saying: at first we were ignored. Then we were ridiculed and laughed at. Then when our ideas started to become really effective, we became a real threat and they defeated us. In other words, there's nothing like the threat of a good example. It's worth remembering that good ideas don't fade away because they weren't good enough. They disappear because they were repressed and defeated or because they became a threat to one power group or another and had to be eliminated. This is a common theme in history. When people start to look effective and organised, they face opposition and oppression and governments turn to direct hostility: surveillance, the crackdown on civil liberties, ID cards, fortress Europe, ASBOs, diminished freedom to protest, a raft of anti-social behaviour laws, the list goes on. Although this may not appear a theme that Transition groups should work around, we argue that it will fundamentally affect TTs ability to organise, respond and be effective. It would be dangerous to assume that the state would not be interested in what seems at face value a pragmatic and sensible project like Transition Towns. To us, taking action to show solidarity with the other people who are resisting fossil fuel corporations is one of the most important ways we can combat climate change and must accompany local attempts at sustainability. While this may mean that we must also deal with repression, surveillance or the courts and legal system, if we are united in this position it will be harder for those who are on the frontline of common struggles to be isolated, made an example of or intimidated. Those who benefit from the current system will try to maintain their positions and our only defence is our collective rejection of repressive laws, which try to squash dissent and repeal hard won rights. A diversity of tactics will be used in struggles for transition and this solidarity is key to forming a real grassroots, strong and effective movement.

It is important to remember that millions of people are already suffering from crisis and war around the world due to competition for scarcer and more expensive energy and food, increased migration as environmental and political crises become more frequent, economic instability as well as extreme climate events such as flooding and storms. While these kinds of things mostly seem far away in our country of warm homes and full supermarkets, they are a daily reality for around half of the world's population. And there is an ever-increasing likelihood of the rich West being affected by such problems, as the globe becomes a more connected and more vulnerable place. In such situations, migrants and those seeking asylum are often made scapegoats for a vast range of problems, from increased crime, disease, terrorism, and social cohesion. In times of resource scarcity or

environmental breaking points, perceived newcomers are excluded on the apparently rational grounds that there is not enough to go around. So we can expect a rise in hostility to migrants and policies of exclusion try to gain legitimacy through apparently “environmental” concerns. The BNP (British National Party) have been talking about Peak Oil for years and how it will help them to power (<http://www.bnp.org.uk/peakoil/politics.htm>). Such right wing arguments often use the idea that a place has a finite environmental carrying capacity. This is false for several reasons. Firstly for hundreds of years the engine of economic growth has been fed by the importation of raw materials, slaves, manufactured goods, food and service labour from the majority world to Western Europe and North America. Our environmental carrying capacity was exceeded when societies started to rely upon imports, non-renewable fuels and to irreversibly pollute the atmosphere, water and soil. Secondly, while there are of course physical limits to any place, climate change makes a mockery of concepts such as national borders. The UK may well try to limit immigration as an attempt to retain a quality of life here. But the many millions of environmental refugees are unable to protect themselves from the increased floods, crop failures and desertification, partly caused by the climate changing emissions from the rich north. Just as those fleeing war over natural resources in Iraq and Afghanistan or the Democratic Republic of Congo had no way to preserve their homes and lives. The struggle against the rise of anti immigrant, extreme right groups will be a key part of making a socially just transition. We can't simply pull up the drawbridge and pretend the problems aren't there or not our responsibility. For this reason it's important to develop a transnational approach to our local community organising that recognises how the UK's current position of wealth and privilege is based on long history of enclosure and exploitation across the globe. This position can be used to fight for equality at the same time as local sustainability.

So what if every town in Britain became a transition town?

Of course, that would be a fantastic thing. But will a day come when the chief executives of multinationals, the millionaires and those in political power would just put their hands up and say well that's that then—let's all make the transition because everyone else has? It's a nice thought, but not very likely! If TT initiatives became numerous enough, divides could open up across our society—separating those

who are making the transition, those who are not—and those who simply aren't interested. While of course it's important to make every effort to persuade people to get on board, some people will see transition as a direct threat to the wealth and resources they have gained from the old model. People talk about these kinds of moments as 'dual power' situations that are full of tensions and conflict between different social groups who struggle to preserve either their new gains or their old ways of life. These kinds of situations happen all the time (Russia 1917, Cuba 1958, France 1871, Venezuela, right now). It's less common in Britain due to its powerful central institutions, which are very effective at keeping the status quo. But there could well be conflict if any kind of transition movement started to threaten the privilege of the wealthy.

The idea of TT is to create a model that everyone could agree to. But if everyone can agree with an idea then what exactly is going to change, and how is it different to what went before? Change comes through argument and debate. This is the basis for our democracies. Our society is made up of different classes with very different interests. It is important to realise the extent to which the groups with more power use this to defend their interests—wealth, property, industry etc. They always have done—Britain is an incredibly stable and conservative country not used to change. And this is not just the old monied classes, but people will fiercely defend their recently acquired wealth—the new money that emerged since Thatcherism. More generally it is important to challenge the idea that everyone has the 'right' to consume in our affluent society. Defending interests of the privileged and property classes is the function and origin of almost all legislation in Britain (the emergence of the police force, armies, legal property law, anti vagrancy laws, acts of enclosure etc.). A real transition is actually a social transition. As the slogan goes: Social change not climate change! It can't just be a set of techno-fixes or plans to use energy rationally or decrease carbon emissions.

There's also much talk of 'win-win' situations, creating initiatives that can please very different groups. But at some point someone has to lose. This might only mean reducing our incredibly abundant consumer society, limiting our use of resources or getting used to a simpler life. But for many people this will feel like losing and will be reacted against like it is a loss. If we are looking for win-win situations, then we are looking for easy victories, which actually may be very little in the way of steps forward. Once we are well on our way to a transition future what will a low energy UK actually look like? A scene from 1950s Heartbeat? MadMax? Or something similar to a very poor city slum? Whatever it actually is (which is impossible to define here

and now) we have to be honest about what we are proposing and what feasibly can and cannot be part of our future. At the same time transition is about being ambitious enough in the light of the scale of change that is required.

What models of organising are being used?

As we mentioned earlier, the Transition initiative has its origins in the permaculture-inspired Kinsale Energy Descent Plan. The three main permaculture principles of earth care, fair share and people care are the guiding lights of a system of design and implementation, which involves designing systems that recycle energy as much as possible and are self-sustaining. As the TT network say: “we used immense amounts of creativity, ingenuity and adaptability on the way up the energy up slope, and that there's no reason for us not to do the same on the down slope.”

This is a really progressive model. The bigger challenge is how this model becomes shared by many rather than by a small number of practitioners or gatekeepers. We need to question models that look to a few experts for the answers, especially when these people are mostly well-educated, white males. What other voices are not represented? The most resilient and durable ways of organising are those where decisions are made, understood and implemented widely, reducing reliance on fixed leaders or fixed ideas. While it is understandable that people look to effective projects and places for inspiration and examples, a reliance on fixed ideas is also a potential weakness as it limits creativity, flexibility to local contexts and does not allow for autonomous decisions. Effective movements have to build in this broad participation from the start. Sure, many people are used to having someone in charge and charismatic strong leaders can be an effective way to mobilise people. But they can also be non-constructive and leave movements exposed to the whims and ideals of a small number of people who could decide to leave at any point. If things don't work out, leaders can easily be blamed, co-opted, and marginalised making the wider group or movement vulnerable. Centralised organising also asks the other participants to trust that leaders remain a benign influence and don't renege on promises, or worse create cliques to push their agendas through.

The role for local government that is emerging, favoured by government officials and transition initiatives alike, is “supporting, not driving.”

We always knew that local government would play a crucial role in Transition Initiatives in the UK and Ireland. And over the recent months, we’re seeing that role emerge from both the existing transitioning communities and from new communities in the earliest stages of contact with us. Our first surprise was just how willing the local councils are to engage meaningfully with existing transition initiatives. Our second is the number of communities where the first person to contact us is from the local council. This is a recent phenomenon, and one that we welcome wholeheartedly. (From the Transition Towns Primer)

At the moment in the national TT network, there are paid staff, who aim to galvanise supporters and encourage new initiatives. In local groups volunteers through working groups push the process forward. In some cases this is through a hub group, where communication between groups occurs and networks develop. Other TT projects have been quick to look for funding for paid positions to do administration roles, pay for office space etc. Setting up an office with paid staff raises questions that have to be addressed. What relationship exists between paid staff and other volunteers, and all the other people who are meant to be part of the transition? Who does the money come from and what restrictions or reciprocal

arrangements do funders want? How are the paid people accountable, chosen and democratically representative, if this really is a participatory movement? What happens when the funding runs out? This model is often justified by ideas of efficiency of organising, but there is also a real danger that it will alienate people from feeling responsibility for the process. Another guiding principle of TT that is equally controversial is that of co-operation with the local Council.

Again here, pragmatic arguments can be made for such an approach but there are many lessons to be learned from the experience of environmental charities and NGOs who have been working using a similar model for the last thirty years. Agenda 21 was heralded as the beginning of sustainable planning at a council level, but what happened here is very instructive. As someone involved recalled,

This global initiative that started at the 1992 Rio World summit for sustainability had so much potential. In one group in Liverpool it transpired that Cargill, (the agro-business giant), were sponsoring the LA21 campaign. Very soon a potentially strong grassroots movement was co-opted and lost within local authority structures and simply became

a useful greenwash alongside the 'business as usual' economic model.

It is in governments' interest to recuperate and co-opt this kind of initiative as a way to deflect criticisms and to satisfy those calling for real change. Elected representatives also bring resources and 'professionalism' and are trusted to make all the fundamental decisions so generally people can defer responsibility and stay passive. An easy way to neutralise a good idea is to simply employ your critics to work for you - absorb the idea and deradicalise it. So transition towns could become another adjunct of government policy. If we do not guard against it, they will give it an office and it will sit alongside economic growth as one of the shining examples that government can use to say that it is doing all it can, when in fact it cannot do anything of the sort.

It is useful here to remember another context. Back in 2005, a large coalition of NGOs and community groups joined the government under the banner of 'Make Poverty History' during the 2005 meeting of the G8 in Scotland. Despite the hard work by many people to achieve real change, what resulted from this movement was largely a de-radicalisation and clever government co-option of a potentially effective anti-poverty movement. The results are there for us to see. A heady mix of Bono, Sir Bob Geldof and Gordon Brown convinced us that everything possible was being done to tackle global poverty, when looking back we now know that very little was done, especially in relation to the pledge to increase the proportion of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) that is spent on aid. One outcome was that the G8, an unelected global institution, was further legitimised by the positive publicity lent to it, which allowed it to evade criticism and scrutiny even further. Some South African commentators drew the link from Geldof's previous attempts to solve global hunger twenty years ago, which failed because they ignored the countervailing roles of imperial power relations, capital accumulation, unreformable global institutions and venal local elites.

These problems repeated and indeed amplified in Live 8 and the message became one of handouts and charity, not one of liberation defined by Africans themselves or the reality that we are actually resisting neo-colonialism and neoliberalism ourselves. (Charles Abugre, head of policy for Christian Aid, one of the organisations in the MPH coalition, from the Carbon Neutral Myth.)

The history of the Green Party is also fascinating in this respect. In the UK, a set of really transformatory ideas have emerged from the Green Party based around low carbon, relocalised economies which are

quietly put to one side when they enter the pragmatic negotiations of coalition power in local government. While one of the most progressive Green Parties in the world in Germany has brought many environmental changes, it has stopped being an oppositional force to transform society, and instead has become a useful way to green the capitalist economy. Concessions were made in order to stay in power rather than sticking to the more radical guiding principles, such as dropping the commitment to a nuclear disarmament policy. Other instances include active support for deployment of German troops and the overseeing of repressive policies against those resisting trains transporting nuclear waste. These acts have seriously damaged the very potent German environmental movement.

The TT movement needs to have a serious discussion about its relationship to central and local government, as these might be the biggest obstacles there are to a real transition. In the end, groups will develop models and ways of working which reflect the nature of their town or neighbourhood—each with their own mix of local institutions and individuals. In one place, a progressive council may play a strong role; in another it might not play a role at all, or even be a major block. Whatever happens, local control over how the process evolves should be respected. TT is well placed to fulfil the Government's objectives for 'complimentary government'. In the whole move to 'double devolution' (from White Hall to Town Hall, then to the people), the Government is looking for opportunities to "empower" local communities, as long as they implement government policy that doesn't rock the boat, which normally has little to do with transition, as we understand it. So in the push for community empowerment, TT initiatives could quite quickly find themselves running bits of the welfare state—gardens, community services, local food - absolving the local state even more of its responsibilities. This may be a good thing in terms of getting things running along the lines of a transition, but currently taxes are paid to ensure free access to these services. Would local taxes be accordingly reduced, and would transition initiatives receive their slice of the municipal budget? And where would Government put the savings in public expenditure? Can cycle lanes, allotments and renewable energy contend with surveillance, military spending, subsidies for big business or the public debt in the current model of organising society?

Looking at anti-globalisation, feminist, peace and peasant movements, from around the world, one can see that there many other ways of organising that involve participatory tools to enhance direct democracy. Consensus decision-making, participatory budgeting, spokes councils, group facilitation, skill sharing and popular education are just some of the ways to ensure people genuinely participate

rather than just being consulted on issues. The open source movement (including everything from Indymedia and Wikipedia to Free Software) is also a great example of how peer-to-peer democracy can work, and how many eyes focused on certain problems can come up with more workable solutions that are widely consented upon and collectively owned. What is key here is that deferment of responsibility is one cause of the current situation, people are largely divorced from the effects of their lifestyles. Taking back control and responsibility will not come from a quick fix but will need time for people to learn co-operation, mutual aid and solidarity.

But doesn't the huge threat of climate change mean that this time, people really will change?

All the evidence about the real prospect of 'dangerous' climate change is there, especially through the recent IPCC Fourth Synthesis Report. Climate change does present more striking evidence than ever that a finite planet cannot support infinite growth. Although there are certainly positive signs of action, it is dangerous to assume that knowledge about any particular issue will result in any set of actions, as people's responses will depend on their education, background, family and economic position. We are up against so many problems on a global scale: wars, slavery, the loss of common assets, colonisation, privatisation, environmental devastation, massive social inequality, spiralling debt, neo liberal free trade agreements, racist immigration controls to name a few. One way to understand the lack of real change is that in face of this barrage of problems, a large proportion are often too disempowered, defeated or distracted to respond to, or act upon, climate change. However, focussing on individual action negates the importance of structural change and working on the way we do things collectively. It is not just powerful groups of people who obstruct change but the many complex systems of race, gender, class that maintain social hierarchies.

It is useful here to clarify between two very different types of changes. There are possible environmental improvements in a *place* (recycling or reducing pollution in a local river for example) and environmental improvements to a *system* (stabilising carbon in the global atmosphere for example). The crucial point is that no causal relationship can be assumed between the two types of change. For example making environmental improvements in our communities does not necessarily make improvements of the second type, like protecting global ecosystems. For this we need very different kinds of

changes such as institutional reorganisation, curbing corporate power and drastically shifting the way the economy and consumer society works. These involve confronting all sorts of vested interests and wealthy elites and it is here that we have to be realistic about what kinds of changes we can achieve without some kind of overarching societal change. Many changes to a place can be made, but they don't really add up to a long lasting and substantial transition, not least globally. So while local food or local recycling and sustainable consumption are essential to inspire and galvanise people equally important are the movements that are committed to making more difficult changes which will protect the wider shared global eco systems. Depressingly, what previous struggles would suggest though is that powerful groups will do everything they can to dig themselves in and protect their position rather than give up concessions. Essentially this is because they are protecting and sustaining the current system at whatever cost. Acceptance that it is this system that lays at the root cause is the only way to truly tackle climate change.

So what's the way forward?

This is not a call for a blueprint for change or a purist critique of TT. Instead it is a call to consider transition towns not as existing in their own bubble, however appealing this prospect may be. TTs are ultimately subject to the same order of oppression, class structure, entrenched power, and vested interests as everything else in the UK. Each place and locality is woven together by networks of power, which have been formed over centuries. But if this structural reality is incorporated in to our plans then we can begin to recognise this and use our diversity for strength. TTs are based on the idea that communities can create different systems, but this is only possible if the malignant forces and entrenched power that people have been struggling against for hundreds of years are recognised, challenged and TTs become a political force for change. Putting things in their historical and political context reminds us that transition will be an inherently political and social movement. To make any real policy changes, communities need room for manoeuvre at a local level—they need power and resources. The nature of the relationship with the local council and the position on local economy and business will determine what these kinds of initiatives can achieve. They must not become an appendix to the local state or preserving pockets of sustainability for a privileged few or they will simply be dead in the water.

The state is part of the problem and clearly does not have all the answers nor can it co-ordinate all the responses. Relying on one institution is not a resilient way to adapt to the changes that are needed. At the recent December 2007 UN meeting on Climate Change in Bali leaders showed their lack of political will and ability to deal with and implement the level of change that is needed. The raft of international legislation from Kyoto targets to market-based mechanisms such as carbon trading and offsetting is poorly conceived, inadequate and not extensive enough to deal with the challenges we have only begun to outline here. More relevant is the Durban Group for Climate Justice, an international network of independent organisations, individuals and people's movements who reject free market approaches to dealing with climate change. They are committed to help building a global grassroots movement for climate justice, mobilising communities around the world and acting in solidarity with people opposing carbon trading on the ground (See climatejustice.blogspot.com).

One of the main obstacles to change is that Britain is one of the most politically centralised countries in Europe. Parliament and Whitehall are extremely powerful. Only as genuinely popular power emerges at a local level can each place have a mature debate about what we are up against, what a transition might mean and how best to govern itself. Although Transition Towns have the potential to build momentum and excitement for this to happen, it may only do so if this long-term goal is kept clearly in focus. And this popular power needs to find ways to challenge centralised seats of power. What this would look like or how it would happen is difficult to say but power is not often gained without a struggle. But if groups can become connected, develop strategy, are prepared to win arguments and are not afraid to fight for and defend their gains then a meaningful transition is entirely possible. A sure fire way of creating a movement with little impact or potential to be co-opted is to ignore the bigger challenges, what we are trying to transition away from, and to think that it will all be easy and can be left to others to do it for us. This just gets people's hopes up, and blinds us to the tasks at hand. If numerous enough, these initiatives could begin to weaken capitalism and provide workable alternative models for the way we organise society.

Throughout the centuries many alternative experiments and communities have existed to show ways of building this popular power. There are countless examples here of groups taking back power to make the decisions that effect them. To give a few examples, the Kenyan People's Parliament, where for fifteen years people have held meetings, as equals and co-operated to change their material and

social conditions, from the grassroots up, “without selling out, and without giving up’. Ujaama villages in Tanzania, who are experimenting with a new model for settlements and who argue that, ‘What we need to develop is people, not things, and that people can only develop themselves.’ Venezuelan Land Committees, which are about reclaiming land but also people debating, agreeing, and taking action collectively about things that directly affect every aspect of their daily lives. The unemployed workers movement and occupied factories in Argentina, landless peasant movements from around the world, the list goes on. The Putney Debates that took place in St Mary’s Church in London around Cromwell’s New Model Army during the seventeenth century English Civil war should also inspire us. This is a great example of how a broad popular movement in England once challenged the established elite when ordinary soldiers debated about the need for equality and freedom and to turn the unequal social order literally on it’s head.

Things could go in many different directions and it’s important to be aware of likely changes to come. In this unknown territory of climate change, despite all our scientific knowledge, there are many uncertainties. What is clear though is that we don’t want to find ourselves sleepwalking into a green police state as we all rush to find ways to protect the environment. Here we might find a kind of ecological version of the future depicted in the recent film ‘*Children of Men*’—strict government controlled carbon rationing, fortress Europe to keep out ‘foreigners’ who might put too many extra stresses on our environment and resources, tight centrally planned forms of production and consumption. This is a familiar vision—people can’t be trusted so we need even more discipline and regulation to run Britain. Big business gets what it wants while ordinary people’s freedoms and liberties are curtailed even more and gross global inequality is increased. This is a ‘khaki green state’, the ‘invisible hand’ of the market with the ‘iron fist’ of the state, a kind of ecological version of Thomas Hobbes’ Leviathan. On the other side, there is a ‘transformatory green society’—a radical, locally

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accountable and participatory democracy where people are trusted, empowered and active, based around strong notions of equity, autonomy, lower production, participatory localised economies that meet basic needs, with good co-ordination and without a strong centralised, disciplining state.

So what does this mean in practice? How can these ideas be incorporated into the Transition movement in a way that does not alienate, confuse or cause friction and factions? A first step could be the simple recognition that to make a real transition, there will be both creation and resistance. All the local endeavours such as community food projects need to be accompanied by powerful movements, which both defend the gains that these projects can make and also take direct action against whatever problems people identify in their locality, for example the monopoly of supermarkets or the return of GM crops to the UK. Secondly, the 'great re-skilling' that can address practical issues such as how to grow our own food, could be made more powerful if combined with popular education and dialogue about the current economic and political system. Continuing the example of food, we should look at the way that the industrial agricultural model has been developed from a particular worldview that excludes many others. Through such activities, the uniting force of common ground we can find together as a basis to act against symptoms that we identify, reject the false solutions that are being proposed, and act in solidarity with people wherever they are who are also struggling to make a real transition. One reason why transition is so urgent here is to address the fact that rich industrialised societies such as Britain are historically responsible for the vast majority of global emissions. The global wealth gap was built on this 'ecological debt' and the world's poorest are now paying both dubious foreign financial debts and already suffering from the rapidly changing climate. Let's not retreat to a purely localised sphere of action but recognise that not only the Earth's ecosystems but also the majority of its people have been damaged by the structures that have created this imbalance. This is an opportunity to share our global wealth and technological resources and to challenge the underlying economic and political structures that drive the fossil fuel economy.

TT argues that communities can shape things as they like and we support this ethic of doing it ourselves. But this is only realistic if people are also prepared to take on the vested interests in the media, government and business. Rejecting systems of control that only benefit a minority and defending our right to self-organisation are the bedrock of a real transition. There is an enormous amount to do, but the knowledge, resources and commitment do exist and there are

countless examples of grass roots movements that are on this path to learn from and strategise with. We are not suggesting that any of this will be easily achieved - it will be a rocky road. But, we believe this could lead to a real transition that isn't afraid to challenge power. The threats of climate change and peak oil provide opportunities for us to challenge some of the basic assumptions about how our society is organised, ask who are the winners and the losers, and rejuvenate our political processes and communities. There is a lot at stake, and many obstacles along the way but being both ambitious and clear about where we want to go is the first, most important step. And this is the least we owe to ourselves.

Postscript

Since May, there have been some lively debates on-line, within Transition groups, at workshops etc. Issues raised here seem to have tapped into wider questions and debates that crop up as we all try and make sense of the multiple crises we are facing. One thing for sure, that didn't come out in the text is how much diversity exists between Transition Initiatives. Many groups are busy considering these questions and many have welcomed the intervention that we made. Secondly, there seems to be widespread belief that that we need to work using a range of tactics, all that we have available to us. It is key to distinguish between issues of strategy and those of tactics. While we may agree that a tactic of community localisation is appropriate, we may be working towards quite different strategical ends. It is these questions that we believe are they most interesting to consider. What are we trying to save, and for whose benefit? Thirdly, questions of inclusivity. The far right question has arisen many times. To what extent are we open to all? On the other side of the coin, many anti-capitalists have expressed opinions that they themselves are excluded. Fourthly, some very hopeful points have been made. Individuals have expressed relief at being involved in a purely 'positive' project, having felt burned out with years of opposing things through campaigning. We are keen to foster and continue these discussions.

Websites

Carbon Trade Watch
www.carbontradewatch.org

Contraction and convergence
www.gci.org.uk/contconv/cc.html

Corporate Watch, arguments against CSR
www.corporatewatch.org.uk/?lid=2688

Durban Group for Climate Justice
www.carbontradewatch.org/durban

Green Party
www.greenparty.org.uk

Intergovernmental panel on Climate Change
www.ipcc.ch

No Borders UK
noborders.org.uk/Articles/EnvironmentalRefugees

ParEcon
www.zmag.org/parecon

Permaculture Association
www.permaculture.org.uk

Richard Heinberg, author of *The Party's Over: Oil, War and The Fate of Industrial Societies*
www.richardheinberg.com

Rising Tide, taking action on the root causes of climate change
risingtide.org.uk

The Camp for Climate Action
www.climatecamp.org.uk

Transition culture, Rob Hopkins website
transitionculture.org

Transition Town website
www.transitiontowns.org
transitionnetwork.org/Primer/TransitionInitiativesPrimer.pdf

Tyndall Centre for Climate Change

www.tyndall.ac.uk

UK Climate Impact Programme

www.ukcip.org.uk

UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (Bali)

unfccc.int/2860.php

