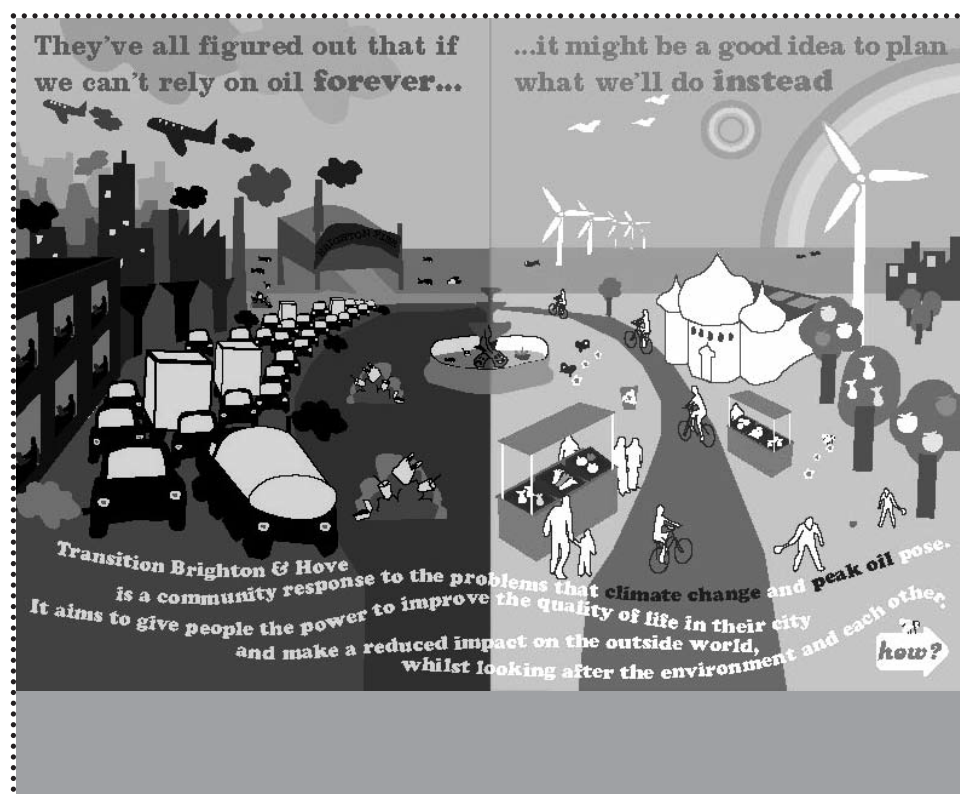


FROM CLIMATE CHANGE AND PEAK OIL TO THE TRANSITION TOWNS MOVEMENT:

BUILDING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

„The challenges presented to us today by global warming and peak oil (and gas) are perhaps the greatest that humanity has faced. This time brings a great opportunity for rethinking the way we live and making conscious choices about what kind of community and world we would like to live in. Change is coming whether we like it or not – and a planned response to the change will leave us in a much stronger position than if we wait until change is upon us.”¹

The Transition Towns Movement is a radical community level response to two critical situations: climate change and the expected energy crisis, summed up in the ideas around ‘peak oil’. It has grown, primarily within the English speaking countries, at a phenomenal rate since its inception in Kinsale, Ireland in 2005, the network now linking together 278 official working Transition Initiatives in 10 countries, with 1000s more on the so – called ‘mulling it over’ list.



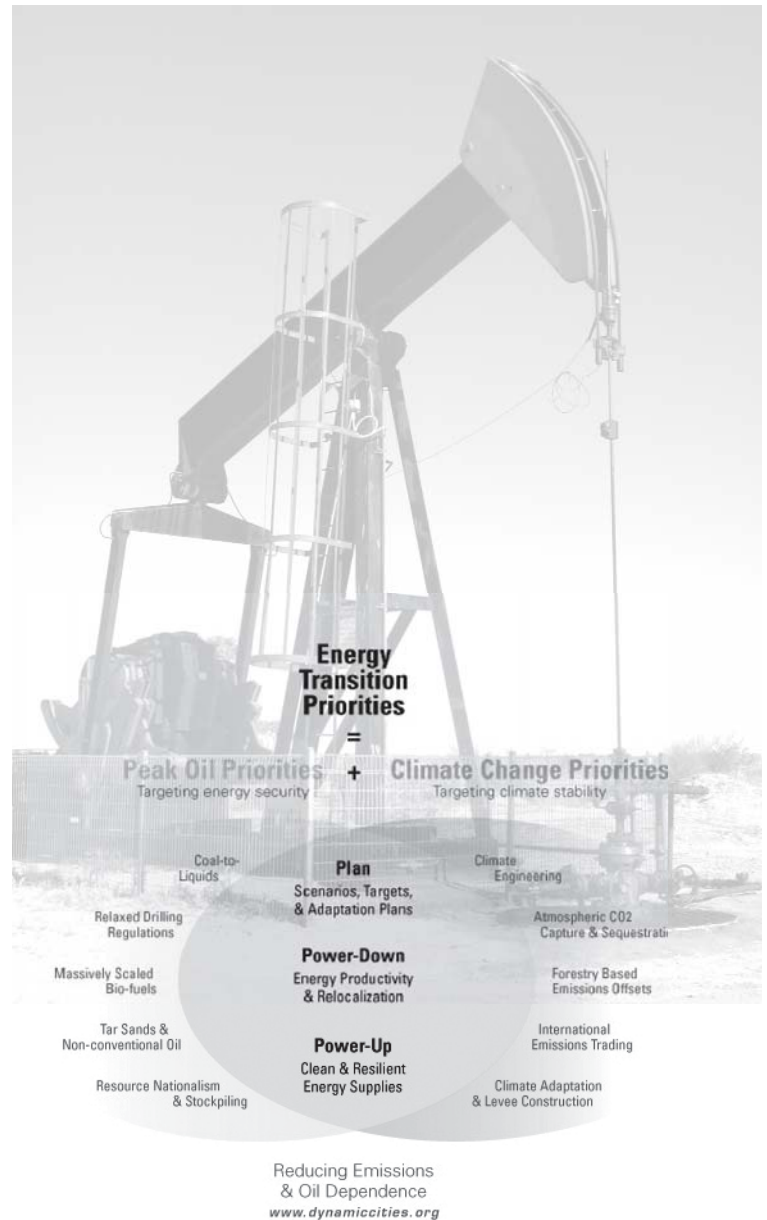
While the name suggests – correctly – that Transition is made up of towns going through some sort of period of change, the reality is more diverse than this: villages, towns, cities, districts make up the backbone of what is better known as the Transition Movement, but we can add to this the farms, hubs, and churches, and in a supportive role, city councils and governmental bodies like, for example, the Scottish Executive. Transition is an idea which has grabbed peoples’ imagination, empowered them, and helped channel energy into progressive community action for community resilience in the face of climate change and peak oil.

¹ Introduction: <http://totnes.transitionnetwork.org/>

FROM CLIMATE CHANGE AND PEAK OIL TO TRANSITION

According to the Transition movement, waiting for climate friendly technologies that promise a business as usual future is not an option due to the cost constraints of Peak Oil. Whether we have already peaked, are now peaking, or are about to peak is an ongoing debate, well documented in many sources. As time goes on it will perhaps become rather indulgently academic.² At the same time, the practicalities of reorganising a society based on cheap oil will become ever more urgent.

This is the challenge the Transition Movement has taken up: to plan, power down, and create local alternatives. More than just a pragmatic decision, it is a visionary and a political choice; the goal of Transition is building community resilience based on mutual aid, cooperation and locally available resources, rather than reliance on systems competing on unstable global markets to deliver vital needs. It's about revaluing traditional local skills and services, understanding, repairing and rebuilding community support networks, and creating a sustainable relationship with the local environment. Inherent in Transition is a critique of consumerism, of neo-liberal economics, of economic globalisation, and of the atomisation and alienation of technocratic, consumer society. It has an underlying assumption, that politics are the nuts and bolts of everyday life, not the craft of political elite. While Transition engages with politics, mostly at council level, emphasis is on creating strong local support for policy makers to react to, rather than lead or co-opt.



Central to Transition are two key issues: Climate change and peak oil, with an underlying radical vision of community empowerment and resilience.

² "The debate over exactly when we will reach "peak oil" is irrelevant. No matter what new oil fields we discover, global oil production will start declining in 2030 at the very latest." Why the 'peak oil' debate is irrelevant, Shanta Barley, New Scientist Online, 8 October 2009.

A CHANGING CLIMATE:

“The commitments made during the international negotiations don’t even give us a 50% chance of avoiding dangerous climate change”³

The urgency of this situation is constantly unfolding: a few months prior to the International Conference on Climate Change in Copenhagen 2010, a UN Environment Programme report provided more bad news for the already dismal debate: recent data suggests that in many critical areas the pace of change is actually outstripping the IPCC’s predictions:⁴ the global climate is destabilising faster than this body of scientists had previously calculated, with faster temperature rises, a faster rate of Arctic melt, new concerns about acidification of sea water, and a jump in greenhouse gas concentration to above that upon which the ‘worst modelled scenario’ had been based. United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon called climate change “the pre-eminent geopolitical and economic issue of the 21st century. It rewrites the global equation for development, peace and prosperity.”⁵ He was hopeful. Far from rewriting anything, the sum resulting from positioning between distrustful powers at COP15 in Copenhagen, framed as the ‘make it or break it’ and the last chance for a post-Kyoto climate agreement, totalled little more than zero, a weak accord without binding commitments.⁶

To anyone attempting to keep up with climate change debates, the massive quantity of often contradictory information, the acronyms and the technical and policy measures is daunting. The Transition Initiative set a very practical aim: a basic ‘climate literacy’ should underpin local organising, but information needs to be used to empower and we should avoid ‘information overload’, which can confuse and debilitate.



“Tackling climate change & enhancing energy security require a massive decarbonisation of the energy system.

We are now on course for a 6°C temperature rise & rising energy costs.

The challenge is enormous – but it can and must be met.

Improved energy efficiency & technology deployment are critical. Each year of delay adds \$500 bn to mitigation costs between today & 2030”

Tanaka, Nobuo,
Executive Director International Energy Agency,
Press Presentation on World Energy Outlook 2009,
London.



³ “A nemzetközi tárgyalásokon tett felajánlások 50 % esélyt sem adnak arra, hogy elkerüljük a veszélyes klímaváltozást „, A nemzetközi és uniós éghajlat politikai keretrendszer, előadás 2009., Feiler József, Jövő Nemzedékek Országgyűlési Biztosának Hivatala

⁴ <http://www.unep.org/compendium2009/>

⁵ Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, 22 September 2009. Opening remarks to the United Nations Climate Change Summit Plenary

⁶ Google ‘cop 15 Copenhagen, and decide for yourself!

PEAK OIL:



“The end-of-the-fossil-carbon-scenario is not a doom and gloom picture predicted by end-of-the-world prophets, but a view of scarcity in coming years and decades that must be taken seriously”⁷

A Transition talk on peak oil starts with a simple challenge: “take a look around and find something in the room that doesn’t involve oil in some way.” Try it. It’s not an easy task. It is however a question that needs asking. Farming and food production, clothes, household goods, medicines, heating and cooling systems, transport, are totally dependent on a cheap and continuous supply of oil-based inputs in the form of energy or chemicals. Unlike renewable sources, which cannot run out, oil and other fossil fuels availability are based on stocks not flows. These stocks are being depleted.

⁹From the start of the 1900s, plentiful oil allowed a coal-based industrialised society to massively accelerate its “development”. From that time, each year there has been more oil (apart from the two oil shocks in the 1970s when Middle East crises caused worldwide recessions). And each year, society increased its complexity, its mechanisation, its globalised connectedness and its energy consumption levels.

According to the UK Energy Research Council, having reviewed 500 up-to-date reports, “global production of oil is declining at a rate of 4 per cent per year in existing oil fields ... (and) to maintain global oil production at today's level we would need to discover the equivalent of a new Saudi Arabia every 3 years.”⁸

“Peak Oil is not about “running out of oil” – we’ll never run out of oil. There will always be oil left in the ground because either it’s too hard to reach or it takes too much energy to extract...

Peak Oil is about the end of cheap and plentiful oil, the recognition that the ever increasing volumes of oil being pumped into our economies will peak and then inexorably decline. It’s about understanding how our industrial way of life is absolutely dependent on this ever-increasing supply of cheap oil.

The problems start when we’ve extracted around half of the recoverable oil. At this point, the oil gets more expensive (in cash and energy terms) to extract, is slower flowing and of a lower quality. At this point, for the first time in history, we aren’t able to increase the amount of oil that’s coming out of the ground, being refined and reaching the market.

At this point, oil supply plateaus and then declines, with massive ramifications for industrialised societies. Very few people are paying attention to this phenomenon, and it’s easy to understand why.¹⁰

⁷ Energy prospects after the petroleum age, Deutsche Bank, 2004.

⁸ New Scientist Online, 8 Oct. 2009. Steve Sorrell, senior researcher at UKERC, UK Energy Research Centre.

⁹ Hubble’s bell, Wikipedia

¹⁰ <http://transitionnetwork.org/Primer/TransitionInitiativesPrimer.pdf>, author: Ben Brangwyn

Peak Oil scenarios have generally been regarded as marginal ‘scaremongering’ by industry preferring to concentrate on questions of access and technology, rather than availability. However, with the publishing of the Hurst report in 2005, commissioned by the US department of energy, the issue became more mainstream:

“The peaking of world oil production presents the U.S. and the world with an unprecedented risk management problem. As peaking is approached, liquid fuel prices and price volatility will increase dramatically, and, without timely mitigation, the economic, social, and political costs will be unprecedented. Viable mitigation options exist on both the supply and demand sides, but to have substantial impact, they must be initiated more than a decade in advance of peaking.”¹¹

Now even the International Energy Agency, long a supporter of a more optimistic technocratic view, has admitted that *“the output of conventional oil will peak in 2020 if oil demand grows on a business-as-usual basis.”*

However, it is important to note that those optimistic about the smooth flow of oil are calculating with reserves that lie beyond the pale, with ‘control’ of emissions that relies on expensive experimental technologies such as carbon capture and storage. The reference to conventional oil implies there are *unconventional* sources: one such example is the Canadian tar sands, bitumen and sand deposits spread out over 138 000 km² of land (an area the size of England) and including 4.3 million hectares of Boreal Forest. Extracting and refining these deposits requires 3-5 times the energy used for conventional sources, with 3-5 times the carbon emissions: this industry has been described by Greenpeace as “the biggest environmental crime in history”. But it is not only environmentalists who are protesting: due to Shell’s involvement, Shell’s own shareholders presently plan a ‘revolt’, at the 2010 AGM, raising *“concerns for the long-term success of the company arising from the risks associated with oil sands.”¹²*

¹¹ Peaking of World Oil Production: Impacts, Mitigation & Risk Management. Robert L. Hirsch, SAIC

¹² Co-operative Asset Management and 141 other institutional and individual shareholders due to present resolution at Shell AGM, May 2010, according to Guardian, ‘Shell faces shareholder revolt over Canadian tar sands project’, Terry MacAllister, Jan 18. 2010.

¹³ Coal: Resources and Future Production, 47 page report by Energy Watch group, March 28, 2007 (revised July 10, 2007)

¹⁴ “It makes no sense to provide precise forecasts of when a peak in oil production will occur. The data is unreliable, there are multiple factors to consider and a ‘bumpy plateau’ seems more likely than a sharp peak. But we can say that the window is narrowing rapidly. The effects of global oil depletion will depend greatly on the response from governments and on the scale of investment in new energy technologies.” Press release, UKERC Report Finds ‘Significant Risk’ of Oil Production Peaking in Ten Years, Oct. 2009. Steve Sorrell, senior researcher at UKERC, UK Energy Research Centre.

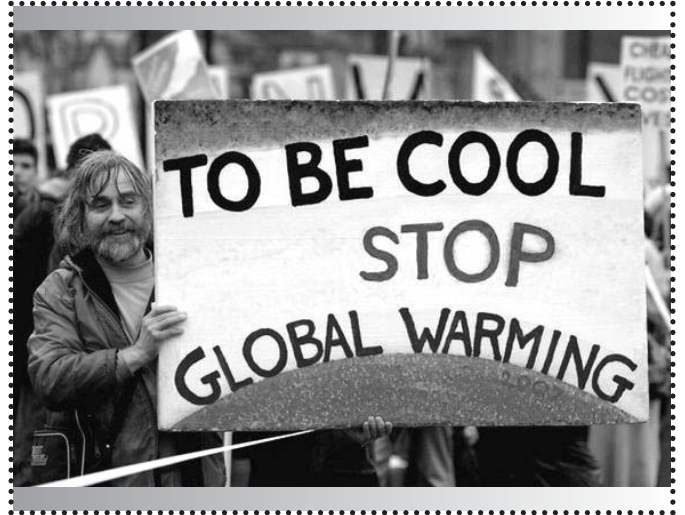
Peaking is not restricted to oil, most of nature’s other resources are also under severe stress. However, if we just looking at energy, it is important to know that coal, uranium and natural gas are all expected to peak within the first half of the century¹³. Like oil, this depends on a vast number of variants, including the costs of investment in new technologies, the costs of meeting restrictions placed by climate change obligations, and the price consumers can pay¹⁴. However we regard the oil barrel – as half full, or half empty – the options for simply adapting to other fossil sources are becoming similarly limited.



Photo courtesy Ben Block. Daniel T'seleie protests oil sands operations, which he says could threaten his nation's waterways. First Nations protest, Copenhagen Climate Talks.

TRANSITION - A LITTLE SUBJECTIVE BACKGROUND:

Britain has a long tradition of community self-organising, grass-roots environmentalism, and direct action, as well as a 'healthy' scepticism about the ability of the government – any government – to 'get things done'. Traditions such as 'common sense' encourage a sense of capability within the population, which perhaps allows increased confidence when dealing with complex issues. The climate issue is a major concern amongst the public, who have organised in coalitions such as Stop Climate Chaos, a broad movement with a combined supporter base of **more than 11 million**, spanning over 100 organisations¹⁵ from environment and development charities to unions, faith, community and women's groups. This is the background, or the context within which Transition operates, hence while its approach is focused on the local, this compliments work being done at policy level and internationally, or in direct action movements such as the Climate Camp.¹⁶



A protester holds a banner during a demonstration against climate change in London_Photo_Reuters



¹⁵ <http://www.stopclimatechaos.org/about>

¹⁶ <http://climatecamp.org.uk>

A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO SOCIAL CHANGE:

Activism needs support, creating change is demanding. The Transition Network and Transition Culture offer a growing range of tools and processes to support communities taking on change.

- There are the '**12 steps**' – practical advice on creating an initiative, including planning the demise of the founding group, creating space for celebrating and acknowledging success, drawing on local wisdom and skills, and creating links with local government.¹⁷
- There are the **6 principles**: positive visioning, inclusion, awareness-raising, resilience, developing psychological insight, encouraging credible and appropriate solutions. The latter refers to avoiding the 'light-bulb syndrome': climate change will take more than changing a light bulb, hence make sure solutions are explored that are credible.
- There are the '**7 buts**' – deconstructing the usual responses people have which block action and demotivate: "we've got no money – it's too late – no one else cares – I'm not qualified..."
- There are online **tools** for visioning, for creating productive community discussion, as well as internet tools such as forum and the wiki which complement local organising skills based on friendship networks and community ties.
- It encourages use of **community resources** as a source of wealth, relying on ideas, borrowing, sharing and self-funding or fundraising. Some Transition initiatives have sought and won outside funding, but this is rather the exception than the rule.



- Regular bulletins **spread ideas** across the network, of useful and innovative community action to spread inspiration.
- Transition is also about **identity**; those involved relate strongly to their approach, their goals and the movement, creating strong bonds in their own community and across the networks.

While being careful of one size fits all solutions, the Transition Movement concentrates on opening up pathways for action by spelling out, perhaps didactically, the first steps. Tools such as Transition Timelines, and pilot projects such as the Transition Streets programme provide support for new community activists and a chance to gain experience without also having to dream everything up.

¹⁷ <http://transitiontowns.org/TransitionNetwork/12Steps>



TRANSITION ISSUES:

The majority of local Transition Initiatives work on some of the following issues:



ENCOURAGING LOCALISED

FOOD: seed swaps, community gardens, farmers markets, food cooperatives, local diet 'challenges', compost schemes, fruit and nut tree planting, urban agriculture, garden shares, tool banks, food box-community supported agriculture schemes, replanting orchards, mapping wild-foods, community harvest events, permaculture courses, community supported agriculture.

SUPPORTING SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORT:

supporting local amenities within walking distance, car share pools, cycle clubs, Bikes 4 all projects, repair workshops, campaigns for public transport provision.



LOW CARBON-ZERO

CARBON ENERGY: Developing energy descent action plans, ESCO programmes, community insulation teams, low energy building projects, community renewable purchases, energy auditing.

STRENGTHENING LOCAL ECONOMY:

organising swap systems, local currency (LETS), creating green businesses, community based fundraising, business to business waste reuse systems.

HEART AND SOUL: visioning, creating celebrations, reconnecting with community and natural world, communication skills, conflict resolution skills.



TRANSITION NEWS:

- Transition in the UK has benefitted from a recent funding pot of £50 million called 'The Local Food Fund' which has been specifically created in order to help drive local food initiatives forward. City farms can be found in most cities, and even some artists have now begun seeing edible landscaping as an art form. Boris Johnson in London has initiated a programme to get 2012 food-producing gardens in place in time for the Olympics, and Blue Peter (a popular children's programme) recently dug out its garden and put in vegetable beds. Manchester City Council is planning to spend £200,000 planting fruits, nuts and vegetables in every one of the city's parks.¹⁸



- Following the success of the first issue of its own local currency, Lewes, a town of 50 000, is issuing its own money for the second time. Money spent locally circulates within, and benefits the local economy. Money spent in national chains doesn't. The Lewes Pound encourages demand for local goods and services. In turn this builds resilience to the rising costs of energy, transport and food. The Lewes Pound also benefits shoppers by creating stronger and more local shops, increasing a sense of pride in our community, decreasing CO2 emissions and increasing economic resilience. Furthermore, the Lewes Pound benefits local traders by increasing footfall and local business activity, encouraging people to buy local and increasing customer loyalty, highlighting the benefits of local shopping, bringing attention and attracting visitors to Lewes and minimising card-based transaction costs.²¹



- Transition Totnes in the South of England is the 'cradle' of Transition, being the hometown of Rob Hopkins, the movement's main inspiration and founder. Having already successfully introduced its own local currency, began implementing an 'Energy Descent Action Plan'. On December 19th Transition Town Totnes was announced as one of 10 communities across England and Wales to be chosen as a 'Low Carbon Community', and awarded £625,000, specifically for a project called 'Transition Streets', promoting 'Transition Together': at a basic level, neighbours' groups support each other in change, local people receive skills training in energy auditing. Renewable energy audits will be made available, with the most eligible homes receiving support to install photovoltaic cells.²⁰



- Transition Town Kinsale has started operating a Land Train as both a community service and a viable commercial enterprise, aiming to reduce the need for cars in the town centre, make walking more pleasant, cut carbon emissions, and make life in town more fun. The scheme takes kids to school, shoppers to market, workers to offices, and visitors to hospital and has become a tourist attraction.¹⁹

¹⁸ <http://transitionculture.org/2009/09/04/my-introduction-to-local-food-how-to-make-it-happen-in-your-community/> rob

¹⁹ <http://www.transitiontownkinsale.org/projects/rural-transportation.html>

²⁰ <http://transitionculture.org/2009/09/30/transition-together-a-fantastic-new-resource-for-transition-initiatives/>

²¹ <http://www.thelwespound.org/what.html>



THE PERSONAL SIDE - DEALING WITH CRISIS:

“The Great Turning is a name for the essential adventure of our time: the shift from the industrial growth society to a life-sustaining civilization.”²²

“I have really enjoyed working with the Transition Tales project. I feel that this is incredibly worthwhile. We spend a lot of time in education worrying about targets and levels. It has been wonderful to be involved in helping young people to think realistically about their future.”²³

There is a growing popular understanding of the issues surrounding climate change and more and more people – especially young people – are becoming aware of a ‘vision’ of the future where uncertainty, scarcity, conflict, alienation and environmental degradation are part of their future reality. When the implications of energy scarcity are considered alongside this, the overall effect can be traumatising.

Central to the Transition Town movement is the idea that a life without oil could in fact be far more enjoyable and fulfilling than the present *“by shifting our mind-set we can actually recognise the coming post-cheap oil era as an opportunity rather than a threat, and design the future low carbon age to be thriving, resilient and abundant – somewhere much better to live than our current alienated consumer culture based on greed, war and the myth of perpetual growth.”*

Transition philosophy is heavily influenced by the work of Dr. Chris Johnstone, author of ‘The Great Turning Times. A drug dependency therapist, Dr. Johnstone compared our dependency on our destructive society, and our refusal to face up to and act to stop this destruction, as being akin to an addict’s refusal to come to terms with the self-destruction drug addiction can cause. Seeing beyond the problems to the potential solution or a desired change can empower individuals to take on seemingly unwinnable situations.

The psychology of Transition allows people to address their concerns about the changes society is going through, bringing the issues closer and addressing fear and insecurity associated with change. ‘Heart and soul work’ is one of the central areas of Transition work – encouraging people to come to terms with change, search for the positive and work towards it.



“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.” (TransitionTowns.org)

²² Joanna Macy, The Work that Reconnects

²³ Emma Osbourne, Year 7 Curriculum Co-ordinator, <http://transitionculture.org/2008/07/10/an-update-on-transition-tales-powerdown-training-in-school/>



TRANSITION FUTURES:

Transition outreach.

Transition is so far largely a middle class, white, middle-aged movement that has tapped into discontentment in largely affluent communities. Does Transition work for inner cities, for young people, the South? Positive new directions are expected from bridging the class gulf and welding the knowledge and energy of working class communities and communities in conflict and their experience with the creative and visionary ideas in Transition. Effort is already being put into addressing the cultural limitations of Transition, results of which have yet to be seen.

Transition and the South.

Following COP 15, Transition Movement began to debate its own relevance in other contexts. The parallels in innovative community organising responding to urgent needs can be seen across the people's movements of the South, for example the Porto alegre participatory budgeting process, the Landless farmers' movements, Kenya's tree planting movements, the South African electricity action groups. Participation of Transition in the COP15 provides possibilities for passing on these ideas within the wider movement.

Transition Solidarity.

There are opportunities to strengthen an understanding about global interdependencies and the urgency of action between peoples when intergovernmental inaction is characterised by mistrust. Should Transition contribute to a people – based reduction in carbon emissions, in the best case with support from facilitating local, national and international legislation and conventions, it will contribute towards creating ecological space for the South to increase its emissions. Transition could provide space for community led equity initiatives: up for debate is whether Transition can 'twin' with communities in the South, creating a bridge that links Northern communities reducing emissions with Southern communities seeking to increase or maintain their quality of life, keeping their already low carbon emissions low. This is not the same as off-set, rather solidarity based development.

Again, should Transition make communities sensitive to why people are forced to migrate or seek refuge as resources become under pressure, droughts extend and seas rise, then it will prove an invaluable base of solidarity and compassion, should we prove unable to avoid the worst case scenarios and 100s of millions of people are displaced. 50²⁴

While focused on the local, Transition has a moral responsibility to see beyond this, to act in solidarity with those in the Global South who are first experiencing the effects of peak energy and climate.



²⁴ "Due largely to sea-level rise and flooding of coastal-zone communities, but also to increased droughts and disruptions of rainfall regimes, such as monsoonal systems, global warming could threaten large numbers of people, with displacement by 2050 or earlier. Preliminary estimates indicate that the total number of people at risk of sea-level rise in Bangladesh could be 26 million, in Egypt 12 million, in China 73 million, in India 20 million, and elsewhere, including small island states, 31 million, making a total of 162 million. At the same time, at least 50 million people could be at severe risk through increased droughts and other climate dislocations (Myers 1996; see, also, Watson et al. 1998). Norman Myers; Environmental Refugees, The Growing Phenomena of the 21st Century.

<http://www.nicholas.duke.edu/people/faculty/myers/myers2001.pdf>



ENDNOTE:

Transition is pulling people along a self motivated and inspired path. It takes an important place alongside campaigning organisations, pressure groups, solidarity organisations and local authorities working for local climate-friendly, low-carbon change. It fills an important gap, offering inspiration beyond protest and a model of supportive community with the potential to inspire. Should climate change become climate chaos, and the peak oil scenarios act out without proper preparation, then those communities following the transition path are in a better situation to deal with this.

Written by: Tracey Wheatley
Design: Maja Kiss