

Strengthening the vital Transition Towns movement

Global sustainability and justice can only be achieved through something like the inspiring Transition Towns movement, but thought needs to be given to key issues or the movement might fail to achieve its goals, suggests **TED TRAINER**. Unless the movement works to replace consumer society it will collapse with it when it finally fails.

The Transition Towns movement started around 2005 and is growing rapidly. It emerged in the UK mainly in response to increasing awareness 'peak oil' is likely to leave people in towns in a desperate situation, so it's vital to strive to develop ways to survive with local economic self-sufficiency. Although Rob Hopkins and his colleagues in the UK receive most of the credit for getting the movement going, its rapid spread testifies to a strong general grassroots readiness to take up the idea. There are now towns in several other countries joining the movement, including Australia and New Zealand. The website (www.transitiontowns.org) is inspiring, linking many towns and projects, reflecting energy and enthusiasm. A handbook and other documents have been published.

The key concept is building town 'resilience' in the face of the coming peak oil crisis. Activities include: 're-skilling' with courses on bread baking, planting the commons, e.g., nut trees on public land, local food production and marketing, especially community supported agriculture, and encouragement of volunteering. These are not new ideas but it's important they

are being linked together in whole town strategies for resilience. These initiatives have come from ordinary people, not states, governments or official bodies.

For decades, some of us in the 'deep green' camp have been saying the key element in a sustainable and just world has to be small, highly self-sufficient, localised economies under local cooperative control. So it is very encouraging to find the Transition Town movement is not only underway but booming. If we make it through the next 50 years to sustainable and just ways it will be via some kind of Transition Towns' process. But if the Transition Towns movement is to achieve sustainability some crucial issues must be addressed or little or nothing of any social significance may be achieved. There is a need for a more focused, detailed action plan, giving clearer guidance to newcomers, and a more radical vision than is currently guiding the movement. These comments won't make much sense unless I outline my perspective on the global situation which some people may reject as being too extreme.

Where we are and the way out

The many alarming global problems crowding in and threatening to destroy us are so big and serious they cannot be solved within or by consumer-capitalist society. Our current way of life in rich countries is grossly unsustainable and unjust. There is no possibility of "living standards" of all people on earth ever rising to rich-world per capita consumption levels of energy, minerals, timber, water, food, phosphorous

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etc. Our way of life also would not be possible if rich countries were not taking far more than their fair share of world resources in an extremely unjust global economy which condemns most of the world's people to deprivation.

Given this analysis of our situation, there must be an enormous and radical shift to a society that is not based on globalisation, market forces, the profit motive, centralisation, representative democracy, or competitive, individualistic acquisitiveness. Above all it must be a zero-growth economy and most difficult of all, it cannot be an affluent society.

Yet almost everyone in the mainstream fails to recognise this situation and continues with the comforting delusion that with more effort and technical advances we can solve problems like greenhouse gas emissions without jeopardising our high 'living standards' or the market economy or the obsession with growth. If I am right about our situation, we must work for transition to a very different society, which I call The Simpler Way, its core principles must be:

- *Far simpler material living standards*
- *High levels of self-sufficiency* at household, national and especially neighbourhood and town levels, with relatively little travel, transport or trade. There must be mostly small, local economies where most things we need are produced by local labour from local resources, under participatory local control, geared to need, and with no growth at all.

- Most problematic, *a radically different culture*, where competitive, acquisitive individualism is replaced by frugal, self-sufficient collectivism.

For a detailed discussion of The Simpler Way see <http://tinyurl.com/m8kugq>

Transition

The contradiction between consumer-capitalist society and The Simpler Way is so huge our chances of making the transition in the time available are not encouraging. Yet we must work hard to achieve it. Following are key points to consider in thinking about transition strategy.

Little will be gained by trying to fight against the current system directly. It's too powerful, dissenting forces are overwhelmed and there isn't time to beat it in head-on conflict. Even if we could for instance take state power, either by violent revolution or green parliamentary action, it would not be useful. *State power cannot build self sufficient, self-governing local economies with conscientious, responsible, creative, happy citizens.*

Transition must therefore be a grassroots process with ordinary people slowly developing the consciousness, skills, local systems and infrastructures to enable them to run their own local communities in cooperative and participatory ways, with frugal lifestyles. The coming era of intense scarcity will force us in this direction whether we like it or. Meanwhile we can begin now building aspects of a sustainable society within the failing old system.

There is no chance of significant change while supermarket shelves remain well-stocked. Almost everyone will stolidly continue purchasing, watching

sport and playing electronic games until scarcity hits with a jolt. But as the old systems run into more serious problems, people will come across to join us, seeing we are enjoying the benefits of the new ways. When oil starts to get seriously scarce people will see they must either take up our examples or starve.

So it's very important to get alternative examples up and running. Nothing will be more persuasive than examples here and there where the new ways can be seen to be more sensible and enjoyable, within mainstream towns and suburbs.

Until around 2000 the basic pioneering work was done by the Global Ecovillage Movement with its thousands of small communities. But the world's





soon-to-be 9 billion people cannot all form Eco-villages on green field sites. Yet they can transform the settlements they are living in into Eco-villages which is what the Transition Towns movement is about. This is why it is so important, yet there are serious concerns about its current directions.

Only building havens?

Firstly, there is the danger it will only be a Not-In-My-Backyard phenomenon, with towns trying to insulate themselves from the coming time of scarcities and troubles. This is a very different goal to working to replace consumer-capitalist society. *It is not much good if your town bakes its own bread or even generates much of its own electricity, but continues to import hardware and appliances from China, and people take holidays abroad.* It will still indirectly be using considerable amounts of coal and oil in imported goods. The wider national society on which it depends for law, postal services, security etc cannot continue as it is unless it maintains the Third World empire from which it draws much wealth. Unless we eventually change all this our Transition Towns will remain part of consumer-capitalist society, and will collapse when it goes down.

Given the view of the global situation outlined earlier, the top concern must be to work to make sure the movement is consciously and primarily about contributing to global transition away from consumer-capitalist society. Our society is the cause of our problems, it's leading us to catastrophe, destroying the environment, it's not possible for all and only possible for us because the Third World is plundered. Our consumer society condemns billions to dreadful conditions. Our top priority must be to replace it, but

this is not central in the Transition Towns movement literature or its web sites.

Lack of guidance: goals?

The website, handbook and especially the 12 Steps document are valuable, but predominantly about procedure, it's difficult to find clear guidance about the sub-goals of the movement, or structures and systems and projects which we should be trying to undertake if our towns are to achieve transition or resilience. We urgently need to know what things we should start to set up, what we should avoid, etc. We especially need to be able to see causal links, to understand why setting up this venture will bring about greater town resilience. Unfortunately people coming to the movement eager to get started will find almost no guidance in the current literature specifically about what to try to do, or anything like an action plan with steps and do's and don'ts and clear explanation on why specific projects will have desirable effects.

Advice and suggestions in the literature are almost entirely about how to establish the movement. This lack is evident in The Kinsale Energy Descent Plan, which does little more than repeat the process ideas in the 12 steps documents and contains virtually no information or projects on energy technology or strategies. We need to know how and why a particular project will make the town more resilient, what projects we should start with, what the difficulties and costs might be, etc. Just being told "Create an energy

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descent plan" (Step 12) doesn't help much when we need to know how to do this.

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The solution is not primarily to do with energy and its coming scarcity. Our greatest insecurity is not oil, it's the global economy which doesn't need your town. It will relocate your jobs to where profits are greatest. It can flip into recession overnight and dump you and billions of others into unemployment and poverty. It will only give you whatever benefits trickle down from ventures which maximise corporate profits. It

condemns much of your town to idleness with unemployment and wastes time and resources which could be devoted to meeting urgent needs. In the coming time of scarcity it will not look after you. You will only escape this fate if you build a radically new economy in your region, and run it to provide for the people living there.

We have to build a local economy, guided by rational planning and under participatory social control rather than leaving everything to the market, or driven by profit. This is the antithesis of capitalism, markets, profit motivation and corporate control. If we don't plunge into building such an economy we will probably not survive in the coming age of scarcity. The Transition Towns movement will come to nothing of great significance if it does not set itself to build such economies. Either your town will get control of its own affairs and organise local productive capacity to provide for you, or it will remain within and dependent on the mainstream economy, and be dumped.

The goal in building new local Economy B is to enable people to guarantee basic necessities are provided by using their labour, land, skills and local resources,

under their own control. Then when the old economy A collapses, we will still be able to provide for ourselves. This kind of vision and goal is not evident in the TT literature I have read. There is no concept of a Community Development Cooperative setting out to eventually run the town economy for the benefit of people via participatory means. Currently, the movement implicitly accepts the normal consumer-capitalist economy, simply seeking to become more resilient within it.

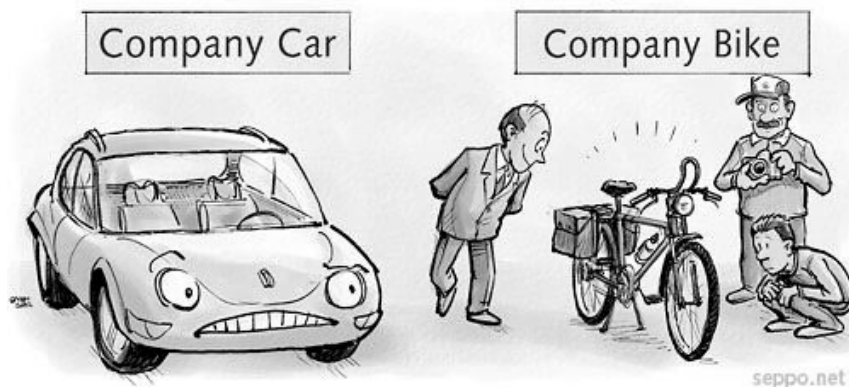
Community Development Co-op

We need to set-up mechanisms enabling us to design and operate a plan to achieve our goal of developing a local economy run by us to meet our needs. It will not be ideal if we proclaim the importance of town self-sufficiency, then run off as individuals to set up a bakery here and a garden there. There must be continual discussion about what the town needs to set-up to achieve its goals, what should be done first, what is feasible, how we might proceed to get the first and main things done, what are the most important ventures to set-up. Individual initiatives should be encouraged but bigger projects requiring whole-town efforts are likely to be more important.

This means from the early stages we should set-up some form of Community Development Cooperative, a process where we come together often to discuss and think about the town plan and our progress, towards having a coordinated, unified approach that will help us decide on sub-goals and priorities, especially on the purposes of the early working bees. It does not need to be elaborate or prescriptive and would not discourage people from pursuing ventures other than the CDC goals.

My impression from Transition Town literature is this theme needs urgent attention. It seems inspired and energetic people are doing good things, but as independent 'entrepreneurs', according to their individual interests and skills. There will always be plenty of scope for this and every reason to encourage it,

but the most important projects will be collective, public works providing crucial services for the town, for example, building community gardens, sheds, premises for little firms, orchards, ponds, woodlots and the commons from which free food will come. These are whole-town projects to be carried out by voluntary committees and working bees. Before these projects can sensibly begin we need to make a plan, considering priority, logistics, geography, feasibility, research, resources etc.



What should the CDC do?

Below is a list of projects from The Simpler Way Transition Strategy.

- *Identify unmet needs of the town, unused productive capacities and bring them together.* Set-up many simple cooperatives enabling all unemployed, homeless, bored, retired people to work in community gardens etc. This would help them start producing basic things they need. Can we set up co-ops to run a bakery, bike repair shop, home-help service, insulation operation, clothes-making and repair operation? Especially important are the cooperatives to organise leisure resources, concerts, picnics, dances, festivals? Can we organise a market day?

One of the worst contradictions in the present economy is it dumps many people into unemployment, boredom, homelessness, "retirement," mental illness and depression and to watching 4+ hours of TV daily. These are huge productive capacities going to waste. The CDC can pounce on these resources and harness them, allowing dumped people to start producing to meet some of their own needs and eliminating employment. This starts to set-up Economy B and we record their contributions which entitle people to proportionate shares of the output.

- *Help existing small firms shift to activities the town needs,* setting up little firms, farms and markets. Establish a town bank to finance these ventures, ensuring no one goes bankrupt and no one is left without a livelihood.
- *Organise Business Incubators;* the voluntary panels of experts and advisers on gardening, small business, arts etc, so we can get new ventures up and running well.
- *Organise working bees* to plant and maintain community orchards and other commons, build the premises for the bee keeper and organise committees to run concerts and look after old people...
- *Research what the town is importing,* and the scope for local firms or new co-ops to start substituting local products.
- *Decide what things will definitely not be left for market forces to determine,* like unemployment, what firms we need, whether fast food outlets will be patronised if set-up. We won't let market forces deprive anyone of a livelihood; if we have too many bakeries we work out how to redirect one of them.
- *Stress the importance of reducing consumption,* of



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living more simply, making, growing, repairing, old things. The less we consume in the town, the less we must produce or import. Remember, the world can't consume at anything like the average rate of rich countries. Besides explaining the importance of reducing consumption, the CDC must stress alternative satisfactions and develop these, e.g. concerts, festivals, crafts. It can also develop recipes for cheap, nutritious meals, teaching craft and gardening skills, preserving etc. The household economy should be upheld as the centre of our lives and the main source of life satisfaction, more important than career.

- *Work out procedures for making good town decisions* for these developments, the referenda, consensus processes, town meetings.
- *In all these activities our primary concern is to raise consciousness regarding the nature, functioning and unacceptability of consumer-capitalist society and the existence of better ways.*

One concern the CDC would have is what not to try to do. For example, it is not clear why in the early stages towns should make much effort to produce their own energy. Producing most forms of renewable energy in significant quantities is difficult and costly. Also, its significance for town independence or resilience is questionable. If your town builds a wind farm it will benefit the nation but is unlikely to benefit the town, other than as an export industry (sending surplus electricity to the grid, without which

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it cannot function.) When the wind is down, the town would have to draw from the grid.

More useful is the effort to reduce energy consumption by insulating houses, reducing unnecessary production, localising work, reducing imports, increasing local leisure resources and especially increasing local food production. The Kinsale Energy Descent Plan recognises this. Town resilience is going to depend more on the capacity to get to work and produce necessities without using much energy, than on whether the town can produce energy.

Introducing local currencies

Local currencies for transition towns is an important issue but there is much confusion about this and I am aware of various initiatives unlikely to have any desirable effects. Local currencies will not have desirable effects unless carefully designed to do so.

To me *the main purpose in introducing a currency is to contribute to getting unused productive capacity of the town into action*, i.e., stimulating local production to meet local needs.

Here is the strategy I think is most valuable. When our CDC sets up a community garden time inputs can be recorded with the intention of sharing produce later in proportion to contributions. These slips of paper function *like* IOUs or 'promissory notes', although that's not what they are. They can be used to 'buy' garden produce when it becomes available. They are a form of money allowing everyone to record how much work on producing and providing they have done and the claim they have on what's been produced. The important point about this currency is its role in enabling people who were forced into economic irrelevance and deprivation to begin producing to meet some of their own needs. Introducing the currency is not the most important element in this process. Organising the 'firm' is the key factor.

Later our currency can be used to trade with firms in the old economy. We can find restaurants willing to

sell us meals paid for with our money. They will accept payment in our money if they can spend this money buying vegetables and labour from us in Economy B. But normal shops in the town cannot accept our money and we in Economy B cannot buy from them, unless there's something we can sell them. They can't sell things to us, accepting our money, unless they can use our money. *Nothing significant can be achieved unless people acquire the capacity to produce and sell things others want.* So the crucial task for the Community Development Co-op is to look for things we in Economy B might sell to normal firms in the town.

Sometimes the new currency is introduced merely as a substitute for the old, as when people buy new notes using normal money. This achieves little or nothing. What's the point of people who could have used normal dollars now buying with 'eco' dollars? This will not bring unused productive capacity into action.

It is often thought local currencies encourage local purchasing because they can't be spent outside the town, but this is not so. Anyone who understands the importance of buying local will do this regardless of the currency. Anyone else will buy what's cheapest, probably an imported item. What matters is getting people to understand why it's important to buy local, and just issuing a local currency will make little difference to this.

Currencies which depreciate with time also miss the point and are unnecessary. Anyone who understands the situation does not need to be penalised for holding new money and not spending it. It's also wrong to encourage spending, people should buy as little as possible, and any economy where you feel an obligation to spend to make work for someone else is not an acceptable economy. In a sensible economy there is only enough work, producing and spending and use of money as is necessary to ensure all have enough for a good quality of life.

Conclusion

The Transition Towns movement is enthusiastic and energetic, reflecting the long pent-up disenchantment within consumer-capitalist society and a desire for something better. The way out of our alarming global predicament has to be via some kind of Transition Towns' movement. To our great good fortune such a movement has burst on the scene. Yet it could easily fail to make a significant difference. I offer these thoughts in the hope they will strengthen the movement. ■PE

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