

THE TRANSITION MOVEMENT AND SOCIAL INNOVATION

The Transition movement is a form of community activism that is both a social innovation itself and experimental space for new social innovations. Whilst it has successfully diffused to other regions and contexts an ongoing challenge is the sustaining of local initiatives over time.

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INTRODUCTION

The Transition movement (TM) is a social movement that emerged following the launch of the Transition Town Totnes (TTT) project in September 2006 in the town of Totnes, UK. The movement primarily consists of a network of place-based Transition Initiatives (TIs) where local participants collaborate on projects which are intended to enhance 'local resilience'. A TI involves groups of activists who organise various projects within a locality, the overall purpose of which is to contribute to a Transition towards a more localised, post-fossil fuel society. The primary focus is to encourage a community-based form of experimentalism in developing a wide range of activities whilst also promoting a shift in people's values and behaviour. Fundamentally, the 'Transition' approach is an optimistic and creative form of community activism which positions itself as distinct to confrontational forms of environmental activism [1].

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SOCIAL INNOVATION AND THE TRANSITION MOVEMENT

The TM has an interesting relationship with social innovation. Firstly, the Transition 'model' can be understood as a form of social innovation itself: it is a novel form of community-based organisation that attempts to engage communities in

addressing sustainability challenges and empower them to establish new grassroots projects. From this perspective one of the interesting things about the TM is that it is an example of how such grassroots social innovations can now spread rapidly via the internet in the web 2.0 era, the governance challenges that this creates, and the way in which the model is adapted as it 'lands' in new geographical and cultural contexts. Secondly, the Transition approach itself is explicitly designed to create forms of grassroots experimental space from which other social innovations might emerge. It does this by creating a supportive and permissive local culture in which participants feel able to experiment with novel ideas. These different aspects of its relationship with social innovation are explored more in-depth in the following sections.

THE DIFFUSION OF GRASSROOTS SOCIAL INNOVATION

The initial emergence of the TM was very much motivated by the issue of 'peak oil'. Rob Hopkins was teaching Permaculture in Kinsale, Ireland, when he met Colin Campbell, a retired geologist who was a peak oil activist, hence part of an 'outsider' movement arguing that global supplies of oil and related hydrocarbons were close to the point of maximum supply. Those subscribing to this perspective argue that such a peak would have profound consequences for humanity, particularly in the energy intensive Global North. Influenced by these arguments, Hopkins worked with his students to develop an 'Energy Descent Action Plan' for Kinsale, which detailed how the town could adapt to life with less oil. This work provided the seeds for the Transition model and, following his return to the UK, Hopkins launched the TTT project in September 2006. Since its inception, Transition has also positioned itself as a response to climate change, arguing that it is an approach that is relevant to both societal problems. Most recently, Hopkins positions Transition as a

third alternative economic strategy to either 'Austerity' or the 'Green Deal', in other words: "local resilience as economic development" [1]. This increased focus on the economic justification and implications of Transition is one of the important ways in which the overall movement has changed since its inception.

Following the establishment of TTT, TIs began to appear spontaneously, first in the UK, and then in other countries. Hopkins describes the spread as like 'mycorrhizal fungus' which pops up in places that you don't expect [2]. At the most recent estimate there were over 1,000 local initiatives across several continents and likely to be others doing work that is inspired by Transition which are not formally registered. The spread of the Transition model was facilitated by the Internet and in particular the Transition Culture blog that Rob Hopkins wrote daily for the first couple of years of TTT and which developed a significant following and profile. Other social media such as YouTube, Facebook and coverage in 'old' media also contribute to its diffusion. In the first few years the TM formed close links with other elements of the peak oil movement, for example writers such as Richard Heinberg and peak oil forums such as the [now dormant] Oil Drum website. The spread of the model was also facilitated by a Transition Training 'world tour' which, in late 2008 and early 2009, visited seven different countries in four months, delivering a number of training sessions. There is a perception, amongst the core activists at least, that it spread through the English-speaking world first, before the ideas were translated into other languages, normally by volunteers who set up websites and translated key documents such as the Transition primer. The first national hubs were established in Ireland and New Zealand in 2007. Since then over 20 national hubs have been established and the hubs have emerged as a distinct level and set of actors within the overall movement.

THE GROWING COMPLEXITY OF AN INTERNATIONAL GRASSROOTS MOVEMENT

The popularity and rapid diffusion of the Transition model caught the initiators of TTT by surprise who had not really planned or anticipated how rapidly the model would spread. Consequently, in 2008 the Transition Network (TN) was established as a registered charity in order to support the diffusion of the Transition model. TN undertakes a number of network specific activities in its aspiration to be a 'catalyst' for the TM. [3]

- **Training:** Training has always been an important part of the Transition model. Transition Training was one of the ways in which the model originally diffused internationally. TN oversees the training activities of the movement including accrediting trainers and expanding the training function via 'train the trainer' activities.
- **Communication:** e.g. via the website.
- **Media:** Supporting the development of two Transition

films. Publication of Transition related books.

- **Tools:** Providing a suite of resources that can be used by TIs. Providing guidance on the steps that can be taken by different TIs.
- **Consulting:** A separate company does Transition consulting, including Oil Vulnerability Analysis – a tool developed early on in TTT.
- **Research:** Co-ordinating and supporting research into the TM. There is a separate research network which involves academics sympathetic to the TM.
- **Events:** Organising conferences and other one-off events.
- **Providing support:** Especially at the national and regional level.

These roles and aims outline the way that TN attempts to support the development of the movement whilst also maintaining some kind of control over the core tenets of what Transition entails. TN attempts to ensure that Transition is a non-prescriptive process, for example one of the principles set out in the first handbook was to let initiatives follow their own interest. However, it is clear that there are some boundaries to the experimental space that is created, and there is a certain degree of structure and prescription within the core texts and guidelines on how to run a TI and which allow things to be recognisable as 'Transition' related [4]. The 'boundaries' of Transition are maintained in a number of ways including through the principles that the official TIs are expected to adhere to, and the Memorandum of Understanding that National Hubs are encouraged to sign up to. Policing the boundaries of what constitute 'Transition' has become a key role of the TN, what is described as protecting the 'DNA' or 'Source code' of Transition. Overall, the principles and guidelines are intended to give a certain degree of flexibility but keep initiatives true to the overall ambition of the approach.

The Transition Network has itself evolved significantly since its inception in 2007. What started as a fairly loose group of activists who functioned in a fairly reactive way, has become more professionalised, strategic and internationally focussed in recent years. Since 2012 there have been regular meetings of the international hubs, organised and supported by TN, which seek to support collaborative working, whilst exploring their role in the movement and relationship with TN. Whilst they are playing a growing role in the governance of the TM as a whole the hubs also play an important role in the further spread of initiatives within their own specified territories. One important aspect of this international diffusion of the Transition model is the different way in which it is being re-embedded in different territories. So, for example, in Brazil it is being used as a community development tool within the favelas and also by a community of rubber tappers in the Amazon Basin who are using the approach to think about how their community can be more sustainable. These are very different contexts to the primarily middle-class environmental activist context which predominates in the UK, where Transition activities are targeted more at fossil fuelled over-consumption.

In terms of conceptualising the relationship between the key different 'levels' of the movement, the Transition Network has developed the image below, which focuses on three specific levels: local initiatives, regional/national networks, and the TN itself [3]. The circles of various sizes represent the different Transition initiatives, the smaller ones being local initiatives and the larger ones regional initiatives. TN is the white encircling ring which acts as a 'cell membrane' and provides a critical catalysing role that defines the identity of the whole and supports its over growth.

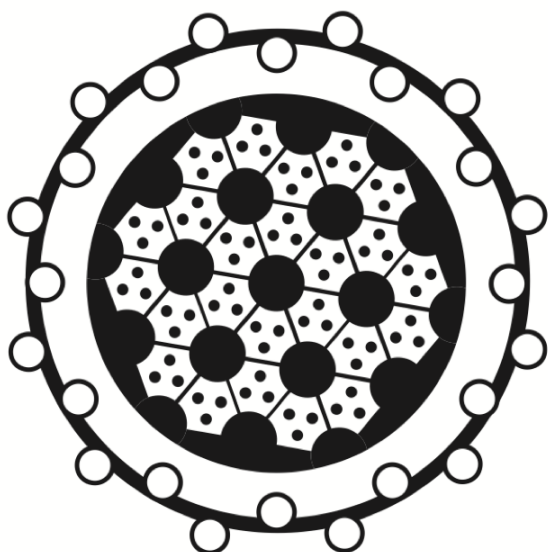


Diagram representing the Transition Movement

CREATING EXPERIMENTAL SPACE

Once established at the local level, TIs create the space for participants to experiment with social innovation. This space is created through the combination of a particular narrative of social change with a set of processes of community organising.

The Transition narrative suggests that social change can be facilitated by community mobilisation. To justify this approach, it integrates a wide range of ideas including for example system thinking, permaculture and eco-psychology. In particular it attends to both outer (systemic) change and internal (personal) change. The power of imagination and positive visions are an important part of this mobilisation process. These ideas are materialised in books, on websites, in films and in other documents and forms of media.

The organisational practices inform not only how a TI itself should be organised, but also how projects should be managed and are reflected throughout the movement as a whole. Transition is explicitly designed to be a non-hierarchical model that allows participants to pursue their

own interests. There is also a focus on how meetings and events should be facilitated so that they are productive and engaging, drawing on a number of participatory approaches such as 'Open Space'. By providing an empowering narrative of change and supportive organisational and cultural practices Transition equips participants with the permission to experiment and to manifest practical examples of the positive futures that they envisage. It does this by embracing the possibility of failure and not placing excessive demands on the success of projects and providing a supportive collective space for experimentation. A good example would be the Transition related community currencies which first emerged with the Totnes pound in 2007 and then spread to other TIs, the model evolving in scale and sophistication as further currencies were launched. Experimentation has taken place across a range of domains such as energy, food, health, transport and the creative arts.

The Transition model has always been explicit about the fact that it was intended to be an experimental process, with a 'cheerful disclaimer' that there was no guarantee that it would succeed. However, the model itself is not static and as the movement has grown so too has the model evolved. This is perhaps not surprising, as it has been likened to a form of open source software insofar as it can be used and adapted by its users.

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CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has outlined the significant relationships between the TM and social innovation. Firstly, it is an example of how social innovations can spread rapidly in the Internet age, and how such diffusion can create governance challenges for those who are trying to maintain some kind of control over the innovation whilst also allowing it to evolve in new contexts. Transition is also unusual in that it is a form of social innovation that is intended to create experimental space from which new innovations can arise. Importantly, these facets are also interlinked, for example the visibility of projects aids the diffusion of the model. One final observation is the fact that the TM also illustrates the difficulty of maintain grassroots social innovation over a longer period of time. It is evident that there are three kinds of initiatives. Those that are thriving and active, those that are 'ticking over' and those that have entered some kind of hibernation. In older initiatives there are experiences of burn out and difficulties in getting new people involved which are not uncommon in community-based activism. Within the movement itself there has been a growing recognition that

the effectiveness and longevity of TIs and projects can be limited by a reliance on voluntary labour. There has therefore been an increasing focus on the potential of social enterprises, co-operatives, community own businesses and other forms of micro-enterprise that enable Transitioners to earn a livelihood whilst also contributing to the Transition. This shift is reflected in the emergence of the *REconomy* project which explicitly focuses on the economic side of Transition. Best understood as a 'spinout project' of Transition as a whole, it has worked with some UK initiatives (including Totnes) on issues relating to local economic resilience. The extent to which these efforts are successful is likely to shape the future of the movement.

REFERENCES

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This chapter draws in part on Longhurst/Pataki, 2015 [2]