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The Transition Companion

Making your community resilient in uncertain times

Rob Hopkins

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So what is Transition?

Rob Hopkins: co-founder of the Transition Network and author of 'The Transition Companion'.

For the last five years, while the price of oil has been rising, the economy has been unravelling and the climate visibly warming, an experiment has been taking place around the world. Known as the 'Transition movement', or as 'Transition Towns', these groups of ordinary people in thousands of communities, in 35 countries, have been coming together to develop creative, playful and effective responses to these challenges. While environmental organisations are often perceived as being rooted in 'doom and gloom', Transition is a celebratory approach, focusing on what is possible at the local level.

It has led to a flowering of imaginative projects, such as:

- Communities setting up their own energy companies, owned and managed on their behalf
- Local currencies, such as the Brixton and Lewes pounds, which keep money local and support local businesses
- New farms being set up, run by community groups to produce food for local people
- New local shops being set up by communities, and seen as key tools for local economic regeneration
- 'Garden share' schemes, which match people who want to grow food but don't have a garden, with people who have a garden they are too elderly or too busy to use
- The setting up of new breweries, new mills, new farmers' markets, and other new food infrastructure
- Working imaginatively with households to help them reduce their energy use through working with their neighbours.

It is based on the idea that if we wait for governments to act, it will most likely be too late, if we act just as individuals it will be too little, but if we are able to work with our neighbours and wider community, it might just be enough, and it might just be in time. One of the central ideas is that of localisation. At the moment, the UK exports 1.5 million kilos of potatoes to Germany every year, and imports the same amount.

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We export to France the same amount of dairy produce as we import from France. This pointless moving around of things that could just as easily have been consumed where they were grown makes us much more reliant on the petrol and diesel that makes it possible, and leaves us very vulnerable to fluctuations in price.

The Transition approach argues that making communities more resilient, that is, more able to withstand shock, could actually be key to their economic regeneration. At the moment, with cuts hitting the public sector, fewer and fewer jobs for young people, it argues that this 'intentional localisation' could be key to the fortunes of our local economies.

In Bath, Bath Community Energy, an offshoot of Transition Bath, plans to install £11 million of renewable energy within the next 5 years which will generate £350,000 per year for community projects. Work on installing solar photovoltaics on local schools is already underway. In Totnes in Devon, Transition Town Totnes' 'Transition Streets' project worked with nearly 500 householders, who worked with their neighbours to reduce their carbon emissions, and to install solar energy. The project won the 2011 Ashden Award for behaviour change, being praised by the judges for "demonstrating how community co-operation can deliver sustainability and encourage low carbon aspirations in the community". In Slaithwaite in Yorkshire, the local Transition group was behind the takeover of the local grocers shop, which has since become a catalyst for other new enterprises in their valley, including a new food-growing co-operative, a community wind power company. What these, and many other projects, have in common is the idea of 'localisation as economic development', meaning that shortening the distance between producer and consumer is not a retreat from progress, but rather could be key element of creating a more responsible and viable future. Brixton, Lewes and Stroud's local currency schemes are all serving to encourage people to support and celebrate local businesses, and to value their local economies.

In 2008, Rob Hopkins published 'The Transition Handbook: from oil dependency to local resilience', which went on to be a best seller, and was voted, that summer, as the fifth most popular book MPs took on holiday with them. It set out what Transition was, and suggested a model people might use, but it was really just the proposal of an idea, an invitation to be part of an experiment. Three and a half years later, 'The Transition Companion' has been created through a collaborative process involving thousands of people. It has gathered stories of projects, of successes and failures, photos and artwork from Transition initiatives all round the world, and has set out what Transition is, and how it works, but this time as a collection of ingredients.

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As Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall writes in the foreword to the Transition Companion: “While always rooted in a set of crucial principles, every example will reflect the specific needs and qualities of an individual place. It’s rather like giving a great cake recipe to a dozen different cooks and watching how their particular ingredients, techniques and creative ideas produce subtly different results”.

The book suggests a number of ingredients and some tools that people can use to create Transition where they live. How they do that is up to them. At a time when ‘localism’ is on the government’s agenda, as is giving more power to communities, the Transition concept is one that is showing the way in terms of what is possible at the local level, engaging many thousands of people in a way that is creative, colourful and ambitious. As this young movement nears the fifth birthday of its inception, it has much to offer current debates about energy security and about how communities might reimagine their economies in rapidly changing times. We have perhaps only just begun to scratch the surface of what the power of “engaged optimism” can achieve.

Rob Hopkins blogs at www.transitionculture.org and tweets as @robintransition. He is a co-founder of Transition Town Totnes and of Transition Network, and is the winner of numerous awards.

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