

The Transition Towns Movement: Its Huge Significance and a Friendly Criticism

Contributed by Ted Trainer
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Editor's note: "Transition Towns" is one of the best ideas in decades, and is being put into practice widely. Author Ted Trainer has a respected track record among energy realists and devotees of sustainability. He wishes to help along a good movement. Culture Change also attempts to support the cause, mainly via activism that has articulated a similar vision vis-à-vis Transition Towns since the early 1990s.

If there is a difference in culture change as we see it, compared to the Transition Towns message, it is probably in our petroleum-industry-analysis-based discussions of collapse and overpopulation. Transition Towns dispenses with that negative or scary focus, reflecting a difference in philosophy and tactics regarding what the public can stand to hear and be attracted to.

It could be that "transformation" is a more accurate word for an historic, wrenching process than "transition," although we all look forward to positive changes that have been incubating since the back-to-the-land and environmental movement took off 40 years ago. Both Rob Hopkins, originator of Transition Towns, and I foresee with hope the return of sail power for trade and transportation. Perhaps he would agree that re-forming tribes can aid in strengthening community.

The world is immensely complicated, and the forces of sweeping change may overall boost transition towns for their positive contribution. Or as Ted Trainer lays out below, a course correction is needed now. His basic message of urgency is this:

It is not oil that sets your greatest insecurity; it is the global economy. It doesn't need your town. It will relocate your jobs where profits are greatest. It can flip into recession overnight and dump you and billions of others into unemployment and poverty. It will only deliver to you whatever benefits trickle down from the ventures which maximise corporate profits. It loots the Third World to stock your supermarket shelves. It has condemned much of your town to idleness, in the form of unemployment and wasted time and resources that could be being devoted to meeting urgent needs there. In the coming time of scarcity it will not look after you. You will only escape that fate if you build a radically new economy in your region, and run it to provide for the people who live there.

However, an oil crisis can happen overnight and become the most devastating event in history, although it ushers in a new and total cultural transformation. - Jan Lundberg

The only way the global sustainability and justice predicament can be solved is via something like the inspiring Transition Towns movement. However unless the movement radically alters its vision and goals I do not think it will make a significant contribution to solving our problems.

The Transition Towns movement began only about 2006 and is growing rapidly. It emerged in the UK mainly in response to the realisation that the coming of "peak oil" is likely to leave towns in a desperate situation, and therefore that it is very important that they strive to develop local economic self-sufficiency.

What many within the movement probably don't know is that for decades some of us in the "deep green" camp have been arguing that the key element in a sustainable and just world has to be small, highly self sufficient, localised economies under local cooperative control. (See my *Abandon Affluence*, published in 1985, and *The Conserver Society*, 1995.) It is therefore immensely encouraging to find that this kind of initiative is not only underway but booming. I have not the slightest hesitation in saying that if this planet makes it through the next 50 years to sustainable and just ways it will be via some kind of Transition Towns process. However I also want to argue that if the movement is to have this outcome there are some very important issues it must think carefully about or it could actually come to little or nothing of any social significance. Indeed in my view if it remains on its present path it will not make a significant contribution to the achievement of a sustainable and just world. This will probably strike transitioners as a surprising and offensive comment, but please consider the following case.

Everything depends on how one sees the state of the planet, and the solution. In my view most people do not understand the nature and magnitude of the situation, including most green people. Consequently they are working for goals which cannot solve the problems. It is of the utmost importance that good green people and transitioners think carefully about the perspective summarised below.

Where we are, and the way out

For decades some of us have been arguing that the many alarming global problems now crowding in and threatening to destroy us are so big and serious that they cannot be solved within or by consumer-capitalist society. The way of life we have in rich countries is grossly unsustainable and unjust. There is no possibility of all people on earth ever rising to rich world per capita levels of consumption of energy, minerals, timber, water, food, phosphorous etc. These rates of consumption are generating the numerous alarming global problems now threatening our survival. They are already 5-10 times the rates which would be necessary to provide present rich-world living standards to the 9 billion people expected by 2050. Most people have no idea of the magnitude of the overshoot, of how far we are beyond sustainable levels of resource use and environmental impact.

Although present rich world rates of resource use are grossly unsustainable, the supreme goal in consumer-capitalist society is to raise them as fast as possible and without limit. If all expected 9 billion rose to the "living standards" we in Australia would have by 2080 at present growth rates, then total world economic output would be 60 times as great as it is now! These sorts of multiples totally rule out any hope that technical advance could sustain growth and affluence society.

In addition there is the huge problem of global economic injustice. Our way of life would not be possible if rich countries were not taking far more than their fair share of world resources, via an extremely unjust global economy, and thereby condemning most of the world's people to deprivation.

Given this analysis of our situation it is not possible to solve the problems without transition to a very different kind of society, one 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, with a far lower GDP than at present, and most difficult of all, it cannot be an affluent society.

I refer to this alternative as The Simpler Way. Its core principles must be

- Far simpler material living standards.
- High levels of self-sufficiency within households, national and especially neighbourhoods and towns, with relatively little travel, transport or trade. There must be mostly small, local economies in which most of the things we need are produced by local labour from local resources.
- Basically cooperative and participatory local systems.

- A quite different economic system, one not driven by market forces and profit, and in which there is far less work, production and consumption than at present, and a large cashless sector, including many free goods from local commons. There must be no economic growth at all. There must be mostly small local economies, under our control via participatory systems, and run to meet needs – not to make profits (although I think we could have markets and many private firms).
- Most problematic, a radically different culture, in which competitive and acquisitive individualism is replaced by frugal, self-sufficient collectivism.

Some of the elements within The Simpler Way are:– participatory democracy via town assemblies – neighbourhood workshops – many suburban roads dug up and planted with “edible landscapes” providing free fruit, nuts etc – being able to get to decentralised workplaces by bicycle or on foot -- voluntary community working bees – committees - many productive commons in the town (fruit, timber, bamboo, herbs...) – having to work for money only one or two days a week – no unemployment – living among many artists and crafts people – strong community – citizen assemblies making many of the important development and administration decisions – much production via hobbies and crafts, small farms and family enterprises.

Modern/high technologies and mass production can be used extensively where appropriate, including IT. The Simpler Way will free many more resources for purposes such as medical research than are devoted to these at present, because most of the present vast quantity of unnecessary production will be phased out.

Because we will be highly dependent on our local ecosystems and on our social cohesion, e.g., for most water and food, and for effective committees and working bees (volunteer or entrepreneurial community work), all will have a strong incentive to focus on what is best for the town, rather than on what is best for themselves as competing individuals. Cooperation and conscientiousness will therefore tend to be automatically rewarded, whereas in consumer society competitive individualism is required and rewarded.

What we will have done is build a new economy, Economy B, under the old one. Economy B will give us the power to produce the basic goods and services we need not just to survive as the old economy increasingly fails to provide, but to give all a high quality of life. The old economy could collapse and we would still be able to provide for ourselves.

Advocates of the Simpler Way believe that its many benefits and sources of satisfaction would provide a much higher quality of life than most people experience in consumer society.

It must be emphasised that The Simpler Way is not optional. If our global situation is as outlined above then a sustainable and just society in the coming era of scarcity has to be some kind of Simpler Way.

Reform vs radical system replacement.

In my view few green people or transitioners recognise the huge distinction here between trying to reform consumer-capitalist society and trying to replace its major structures and systems. The Simpler Way contradicts the core systems of the present society and cannot be built unless we replace them. Consumer-capitalist society cannot be fixed; it cannot be reformed to not create the alarming global problems we face while still being about the pursuit of affluence and growth etc.

Consider,