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# The Routledge Companion to Alternative Organization

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# Organizing transition

## Principles and tensions in eco-localism

*Shiv Ganesh and Heather Zoller*

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Over the last fifty years, studies of alternative organization have evidenced an interesting tension in what counts as alternative forms of organizing. On one hand, what is constituted as “alternative” is historically and politically responsive to extant dominant forms of organizing. At the same time, regardless of the specific kind of dominating force which shapes alternative spaces, be it capitalism, patriarchy or colonialism, studies of alternative organizing/organizations have been concerned with enduring and transcendent issues of democracy. Chief among them are principles of collective participation, dialogue and community (Cheney et al., 1997, and Chapter 3 in this volume).

This tension between responsive and transcendent aspects of alternative organizing informs our discussion and assessment of the transition initiatives movement, a popular eco-local movement that began in Ireland in 2005. Eco-localism has attracted much academic attention and critique in recent years. As conceptualized by Curtis (2003), it is a model of place-based economics that rejects large-scale, place-less rational economic models upon which the current global economic order is built. Instead, it propounds a mode of organizing that advocates “place-rooted local contexts” (p. 86) where economic decisions are made by communities who understand the vital role played by local eco-systems. As a form of eco-localism, the transition movement advocates principles and templates for community organizing to deal with the twin crises of peak oil and climate change by building resilience to manage potential shocks and reducing or eliminating carbon dependence.

In this chapter, we investigate the potential of the transition movement to transform communities through bottom-up, democratic organizing and resist dominant discourses and relations of power that support neo-liberal conceptions of economic growth and deny the environmental consequences of late capitalism. Although several critiques of the transition movement focus on what they cast as the inherent limitations of eco-localism as a form of meaningful resistance to capitalism, often from an explicitly socialist point of view (e.g. Albo, 2009), our point of departure is relatively pragmatic. It is well established that all social movements struggle with issues of democracy, power and scale (Tarrow, 2005), and like other movements and practices discussed in this volume such as alternative food reclamation (in Chapter 20 of this volume), non-commodified labour practice (in Chapter 7) and alterglocalisation (in Chapter 23), the transition movement faces similar issues. In order to prevent

critical attention to this social movement lapsing into disengagement, our approach in this chapter is deliberately affirmative and our assessment is aimed at understanding the potential of the movement as well identifying issues and challenges it may face. Accordingly, we discuss how the transition initiatives movement attempts to be simultaneously responsive to current global environmental and economic crises, while also engaging substantively and deeply with issues and dilemmas of democracy.

After briefly describing the transition movement, we examine how it has constituted resilience as a key responsive principle. We argue that the movement's conceptualization of resilience challenges increasingly popular individualistic and neo-liberal articulations of the term, with significant implications for sustainability organizing. Following this, we discuss some enduring democratic principles of alternative organizing that are also evident in the transition movement. We highlight some pragmatic responses to common organizing tensions that may allow transition towns to balance imperatives for participation and material outcomes, which in turn may enable the movement to scale up over time. In doing so, we draw from the organizing framework proposed in the *Transition Handbook* and other publications that act as guides for local action, as well as examples from different parts of the world. In concluding, we identify key challenges for the movement in resisting dominant economic and political power relations to achieve sustainable economic and civic models and democratic principles.

### Transition towns and the transition movement

The transition movement, like all eco-local initiatives, is shaped against what it identifies as two monumental and intertwined crises generated by capitalism: anthropogenic global warming or climate change, and the related problem of peak oil. Evidence of human-induced changes in the atmosphere was established in the 1970s, and its impact on the planet's climate has been measured and modelled with increasing certitude since that time (Hansen, 2009). Concurrently, analysts have established that the world has approached, or is close to approaching the moment of "peak oil," a term first coined by Shell petroleum engineer Marion Hubbert in 1956 to describe the moment when the rate of extraction of petroleum would finally be overtaken by the rate of consumption (Deffeyes, 2004). Scholars, scientists, and engineers have theorized the economic and environmental consequences when the energy returned on energy invested (EROI) reaches equivalency or a net loss (King and Hall, 2011).

Starting with the supposition that macro-level policy initiatives are too slow, ineffectual, compromised and partial to deal with these crises (Ganesh and Dann, 2011), a slew of initiatives worldwide have emerged to act on these issues by mobilizing communities and transforming local civic and economic organizing. These eco-local movements (Curtis 2003) privilege place-based organizing as a means of resisting larger capitalist economics that are predicated on universal and continual growth, without regard to the consequences of such growth in specific locales or even on the planet as a whole (Meadows et al., 2004). Thus, eco-local movements encourage communities to make economic decisions based on their understanding of the vital role played by local eco-systems. Eco-local initiatives tend to be diverse and creative, including ventures such as community agriculture, local exchange economies, urban gardens, and time banks (see Chapters 12 and 15 in this volume).

Eco-localism is obviously not without its sceptics. Many critiques of eco-localism tend to reflect larger socialist critiques of anarchism by arguing that the retreat into localism implies a rejection of large scale society, which is unrealistic and abandons the larger struggle against

corporate globalization and capitalism in general (Marshall, 2008). Albo (2009) for example, argues that eco-localism is rooted in an impractical rejection of universal or large-scale change, modernization and centralization. Likewise, Sharzer's (2012) critique of localism argues that it supports neo-liberal economics by promoting micro-markets, is restricted to the professional and creative classes, and endorses an incremental approach to change that will transform capitalism. Although both these critiques offer important assessments about the difficulty involved in scaling up social movements and local practices, they also conflate all forms of localism with small-scale and market-based initiatives. The transition movement, for instance, cannot be easily equated with forms of "green capitalism" or "buy local" movements.

We maintain, along with several other chapters in this volume (see Chapter 15, for example) that the idea of developing place-based economic systems is not incommensurate with large-scale, systemic change. Indeed, we believe, along with Homer-Dixon (2006), that renewed attention to locality is a crucial, powerful and pragmatic *starting point* for any meaningful intervention into the ecological devastation wrought by capitalism, precisely because capitalism is amnesiac about location. Any critical assessment of eco-local initiatives therefore needs to carefully examine to what extent it self-consciously grapples with questions of systemic change: in Rao's (2010) conception, the extent to which it is cosmopolitan.

The Transition initiatives (or sometimes simply "Transition") movement indexes the popularity of eco-localism. Started in Kinsale, Ireland in 2005 by permaculturist Rob Hopkins, it now has more than 500 chapters worldwide (Transition Towns, 2010). It is a particularly good instance of an eco-local movement due to its emphasis on the need to "transit" out of a high-energy, densely connected industrial economy towards local, loosely connected low-energy economies that can more robustly manage shocks associated with climate chaos. As the Transition Network website says:

Transition Initiatives, community by community, are actively and cooperatively creating happier, fairer and stronger communities, places that work for the people living in them and are far better suited to dealing with the shocks that'll accompany our economic and energy challenges and a climate in chaos.

Thus, the movement is premised on the idea that viable, sustainable and creative solutions to the intertwined problems of peak oil and climate change can be found by creating new and alternative forms of locality. This idea is closely linked with permaculture, which involves ecological design for sustainable agriculture and ecosystems, creating synergies that achieve maximum sustainable yield through each element of farming and landscaping (Mars, 2005).

The Transition movement was originally known as the "Transition Towns" movement but the reference to "towns" has been increasingly dropped in the last four years, as various initiatives spring up in various parts of large metropolises. By all accounts, the term "Transition Town," itself an evocative discursive referent to a shifting yet small sense of place, was coined by Rob Hopkins and his students as part of an attempt to lobby the Kinsale council to adopt low-energy and sustainable food practices. As Hopkins took these ideas to Totnes, England, they evolved into the development of a detailed template for action called an Energy Descent Action Plan (EDAP), which is often described in terms of the popular slogan "the big step down." An EDAP involves creating "a clear vision of how a lower energy future could be, and then identifying a clear timetable for achieving it" (Hopkins, 2005, p. 0). According to the Kinsale report:

The late renowned ecologist Howard Odum coined the term ‘energy descent’ for the transition from a high fossil fuel use economy to a more frugal one, also coining the term ‘a prosperous way down’ to show that, if planned, this could be an opportunity for great inventiveness and abundance.

(p. 4)

The transition website ([www.transitionnetwork.org](http://www.transitionnetwork.org)) also cautions that EDAPs should be considered a provisional and emergent part of the movement rather than a proven template. The model emphasizes the process through which communities develop the EDAP more than the outcomes (Heinbert and Lerch, 2012), encouraging communities to focus on their assets and identify their strengths rather than approach sustainability in deficit terms. As a way to capture that process and guide other communities, a Transition Handbook, authored by Hopkins and based on his work in Totnes, describes twelve major steps or dimensions involved in the process of developing and implementing the EDAP (see Table 16.1), which we discuss in the second half of this chapter.

Hopkins’ template was quickly adopted in various parts of England, before rapidly becoming global, moving on to Canada, Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, and then to the United States, Brazil, Portugal, France, Japan, Hungary, Spain and elsewhere. The movement has been facilitated by technology, and all countries that have Transition initiatives have regional websites that are affiliated with [www.transitioninitiatives.net](http://www.transitioninitiatives.net), in much the same way that the Independent Media Centre, or Indymedia, grew in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Pickard, 2006). As mentioned earlier, the name of the movement itself began to be shortened to Transition initiatives in 2008–2009 in order to describe villages and entire cities that were adopting the model. To be called a formal initiative, communities have to have a small amount of training and communication with the original group in Totnes, as well as have progressed through several stages of the twelve-step process. Additionally, there are many hundreds of informal initiatives all over the world that have adopted one or the other aspects of the Transition initiative.

While these initiatives are often in tension with government priorities and mainstream discourses on sustainability and development (Ganesh, 2007), they are influencing community and environmental health and wellbeing, and can have surprising effects during emergencies and disasters (Folke et al., 2010). In the following sections, we identify ways in which the transition movement challenges dominant, neo-liberal conceptions of the economy and democracy. The first is by casting resilience in collective and potentially transformative terms, and the second by promoting participative methods.

## Transition and resilience

Understanding how the transition movement has appropriated and defined resilience as a core organizing term not only helps clarify how the movement is responsive to contemporary environmental, political and economic issues, but also how it crafts a cosmopolitan notion of localism. Indeed, resilience is such a central organizing concept in the transition movement that it is an explicit identity term: the very title of the founding document by Hopkins (2008) is titled *The Transition Handbook: From oil dependency to local resilience*. The Handbook says:

The concept of resilience is central to this book. In ecology, the term resilience refers to an ecosystem’s ability to roll with external shocks and attempted enforced changes. Walker et al. define it thus: “Resilience is the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance

and reorganise while undergoing change, so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedbacks.”

(p. 6)

The Handbook goes on to characterize three major features of resilience: diversity, modularity and tightness of feedbacks. Diversity in the context of community resilience refers to the ability of a community to generate diverse forms of multiplicity, such as multiple sources of energy, multiple forms of land use, and multiple sources of livelihood. Modularity, following from this, implies that the collapse of one portion of the community does not result in the automatic collapse of the rest of the community. Finally, tightness of feedbacks refers to how quickly and responsively portions of a community can respond to crises in other parts of it.

The Handbook also makes an effort to distinguish between resilience and sustainability, arguing that specific sustainability initiatives do not necessarily contribute to community resilience. A recycling program, for example, might help with the more sustainable production of plastics, but it does nothing to decrease the community's reliance on plastics itself. On the other hand, measures that reduce animal and food transportation not only reduce global energy consumption, they also help with local community resilience because they increase modularity-by reducing a community's dependence on global industrial agriculture for its protein sources. Likewise, creating an alternative currency helps enhance diversity by creating new, personal economic relationships and encouraging local enterprise.

The transition movement's conceptual appropriation of resilience, then, is distinct from how it is used in academic studies grounded in social psychology or organizational studies, as well as in programmatic applications informed by these disciplines. For example, the US army recently renamed its “Battlemind” program as “resilience training.” The program attempts to train soldiers to be immune from the psychologically devastating effects of combat, which include, of course, violence and death. Interestingly enough, the program is advised by Martin Seligman, a key figure in the positive psychology movement (Ehrenreich, 2010) that has dominated how the concept has been appropriated both in social psychology as well as organizational studies.

Although psychology and organizational studies treat resilience in very complex terms and at multiple levels, they continue to rely on Rutter's (1987) conception of psychosocial resilience as the “degree to which people can protect themselves against the psychological risks associated with adversity” (p. 316), which results in resilience being understood relatively narrowly as a form of coping and as a social adaptation to risk at the individual level. Doing so, however, does not enable us to focus on actions and practices that change the source of the risk itself. For instance, Sutcliffe and Vogus (2003) developed the notion of organizational resilience within the framework of positive organizational scholarship, but like others, consider resilience in terms of exposure and positive adaptation to a threat or risk rather than a process of systemic renewal that can change the risk itself.

There may be several reasons for the paradoxical bias towards adaptation in studies of resilience influenced by positive organizational studies. For one, positive psychology and positive organizing rarely address contexts of power, particularly in terms of accounting for what might be considered “positive” experiences and behaviours, as well as the role of power and critique in changing and shifting systemic risks and threats themselves. The focus on adaptation might also stem from the tendency to depict threats and risks as negative, fixed and immutable and therefore outside the purview of such analysis. And finally, the tendency to understand resilience in individual rather than community terms may also lead to a focus on adaptation.

However, the political and historical circumstances that motivate the transition movement have resulted in a significantly different and cosmopolitan definition of resilience, which focuses not only on local adaptation, but also on systemic renewal. It draws from more ecological notions of resilience, as demonstrated by its association with the Resilience Alliance, a collaborative consortium of scientists who explore the dynamics of social-ecological systems. The Alliance offers a threefold definition of resilience, stating that it refers to:

- i) the amount of change the system can undergo and still retain the same controls on function and structure, or still be in the same state within the same domain of attraction;
- ii) the degree to which the system is capable of self-organization; iii) the ability to build and increase the capacity for learning and adaptation.

*(Resilience Alliance, 2012)*

This definition positions resilience as distinct from stability, and as part of a cyclical self-organizing system that involves systemic renewal as well as adaptation (Berkes et al., 2003).

The transition movement's conceptualization of resilience is thus significant because it calls attention to larger relationships of power that are created and sustained through dominant neo-liberal economic discourses predicated on growth and energy consumption. Developing resilience entails formulating a steady-state economy focused on establishing economic security in an equitable way within the capacity of the ecosystem (Rees, 2010). In this way, the concept represents a form of resistance to prevailing discourses of austerity and disaster capitalism that defines financial resources in terms of scarcity and ecological resources as plentiful (Klein, 2011). The transition movement instead inverts this discourse by reframing finance as potentially plentiful and scarcity as ecological. Human capital as the capacity for creativity is treated as unbounded, whereas environmental capital is treated as finite. This, of course, has implications for how localism itself is conceptualized. As Rees (2012) argues, economic planning should occur at a manageable scale, which leaves the question of scale to the practical experience of organizers on the ground. Rees' approach also implies the need for cooperation among different economic planning regions, and does not conceptualize localism and regionalism in terms of discrete and sequestered units.

In addition to challenging taken-for-granted neo-liberal economic models, this conceptualization of resilience pragmatically challenges popular opinion that casts environmental conscientiousness as nay-saying. Asking citizens accustomed to the consumption patterns of late capitalism to radically re-think their assumptions about growth (Heinberg and Lerch, 2010) and extensively modify their lifestyle is likely to be dismissed out of defensiveness and fear. Denial is particularly easy when proponents of the status quo promise technological fixes so that environmental concerns can be ignored. The transition movement thus uses "positive" discourse as a means to go beyond this problem. The movement has been helpful in that it places optimistic attention onto what the future might actually look like. As the Handbook says, "It is one thing to campaign against climate change and quite another to paint a compelling and engaging vision of a post-carbon world in such a way as to enthuse others to embark on a journey towards it" (p. 67). Building resilience is not framed in terms of sacrifice and loss, but is about creating liveable futures that focus on developing human happiness through meaningful relationships, a sense of purpose, and environmental harmony rather than the accumulation of material goods.

For instance, in the US, transition town advocates seek to redefine prosperity by measuring well-being rather than wealth (the GDP), drawing from the idea of the 'Genuine Progress Indicator' (GPI) used in places like Maryland. Building community resilience, as



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one organizer put it, involves using an appreciative inquiry approach, or a “cooperative search for solutions, to go where people want the community to go. That more than anything else is effective because it demonstrates that we can do things” (personal communication, May 2010). Functional demonstrations of this vision are important given that the level of optimism expressed by the movement can itself be a shortcoming. Indeed, one of the organizers we spoke with said “our biggest challenge is people thinking we are silly” (personal communication, May 2010).

In sum, it is significant that transition groups frame resilience at the system level rather than the individual level. Groups assume that environmental realities must be faced and addressed, but their framing treats extant relations of economic and social power as something that can be changed through grass roots action rather than something to which we must adapt locally. The movement builds a narrative in which doing with less (material goods) produces greater levels of equality, happiness and community than many citizens experience today (Fodor, 1999). And although adaptation continues to be positioned as an important aspect of resilience, it is contextualized in terms of a broader need for sweeping social and ecological transformation and renewal.

### **Envisioning democracy: organizing principles in the transition movement**

The systemic and eco-centric notion of resilience adopted in the transition movement therefore carries significant potential as a means of consolidating and responding to economic and environmental crises wrought by capitalism. The heavy emphasis on process means that much of this potential depends upon how the transition movement engages with the enduring concerns of alternative organizing efforts for democratic ideals. Significantly, movement advocates construct these democratic principles with a strong blend of pragmatism, perhaps because it frames the need for resilience as being strong, urgent and immediate. Thus, democratic ideals are often discussed in highly practical terms, and there are three terms in particular that are common in the movement and merit attention: *inclusivity*, *Open Space decision making*, and *open-endedness*. However, each of these terms is held in pragmatic and often productive tension with the need to achieve practical outcomes. Inclusivity is understood with reference to the need for local power brokers to get involved, Open Space decision making is encouraged alongside the need to engage in education and awareness about ecological crises, and open-endedness is held alongside the need for a pragmatic vision about outcomes. We take each tension up in turn.

#### *Inclusivity AND the need to get local power brokers involved*

Historically participation has been an enduring concern for alternative organizing, and it remains a central principle of contemporary democratic and grass roots organizations. Bottom-up, grass-roots change results from involving community members and giving them voice in the organizing process and in substantive decisions, reflecting the tenets of participative democracy. The transition model encourages this in a number of ways, understanding participation in terms of the need for inclusivity. In “How to Start a Transition Initiative,” the Handbook insists that citizens do not need funding or expertise to initiate the process. “Funding is a very poor substitute for enthusiasm and community involvement, both of which will take you through the first phases of your transition. Funders can also demand a measure of control, and may steer the Initiative in directions that run counter to community interests and to your original vision” (p. 146). The model encourages the use of Open Space

technology (which we describe later) to co-create goals and principles and to “involve everybody in the transformation” (p. 149). As sub-groups form, members should continually question, “Who isn’t here who should be here?” (p. 159). “Go-Rounds” give sub-groups 5–10 uninterrupted minutes at meetings to share what has been happening with their groups and check in on how they are feeling. Hopkins suggests that members should be trained in such meeting facilitation and collaboration techniques to promote widespread participation.

Of course, an inclusive, bottom-up project has to start somewhere, often with visionaries or leaders who initiate the process and encourage participation (Zoller, 2000). In Kinsale, Hopkins and his permaculture students initiated the project by identifying and inviting participants from relevant community sectors. The group might hold an event about food and invite speakers to address that topic, followed by an open meeting on the subject. For some, this leadership role calls into question the democratic or dialogic nature of the process (Bohm, 1996). Pragmatically, though, we may be able to separate the context of initiating the process from the conversations and models that ensue. A good example of this comes from the Handbook, which recommends that organizers “set up a steering group and design its demise from the outset” (p. 148). This can be seen as a type of planned organizational obsolescence, an occurrence that in most sectors was difficult to imagine previously (Cheney, 2002).

Participative tensions also arise because at the same time the model focuses on inclusivity and a bottom-up approach, it also recognizes the need to involve local officials and power brokers in order to build credibility, promote scale and create policy change. Hopkins described a “community think tank” intended to initiate organizing in Kinsale “in order to hear the community’s ideas about how energy descent would affect the community and what might be done about it. We sent personal invitations to the movers and shakers in the town” (p. 123). Enrolling powerful participants can also be seen as a transgression against a grass roots approach. Pragmatically though, The Transition Handbook stresses that Lesson One from the Kinsale process is “Avoid ‘them’ and ‘us.’” Treating local officials as a source of the problem and as separate from citizens does not translate into effective action. Involving policy makers and others, like influential decision-makers, does require vigilance in managing power imbalances. “The power of the Transition process is its potential to create a truly community-led process which interfaces with local politics, but on its own terms. The role we identify for Local Authorities in this process is to support, not to drive it” (p. 144).

This pragmatic tension has resulted in some projects being more visibly led by community members, and others being obviously and visibly folded into larger policy goals. For example, the Mayor of London’s office collaborated and funded several transition-related groups to create a “Capital Clean-up” campaign, in time for the 2012 London Olympics. Here, the pragmatic goals of the City of London were arguably much more about tourism and promotion than about ecological sensitivity; yet, the other groups that participated in the exercise, including the transition-related group Thames 21 ([thames21.org.uk](http://thames21.org.uk)), were much more connected and supported by local communities, and were able to realize important goals related to wildlife and water conservation as a result.

Other transition-related efforts are entirely locally initiated, without much initial input from local, state or national government, but support from them in later stages. For example, the Waitati Energy Project began in Otago, New Zealand with the impetus of local activists, who used the aftermath of a major 2006 flood that compromised their power networks, as an opportunity for a range of community members to get involved in creating and promoting alternative energy sources in Waitati and Blueskin Bay. The local residents have been successful by many indicators: they have engaged with national government to develop small wind turbines and micro-hydro projects to create local off-the-grid energy networks, as well

as create a successful household energy efficiency program. In both cases, it is clear that projects flourished because they were inclusive; but in one case, the initiative was driven by policy needs and in the other, by local exigencies.

The question of who participates and the degree of diversity and broad representation of involved communities remains a significant, and sometimes vexing, issue; indeed, it predicts the ability of a transition initiative to embed itself in an existing matrix of community organizing around environmental issues. In one small town in the northwestern United States, for example, the first author's participant observation over a period of three months showed that one reason that the local transition initiative had failed to reach the point of "the great unleashing" was because the core group of organizers were not seen as credible by other key actors. These included not only the local university or members of the city council, but also the local food bank, members of a permaculture collective, and even a local Occupy group.

### *Awareness raising AND Open Space decision making*

Collaboration is often conceived in dialogic terms as equitable and open interchange that does not privilege particular viewpoints (Isaacs, 1993). This ideal can lead to tension with organizations that need to engage in advocacy by raising awareness and building public support for the issues they seek to address. This need for persuasion may exist in tension with the need for dialogic interaction. The transition model provides a pragmatic blueprint for managing this tension. For instance, Hopkins cautions that organizers should not assume community members understand basic environmental concepts let alone more complicated, abstract and specific issues of peak oil and climate change, so they must "prepare the ground" (p. 149) by educating audiences through film showing (for example, *Peak Oil: Imposed by Nature* or *The Power of Community*) and speaking events. These events should build a groundswell of enthusiasm and energy for participation, which is critical for successful initiatives. Reflecting their pragmatic approach, Hopkins suggests that this education process also serves the function of building the social networks needed for a transition initiative as audience members get to know one another. "Education" as it is framed here involves persuading people that we need to respond to environmental crises and that the transition model is an effective way to do so.

This persuasion is not "one-way" in the sense that public events should encourage dialogue among audience members. Education can be understood in Paulo Freire's sense as a set of moves that culminates in dialogue (Burbules, 1993). In practice, it may be more appropriate to view persuasion and education as intertwined with dialogue, as ideas that result from group discussion must be promoted throughout the community in order to cultivate participation. Interestingly, the persuasive needs for awareness, education and inspiration are part of a stages of change model that derive from studies of addiction – indeed, the very idea of a "12-step model" for change is discursively related to recovery from alcoholism. Here, addiction models are used metaphorically to explicitly understand energy use in terms of addictions and dependencies. Consequently, public meetings and discussions have to allow time for people to be weaned from their energy dependencies. Still, persuasive efforts do stand in tension with the idea of collaborative and open decision-making.

The Handbook describes Open Space Technology as involving a group of people who come together "to explore a particular topic or issue, with no agenda, no timetable, no obvious co-ordinator and no minute-takers" (p. 162) that creates opportunity for expression, networking, and the development of visions (as well as typed notes). The movement imports this highly open-ended deliberative procedure from Owen's (1997) discussion of the subject.

As a process, open-ended procedures do not specify agendas or desired outcomes: they begin purely with a topic for discussion. Discussion formats are always in circular formation, begin with people describing their passions, and inviting participation from others for sub-group breakout discussion. In this manner, the group goes where its participants want it to go, and as sessions and sub sessions evolve, the larger group begins to convene less regularly. The longer the session, the greater the need to record deliberation. The transition model adopts this need to record deliberation by creating a Wiki website where drafts of Energy Descent Plans can be shared and edited collaboratively. The town of Hertfordshire ran an online Wiki successfully for four years to discuss, debate and understand notions of energy descent and visions of the future until 2010, when its participants decided that its purpose for successful visioning, deliberation and support for surrounding transition groups had been fulfilled. They then moved to a formal website and a Facebook page to facilitate continued interaction.

A significant challenge that emerges for transition groups is to manage tensions that might arise from these very collaborative efforts, and ways in which this is done can impact the enthusiasm behind specific efforts. An organizer for a transition initiative in Aotearoa New Zealand reported to us some recent dynamics in their local group where participants were split on whether they should create a new level of organization that they were trying to define as a “resilience network.” Some people felt that it was critical to create such a trans-local group because it would help different communities learn from each other, create a more consolidated front to lobby the regional council, and help build better awareness about systemic aspects of resilience. Others felt that it would dilute energy behind efforts to grow and manage more local ventures such as the local time bank, and that they would not accomplish anything “real” with the network. In the absence of a consensus, one influential organizer stepped in and made a decision on behalf of the group to get involved in the network. This, understandably, violated the expectation of several members that they make decisions consensually and collaboratively and created a fair amount of bitterness.

### *Visioning AND open-endedness*

The tension between education and Open Space decision making as the key means through which communities make decisions and deliberate together is echoed in another tension about the goals of the movement between focused visioning versus the need for open-endedness. This reflects a common dilemma in community-based organizing between allowing new ideas to emerge through the process and creating a concrete vision and mission of where the organizing will go that creates enthusiasm (Medved et al., 2001). For instance, in a Healthy Communities initiative, facilitators and community members clashed over whether unstructured dialogue was the key to creating change or an impediment to action (Zoller, 2000). Missions help groups coordinate their action and cohere a common identity, but they can also limit groups’ potential. On one hand, Open Space decision making, in its very title, encourages an open-ended vision. The four key principles of Open Space, according to Owens (1997), are:

- whoever comes are the right people
- whatever happens is the only thing that could have
- whenever it starts is the right time
- when it’s over, it’s over.

(Owen 1997, p. 95)

*Table 16.1* Twelve key ingredients to the transition model

- 
1. Set up a steering group and design its demise/transformation from the start
  2. Start raising awareness
  3. Lay the foundations with existing groups and activists
  4. Organize a Great Unleashing
  5. Form theme (or special interest) groups
  6. Use Open Space decision making techniques
  7. Develop visible manifestations of the project in the community
  8. Facilitate the Great Reskilling or the desire to change habits
  9. Build a bridge to Local Government
  10. Honor the elders
  11. Let It Go Where It Wants To Go
  12. Create an Energy Descent Action Plan.
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Adapted from [www.transitionnetwork.org](http://www.transitionnetwork.org)

On the other hand, the principle of open-endedness is balanced by the need to remain focused on the core goals of the movement, to enhance resilience and to empower communities to deal with ecological crises. Some important features of the transition movement help balance this tension in a pragmatic way.

For example, take the “twelve key ingredients of transition” identified in the Handbook. These include setting up a core group of dedicated activists, raising community awareness about peak oil and climate change, a “great unleashing” or setting up a memorable milestone or a project that resonates with the community, a subsequent division of labour and the creation of specialized subgroups, initiating Open Space democratic decision making techniques, engaging with local government, and culminating in the creation of a specific EDAP. The directiveness of these twelve steps is offset by the caution:

They don't take you from A–Z, rather from A–C, which is as far as we've got with this model so far. These steps don't necessarily follow each other logically in the order they are set out here, every Transition initiative weaves a different way through the Steps, as you will see.

*(p. 148)*

The Handbook recommends that readers view the steps not as prescriptions but as pieces of a puzzle they may wish to use. The particular form a transition project takes depends on the community itself. For instance, Bloomington, Indiana in the US developed an energy descent plan in a somewhat top-down form through a task force coordinated by the city council. Further, as is evident from the title of Table 16.1, discussion in recent years has reframed the “steps” to “key ingredients” in an attempt to reduce the apparent linearity and overt prescriptiveness of the process.

The tension between the paradoxical goals of visioning and open-endedness echoes extant discussions in studies of community dialogue of tensions between talk and action (Zoller, 2000). Here, open-ended processes run the risk of being seen as “all talk” with a significant tension between the need to allow emergent decisions to guide the group rather than adopt action for its own sake, and the need to see concrete results in order to maintain enthusiasm and participation. To ameliorate this issue, the movement suggests demonstrating concrete manifestations of the movement early on. Drawing from other grass-roots initiatives, Hopkins

suggests that “your project needs, from an early stage, to begin to create practical manifestations in the town, high visibility signals that it means business” (p. 163). Such initiatives could include activities from tree plantings to an experiment in alternative currency. Stressing the pragmatic theme, the Handbook recommends uncontroversial events that will result in positive press, part of the “great unleashing” that is discussed in detail in the “12 key ingredients.” The challenge for the movement is to ensure that such actions do not substitute for more transformative changes, and whether particular activities themselves count as “talk” or “action.” This is evident from an example discussed in the previous section, where participants in a transition group were torn about whether or not to join a resilience network, because they could not agree whether it counted as just “talk” or as a meaningful systemic intervention.

## Discussion

As we explained at the outset, it is tremendously difficult to catalogue the success of any social movement because such efforts depend upon what counts as a successful outcome of movement organizing. Rather than interpret movement success purely in material terms or with regard to the achievement of the formal goals of the movement, Tilly (2006) suggests that we understand successful movement mobilizing in terms of WUNC – Worthiness, Unity, Numbers and Committedness. From that perspective, the transition movement has been consequential in communicating the importance of acting locally on both peak oil and climate change to many hundreds of communities all over the world. Participants have managed the enactment of dialogic and democratic forms of communication, the number of transition initiatives has grown at an unprecedented rate, and it is clear from studies (Ganesh and Dann, 2011, Ganesh, 2012) as well as media coverage that participants are committed to the success of the movement. The broader potential of the transition movement stems from its reframing of resilience in systemic terms that paint a picture of energy descent and climate change as an opportunity for a happier and more fulfilling future, rather than merely the abrupt end of the consumption party. Collective resilience becomes a powerful means of changing social norms of radical individualism as well received views about the necessity of growth as an economic model.

Some of the movement’s success may also result from the pragmatic approach we describe above that balances concerns about facilitating the growth of emergent solutions through bottom-up participation with the need for some of the basic tools of political organizing: building enthusiasm, involving existing power brokers and moving towards concrete action. Obviously, these tensions are significant and, as our discussion demonstrates, they can be managed poorly or well. Initiatives must remain focused on avoiding losing that sense of balance if the movement is to continue to thrive in terms of WUNC.

Given the enormity of unfolding environmental crises, it is also crucial to understand the success of transition initiatives in material terms. Because it is still early in the movement, its influence cannot be fully understood. At a minimum, individual transition efforts can provide working models as effects of climate change and peak oil become more visible to power brokers and the general public. Nonetheless, in moving forward the movement needs to address several challenges. In closing, we identify three.

First, it is arguable whether all communities are equally fertile grounds for transition. Indeed, communities that are particularly vulnerable to ecological devastation are often those that are characterized by hierarchies of exploitation, ranging from powerful global, corporate or state actors to local elites (Shiva, 1989). Persuasive and participative communication

practices to encourage change in impoverished and marginalized communities, often in the third world, are often stymied by powerful national and transnational interests. The template offered by the transition movement needs to take such material and power issues into account if it is to build a truly global community resilience, which might stretch to its limit the ability of the movement to balance democratic organizing with the pragmatic need for outcomes.

A second challenge that transition initiatives face is the question of local ownership: whether communities truly own the process and outcome of transition efforts, or whether they are incorporated into the service of larger, extraneous or even non-related policy objectives. The City of London's use of transition groups to improve its image before the 2012 Olympics is a case in point. Whilst critics such as Albo (2009) focus on capitalism itself as the prime obstacle to any effective eco-localisation effort, we believe that local ownership of transition efforts is an important first step in materially shifting the scale of change enabled by transition.

Finally, the actual process of transition involves a fundamental shift in economic livelihoods, social practices and political relationships. While we have described how three major tensions in the transition movement are often balanced against each other, it is also the case that the scale of change that the movement is asking for may make such balance supremely difficult to maintain in the long run. In practical terms, the effort the movement requires may be difficult to sustain in the face of the change required. Further, the optimism of the principles espoused in the movement may themselves make the movement easy for critics to dismiss. It is precisely for these reasons that we need to continue examining potential obstacles facing the movement, not only in terms of the material scale of the challenges involved, but also in terms of how these initiatives enact their own prefigurative politics (see Chapter 23 in this volume) and addresses questions of power in terms of participation and decision-making at the local level. Perhaps, with such self-examination, the movement itself will continue to be resilient in the face of its many challenges.

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