**The Transition movement: Today Totnes... tomorrow the world**

What began as one town's experiment with reducing its reliance on oil has now spread to 35 countries around the globe

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Its founder believes it is our best hope for a future after the worldwide banking crisis. Now, it seems, a growing number of people are starting to agree. The "Transition" movement has grown eightfold since the recession hit three years ago and is now operating in 35 countries around the world.

When the first Transition town was established five years ago in Totnes, Devon, the "experiment" was simple. Like-minded people would work on creating a more sustainable community to reduce their dependency on oil. By 2008, there were 100 registered initiatives in 11 countries. Today, there are more than 850 Transitions in three times as many countries. More than 300 groups have signed up in the past year.

Transition now operates in countries including Latvia, Thailand, Nigeria, India and the US. Recent projects have sprung up in favelas in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and the newest initiative to be registered is from Parramatta, New South Wales, Australia.

To its founder, Rob Hopkins, the reason for this explosive growth is obvious. "Communities are realising they are more vulnerable, and the current situation means people are less complacent about where the economic activity of the future is going to come from," he says. "Transition doesn't wait for permission to get started; it is about ordinary people making things happen within a bigger strategic context."

The movement is not without its critics, whether lambasted for not being radical enough, for a lack of practical guidance, or for failing to appeal to those outside the white, middle-class demographic. Much of the criticism has come from within sustainability circles themselves. Transition is proudly "apolitical" and while it works with local government, it stays clear of lobbying Parliament. But, for some, this is its major flaw.

"It's wonderful to see people acting locally to do something about climate change, but you can't run the whole economy on that. You need government involvement as well," says Peter North, a senior lecturer in human geography at the University of Liverpool. "Transition can sometimes help politicians show something good is happening locally, while allowing 'business as usual' to carry on everywhere else."

Despite Mr Hopkins's refusal to become affiliated with any party, the significance of the movement is not lost on politicians. When his first Transition Handbook was published in 2008, outlining the 12 steps needed to become part of the low-carbon movement, it was ranked number five on the MPs' list of summer reading. Ed Miliband called the movement the "vanguard of that persuasion".

Now, two days before the local launch of his second book, The Transition Companion, it is clear that Mr Hopkins is even more ambitious when it comes to the scope of the movement's work. Out goes the focus on abstract notions of "peak oil" and in comes an emphasis on "social enterprises", economic development and growth. In the book's introduction, Mr Hopkins appeals to the network to "create projects and infrastructure that are economically viable".

Even Totnes, the flagship Transition town, which boasts 5,000 supporters, has started number-crunching. Under its Transition Streets programme, it has worked with 500 households to reduce their carbon emissions and water use, saving an estimated £700 per home each year. A Transition initiative in Lewes, East Sussex, raised more than £350,000 and, in July, set up the first community-owned solar power station on the top of a local brewery, generating 98kW – the equivalent produced by solar panels on about 50 house roofs.

But with more than three times as many initiatives in urban than rural locations, some of the most innovative projects are now happening in cities. Bath Community Energy is aiming to put £11m-worth of renewable energy into community ownership over the next five years, while, in London, there is a network of around 40 Transition initiatives. Projects range from a new mobile-phone-based local currency, launched under the Brixton pound, to the creation of a community allotment on the platform of Kilburn Underground station.

Mr Hopkins stresses that Transition's particular form of "localisation" is different from the Government's talk of local control. "Localism is about devolving political power to local councils... Localisation is an economic process that shortens the distance between consumer and producer, increasing local ownership," he says. But Gill Seyfang, a senior researcher in sustainable consumption at the University of East Anglia, says Transition is never going to become more mainstream, increase its impact, or transcend the "green clique", unless it links up with the "powerful actors" that it seems so cautious of.

For Mr Hopkins, the aim is simpler. "What we are doing is showing communities they can actually do something to address these issues while also helping politicians see what is possible," he says. "It is about designing the next step forward in a way that is appropriate to the challenges we face.

"Whether you call it 'Transition' or not, all these things are going to contribute to making us more resilient."