



# THE TRANSITION COMPANION

Making your community more resilient  
in uncertain times



Rob Hopkins

Founder of the Transition movement



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# Introduction

This book seeks to answer the question:

**“What would it look like if the best responses to peak oil and climate change came not from committees and Acts of Parliament, but from you and me and the people around us?”**

It's a big question, which is why it requires this relatively big book to address it, but I think you're going to enjoy the pages ahead, and the journey on which they will take you. For *The Transition Handbook*, published in 2008, this was pretty much a speculative question, but for this new book we are able to draw from what has, in effect, been a four-year worldwide experiment, an attempt to try to put the Transition idea into practice. I think it is one of the most important social experiments happening anywhere in the world at the moment. I hope that by the end of this book you will agree, that if you aren't involved you will want to get involved, and if you are already involved, it will affirm, inspire and deepen what you are doing and give you a new way of looking at it.

Supported by some simple principles, ingredients and tools – which I'll introduce you to later – and by a global network of self-organising initiatives, many thousands of people in cities, islands, towns and villages, from the US to New Zealand and from Brazil to Norway, are asking “For all those aspects of life that this community needs in order to sustain itself and thrive, how do we significantly rebuild resilience (to mitigate the effects of peak oil and economic contraction) and drastically reduce carbon emissions (to mitigate the effects of climate change)?”

While the overriding cultural response is to duck that question and to pop our heads into the sand of denial, these people are responding with creativity, compassion and a deep commitment. They're also having fun, lots of it, connecting with people they'd never met before, and together creating something

far greater than the sum of its parts. What they're doing is telling a new story about the place they live, and about what that place could be like in the future. This book is called a ‘Companion’ because that is exactly what it is intended to be. It is a move away from ‘The Twelve Steps of Transition’ that has underpinned the work of Transition initiatives up to this point, towards a more holistic, more appropriate model. It will act as a very useful companion as you try to address the questions I have just outlined. It imagines the work involved in transforming the place you live from its current highly vulnerable, non-resilient, oil-dependent state to a resilient, more localised, diverse and nourishing place, as a journey. It is a companion in the sense that it doesn't tell you which way to go or what your journey will look like, but suggests some of the especially good views along the way, and provides a rough sense of the different types of terrain you will find yourself travelling across. But the journey itself and where you end up – that's up to you.

The journey analogy is a useful one. Throughout history, we have told stories of heroes who undertook extraordinary journeys, which combined an inner and an outer experience. Often they go something like this: a likeable but flawed character (Frodo,



Transition argues that a more resilient community is one that grows food everywhere. Photo: Lou Brown

## CHAPTER ONE

# The emergence of an idea: A potted history of Transition

**I am often asked “So how did this whole Transition thing start?” So often, in fact, that I often consider having the following couple of paragraphs printed on a T-shirt. The poor souls who share an office with me have heard this so many times that I can see their eyes glaze over when they hear someone ask me. Anyway, given that what follows is a history of how the Transition idea emerged and evolved, I must start at the beginning. If you too have heard it dozens of times, do leap forward a few paragraphs to the highlights on pages 13 to 16.**

I was a teacher of permaculture at a wonderful, very progressive adult education college in Kinsale, Ireland, where I had set up and taught the world's first two-year full-time permaculture course. The course<sup>1</sup> proved to be, and still is, wildly popular, turning one of the largest areas of lawn in the town into a mixture of ponds, gardens, polytunnels, forest gardens, a cob-and-cordwood amphitheatre and much else, while producing many inspired and enthusiastic students. At the start of term in October 2004, I showed the students the film *The End of Suburbia*, and the following day Dr Colin Campbell<sup>2</sup> came in to talk to them about peak oil. This combination put a bomb under both me and the students, and so I set the second-year students a project to create a plan for the intentional weaning of Kinsale off its oil dependency (for more about permaculture see Tools for Transition No.1: Permaculture design (page 84).

The resulting document, entitled ‘Kinsale 2021: an Energy Descent Action Plan’<sup>3</sup> (EDAP), a compilation of the students’ work and a few other bits and pieces, was finished in time for a conference we held in June 2005 at the college, called ‘Fuelling the Future’. We didn’t see that we had created anything



especially meaningful, and the document wasn’t even formally launched; rather, it was almost apologetically on sale at the back of the room. Luckily, others, including Richard Heinberg, who spoke at the event, picked it up and saw something of importance in it.

The 500 printed copies were rapidly sold (I remember over 100 going off in one box to Australia), and the pdf was downloaded many thousands of times. A few months later, Kinsale Town Council

unanimously voted to support the plan and its findings. In the meantime I had moved to Totnes in Devon, where I met Naresh Giangrande, a fellow peak oil educator, and the two of us set about investigating what a better and deeper version of the Kinsale EDAP in Totnes might look like. We began showing films together and giving talks, and they generated a great deal of interest. Other people started getting involved and bringing pieces from systems thinking, psychology, business development and the power of the internet to spread ideas.

described me as looking like “a man standing under a tsunami that was building faster and higher than he could imagine”. He offered to help set up an organisation designed to support the other places where Transition was emerging. The idea of something called ‘Transition Network’ emerged, and within a short time we had secured core funding to get it under way – just in time, as it turned out, as pretty soon after that everything started going bonkers. Over the four years since then, there have been regular events or occurrences



Members of the audience meeting each other at the Unleashing of Transition Town Totnes, September 2006.



Some of the translators of the Dutch *The Transition Handbook* celebrating at the launch of the book.

The right people seemed to turn up at the right time. In September 2006, after eight months of awareness raising and networking, we held an event called the ‘Unleashing of Transition Town Totnes’, where over 400 people turned up at Totnes Civic Hall to launch a process that had barely been designed in any detail. At that event were people from a few other communities, including Falmouth, Penzance and Lewes, who went back home and tried to figure out if this might work there too.

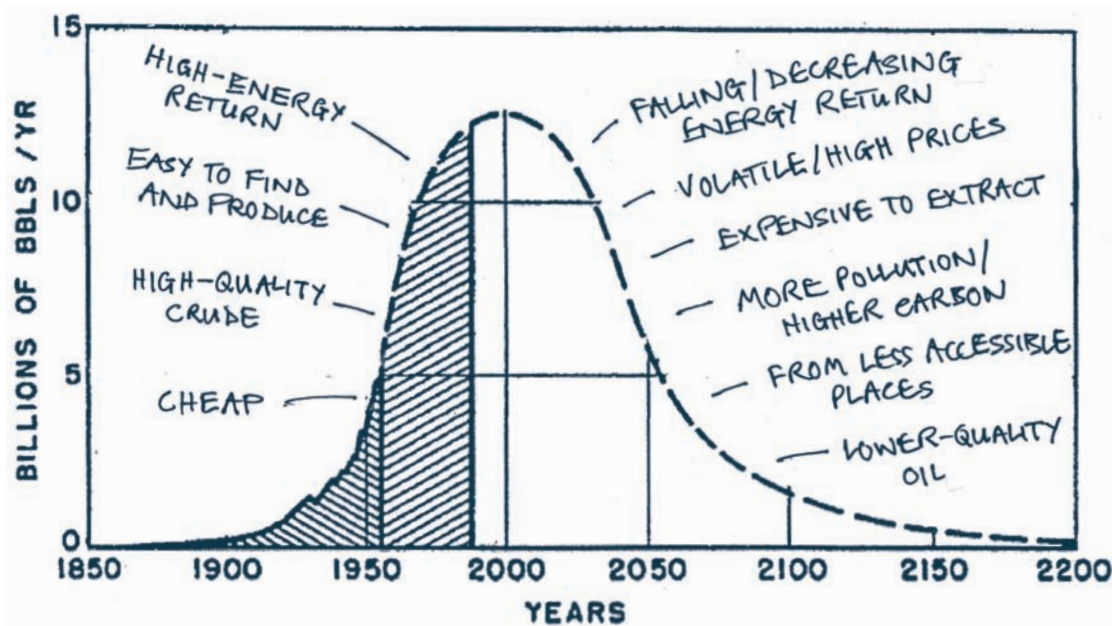
Shortly afterwards, at Schumacher College in Dartington, a course was held called ‘Life After Oil’, whose teachers included Dr David Fleming and Richard Heinberg, and I also taught a day about Transition. One of the participants, Ben Brangwyn,

that have made us stop and go “wow!” Anyone reading this who has been involved in Transition will have their own list, but here are some of my highlights.

#### **The passing of the Transition Somerset resolution.**

We got a call one day from Somerset County Council, saying they had just passed a resolution supporting their local Transition initiatives (of which there are many) and pledging to support them, which caused great excitement and inspired others to follow suit. Somerset has since had a change of administration and abandoned much of its sustainability work (see *Daring to Dream* 1: Policies for Transition, page 262), but at the time this felt like a very significant development.





The Oil Age: a game of two halves! (With apologies to M. King Hubbert's classic 1956 peak oil graph.)

The International Energy Agency (IEA), which had spent many years previously deriding the idea of peak oil, announced in one sentence tucked away in its '2010 World Energy Outlook'<sup>6</sup> that "crude oil output never regains its all-time peak of 70 million barrels per day reached in 2006", and that output is now rapidly depleting. What is now making up the shortfall is what is referred to as 'unconventional oil', which includes deep-sea oil production, tar-sands oil production and making oil from coal.

These unconventional oils make conventional oil production look 'green'. They have far higher carbon emissions, use much more water, produce a lot more pollution and lower-grade fuels and often give us an energy return closer to 5:1 or less. Although some people argue that improving technology means that what are currently 'unconventional' fuels will one day become the new 'conventional' fuels (i.e. gas from coal), this is still a long way from reality, if indeed it is possible.

Globally, oil production has largely been on a plateau since May 2005, and, in early 2011, as the

price of oil started to rise again, concerns have been raised by the IEA that economic recovery will be very difficult in a world of high or volatile oil prices. The exact date of the peak is often debated,

"Oil prices are entering a dangerous zone for the global economy. The oil import bills are becoming a threat to the economic recovery. This is a wake-up call to the oil-consuming countries and to the oil producers. It is not in the interest of anyone to see such high prices. Oil exporters need clients with healthy economies but these high prices will sooner or later make the economies sick, which would mean the need for importing oil will be less."

Fatih Birol, International Energy Agency, January 2010<sup>7</sup>

but in reality it is something we will only be able to see with hindsight. The forecasts of most relevant organisations have been steadily moved from further in the future back to nearer the present, many putting the date at any time between now and 2015. Others have expressed concern that stated world oil reserves could have been exaggerated by up to a third,<sup>8</sup> and documents made available by WikiLeaks in February 2011<sup>9</sup> suggested that Saudi Arabia's reserves may have been overstated by as much as 300bn barrels – almost 40 per cent.

A 2005 report that looked in detail at how much time the US economy would need to prepare for the peak<sup>10</sup> argued it would need 20 years, or 10 if the response were akin to a wartime mobilisation. Given this timescale, whether peak oil happens now or in five years is neither here nor there. We rely hugely on the unreliable, moving from a time where our sense of success and who we are is directly linked to how much oil we consume, to a time where our oil dependency is a key vulnerability.

## Because it means they can do that project they have always dreamed of doing...

Transition creates a space and a context within which people are invited to get going on projects they are passionate about, with the support of a larger organisation and with connections to other projects. Events such as Open Space (see Tools for Transition No.15: Community brainstorming tools, page 214) let people meet others who share the same passions, to create an environment in which it feels natural to start and make things happen. Start a community bakery? A farm? An energy company? A food garden on the roof of your local supermarket? Why not?

## Because of climate change

The basic notion of climate change, that carbon dioxide and water vapour trap energy from the sun in the Earth's atmosphere and stop it being



Pressing apples on the Scilly Isles.  
Photo: Jonathan Smith

“What is happening now in our central regions is evidence of this global climate change, because we have never in our history faced such weather conditions in the past.”

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev,  
December 2010

bounced back out into space, was established in the mid-nineteenth century. Without that process, our planet would be 20-30°C colder than it is today. Since then, due to the combustion of fossil fuels,

“I do Transition because it’s what **needs to be done**, and because it’s the **first positive, life-affirming** process that I have found.”

Judy Skog

“Transition provides me with the **knowledge** and **contacts** I need for the **uncertain future** ahead. I now live for Transition.”

Russ Carrington

“Because it **just makes sense.**”

Harriet Stewart-Jones



Starting out

Deepening

Connecting

Building

Daring to dream

PART THREE:

How the Transition  
movement does  
what it does –  
ingredients for  
success

# 1. Coming together as groups

by Sophy Banks



The Transition Belsize group giving away trees. *Photo: James Piers Taylor*

## How best to bring a group of people together, and lay foundations for their working together successfully?

One common mistake when forming a Transition group is to think that because everyone is committed to the core purpose that initially drew them together, there won't be any difficulty in working together. However, everyone has their own idea about how groups should be run, based on past experience and beliefs, and on their own strengths and abilities. This book doesn't intend to specify one 'right' way groups should structure themselves – each group will need to figure out its own way of working, but it will offer some useful insights and tools.

So, how can we create as many positive effects (the things we all love about being part of a project like Transition) as possible, and minimise what can be difficult (the things that turn a pleasure into a

chore)? This ingredient strongly recommends investing time and energy at this early stage to save a great deal more time and energy later on. These tasks may well take up most of the first few meetings, and appear regularly on the agenda for the first six months or year, but this is time very well spent (later phases of group life are covered in *MOMENTUM (Deepening 9, page 155)* and *HEALTHY CONFLICT (Tools for Transition No.11, page 164)*).

The first thing to establish is what the *purpose* of the group is. This might include a mission statement, and then some secondary sentences about how you will carry this out. For example, here is the Mission Statement of Transition Town Exmouth:

“Transition Town Exmouth aims to build Exmouth's local resilience and independence from fossil fuels, and to reduce its carbon emissions by a process of energy descent.

We will do this by:

- Creating awareness and understanding of the mission and the Transition movement.
- Applying the Transition model to the town of Exmouth and locality.
- Empowering stakeholders to envision and follow pathways of energy descent and practical actions that contribute to the mission.”

Agreeing on the mission or aim of your group will help enormously in getting clarity about everything that follows – who joins the group, how you work together and where time should be spent, what are the priorities and so on. Include in your purpose something about how you will work as a group as well as what you will do.

The following are some very different kinds of activities that groups may have as part of their purpose. You may want to spend some time thinking about how much these apply to your group as you start.

- Getting tasks done.
- Reflecting and improving how the group works together.
- Building trust and safety and getting to know each other.
- Giving and getting support.
- Learning and sharing tools and skills.

You will also need to agree some basic ground rules, which describe how the group will work together. This also helps to reduce misunderstandings, and having it written down and available at group meetings keeps it in mind. Most groups update and add to these as new things arise. Agreements made at the start might include the following.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Margaret Mead

- When and where meetings take place.
- How meetings are run (agenda setting, facilitation / chairing, managing the time, and so on – see RUNNING EFFECTIVE MEETINGS (Tools for Transition No.4, page 109)
- How decisions are made (consensus, majority vote, consent) and recorded.
- How you behave towards each other (respectful listening, arriving on time, supporting the group purpose, appreciating each other's contribution, maintaining confidentiality where appropriate).
- What kinds of things you will make time for in your meetings (planning, doing, reviewing tasks, learning, social time, reviewing and revising group agreements).

Agreements you might want to work out later in the group's life could include:

- Is the group open or closed? How and when can people join, and how are they brought into the group? How and when do people leave?
- How to deal with disagreements.
- How and when to review and change the group agreements.

The last thing to consider is who you need in the group. What skills are required? Which voices aren't there that should be there?

**From the outset, create clear structures and processes that help your group to work enjoyably and effectively – and take some time to get to know each other as people!**

#### You might also enjoy . . .

INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY (*Starting out* 2, page 82), RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION (*Starting out* 3, page 86), TRANSITION TRAINING (Tools for Transition No.3, page 98), RUNNING EFFECTIVE MEETINGS (Tools for Transition No.4, page 109), ‘HOW ARE WE DOING?’ (*Deepening* 7, page 150), SUPPORTING EACH OTHER (Tools for Transition No.9, page 159), PERSONAL RESILIENCE (*Deepening* 11, page 161), HEALTHY CONFLICT (Tools for Transition No.11, page 164).



## Tools for Transition No.15: Community brainstorming tools



Open Space sessions at the 2009 Transition Network conference, Battersea Arts Centre, London.

**Belief in external experts to show us the way has become standard practice. However, much of what we need is around us. We need ways to unlock the knowledge and ideas of our community. Two approaches often used by Transition groups are Open Space and World Café. The following information will help you run sessions on them.**

### Open Space Technology

This is for groups from 10 to 1,000 people who need to explore a major issue. Its originator, Harrison Owen, bases it on four guidelines:

- Whoever comes are the right people.
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened.

- When it starts is the right time.
- When it's over, it's over.

... and one 'law', 'The Law of Motion and Responsibility:

**"If, during the course of the gathering, any person finds themselves in a situation where they are neither learning nor contributing, they are invited to use their feet and go to some more productive place."**

Harrison Owen

- You'll need a room large enough for those attending to be able to sit in a circle (or, in the case of large numbers, in concentric circles), a wall you can stick things on to, and places (rooms, tables, corners) for conversations.
- A clear question must appear in publicity and invitations for the event.
- Sit participants in a circle. In the centre is a pile of sheets of A4 paper and pens. On the wall is an empty timetable, with the timings of the different sessions on one axis, and the various breakout spaces on the other.
- Explain the rules of Open Space, and say the only rule for proposing a question is that you host that discussion and take legible notes.
- Anyone with a question writes it on a sheet of paper and sticks it to the wall. If there are more questions than available time slots, the leader or participants can consolidate relevant ones. Once your timetable/agenda is complete, allow people a few minutes to look at it and work out what they want to go to. Then announce the start of the first session.
- In theory, the rest of the day will now organise itself!
- At the end of each session, collect the note-filled sheets, and put them on the wall in the area called the 'Marketplace'.
- It can be very useful to have a 'Newsroom', someone who is scribing the notes from the

sessions. They can give people leaving the event a printed account of what was discussed, post the notes online or send them to participants the following day.

- Leave 30-40 minutes or so at the end for a go-round to reflect on the process rather than issues raised.

Open Space is great for gathering ideas that lead to practical projects. Meeting others who share your passion helps turn ideas into action. Those who have ideas bring them to an Open Space looking for collaborators. Open Space makes private ideas public and helps kick-start explorations around their feasibility, which then attracts others.

## World Café

This has been summarised as being about 'awakening and engaging collective intelligence through conversations about questions that matter'. It differs from Open Space in that it is more directed and explores specific issues. It rests on the ancient truth that food and drink prompt thought and conversation. So here's how to run a World Café session:

- Plan the event well, frame the question(s), decide who should be there and how you will invite them, where and when it will be, and what results



An Open Space session that took place in Tsuru City at the all-Japan Transition meeting, August 2010. Photo: Paul Shepherd



Discussions at an Open Space event in Totnes.

## 2. Social enterprise / entrepreneurship



Preparing vegetable boxes at Growing Communities, a local food social enterprise in Hackney.

**Visioning a powered-down local economy is one thing, but how to bring it into reality, in such a way that it supports the wider transition of the community and can thrive independently of external funding?**

Transition is about creating a new, economically viable local infrastructure that creates livelihoods, skills and resilience – and these projects need to be economically viable. Social enterprise is gaining a lot of traction and interest, often in the context of the UK government's 'Big Society' agenda. This ingredient argues firstly that Transition initiatives

might better meet their aims by stimulating and supporting social enterprises / entrepreneurs locally, and secondly suggests that, in the pursuit of initiatives becoming financially viable, social enterprise has a key role to play – possibly through the initiative setting itself up as an enterprise offering services, selling training in its projects, etc., through to getting an ongoing donation / revenue cut from enterprises it has helped support or that have emerged from the initiative's work.

But what does social enterprise actually mean? The first thing to note is that it is not a new idea. The Cooperative movement in the 1860s created viable businesses to strengthen local economies and create meaningful employment and local ownership.



## Transition in Action: The REconomy project

by Fiona Ward



Fiona Ward introduces REconomy at its launch event in Totnes, January 2011.

The REconomy project aims to help Transition initiatives to engage local businesses and organisations, and stimulate new social enterprises in order to strengthen their local economy and increase community resilience. This is Phase One of what we hope will be an ongoing programme by Transition Training and Consulting – the part of the Transition Network that engages with business and organisations, including social enterprise. This project has been kindly funded by the Roddick Foundation.

The project is working with ten Transition initiatives during 2011 to help them to define and then strengthen the skills they need to:

- Engage their existing local businesses and organisations in discussions about Transition issues, the implications and the potential solutions.
- Stimulate the start-up of new social enterprises that can take advantage of low-carbon and relocalised markets, and shape a more sustainable and equitable local economy.

We also aim to pilot a means to estimate the economic potential of a local Transition economy, including its land/energy assets, skills and other resources, and then explore how this can be used to best effect to engage all the relevant players in a coordinated and prioritised set of activities to deliver this economic potential.

For more information see:  
[www.transitionnetwork.org/projects/reconomy](http://www.transitionnetwork.org/projects/reconomy)

“Social enterprise is a business or service with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners”.

### Future Builders

In essence, social enterprises are financially viable, with explicit social aims and an ownership model

that increases social participation. Often they stem from one visionary, bold individual, an entrepreneur. I asked Nick Temple, formerly of the School for Social Entrepreneurs, what qualities seemed typical. He told me that being a social entrepreneur is as much an attitude as a specific business model. In essence it is about approaching social and environmental problems entrepreneurially. His advice:

- Just get on and do stuff: the best thing is to get started and learn from your own and other

“Honestly, I don’t really see many other ways  
of ensuring a **better world** for our children ...”

Miguel Leal

In 2008, the bestselling *The Transition Handbook* suggested a model for a community-led response to peak oil and climate change. Since then, the Transition idea has gone viral across the globe, from Italian villages and Brazilian favelas to universities and London neighbourhoods. In contrast to the ever-worsening stream of information about climate change, the economy and resource depletion, Transition focuses on solutions, on community-scale responses, on meeting new people and on having fun.

*The Transition Companion* picks up the story today, drawing on the experience of one of the most fascinating experiments under way in the world. It tells inspiring tales of communities working for a future where local economies are valued and nurtured; where lower energy use is seen as a benefit; and where enterprise, creativity and the building of resilience have become cornerstones of a new economy.

The first part discusses where we are now in terms of resilience to the problems of rising oil prices, climate change and economic challenge. It presents a vision of the future if we do not address these issues, and how things might change if we start to do so. The book then looks in detail at the process a community in transition goes through, calling on the experience of those who have already embarked on this journey. These examples show how much can be achieved when people harness energy and imagination to create projects that will make their communities more resilient. *The Transition Companion* combines practical advice – the tools needed to start and maintain a Transition initiative – with numerous inspiring stories from local groups worldwide.



**Rob Hopkins** is recognised globally for his grassroots work in promoting community resilience in the light of peak oil and climate change. He is the co-founder of Transition Town Totnes and the Transition Network, and author of the best-selling *The Transition Handbook*. He has created this book through a collaborative process involving thousands of people. His blog is on [www.transitionculture.org](http://www.transitionculture.org).



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