

**transformative
social innovation
theory**

TSI-

Narrative

for the

Transition

Movement

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About TRANSIT:

TRANSIT is an international research project that aims to develop a theory of Transformative Social Innovation that is useful to both research and practice. It is co-funded by the European Commission and runs for four years, from 2014 until 2017. The TRANSIT consortium consists of 12 partners across Europe and Latin America. For more information, please visit our website: <http://www.transitsocialinnovation.eu/>.

About this Document/ Disclaimer:

This report provides a very short summary of a full case-study report that includes in-depth case-studies of Transition Movement. Both, the full case reports and this summary, were guided by four empirical research questions based upon a preliminary conceptual framework of the TRANSIT-project. The four questions concern:

1. the overall development of the local cases and the transnational network(ing);
2. how they relate to different types of change and innovation (incl. social innovation, system innovation, game-changers, narratives of change and societal transformation);
3. how actors are empowered and/or disempowered in and by the local cases and the transnational network(ing), including topics such as governance, learning, resourcing and monitoring;
4. what are other relevant emergent issues with regard to understanding the dynamics of transformative social innovation.

This summary document focuses on the first three questions. It presents – in a highly reduced and generalised format – the interpretations of the researchers, and does not necessarily reflect the views and nuances of the initiatives and respondents themselves. For a full account of each transnational network and local case, including interview quotes and expressed nuances by respondents, we refer to the full case report, which is available via communication.transit@ihs.nl. Both the full case report, as well as this summary document, are the basis for future research activities and publications.

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1 Development of the Transition Movement

The Transition movement (TM) is a social movement consisting of individuals who mostly come together voluntarily in place based communities (Transition Initiatives) to work on projects and activities that relate to the broad goal of achieving a ‘transition’. A recent definition of the vision of a transition, from the perspective of the TM is

...about the changes we need to make to get to a low-carbon, socially-just, healthier and happier future, which is more enriching and more gentle on the earth than the way most of us live today. In our vision of the future, people work together to find ways to live with a lot less reliance on fossil fuels and on over-exploitation of other planetary resources, much reduced carbon emissions, improved wellbeing for all and stronger local economies. (Transition Network, 2014).

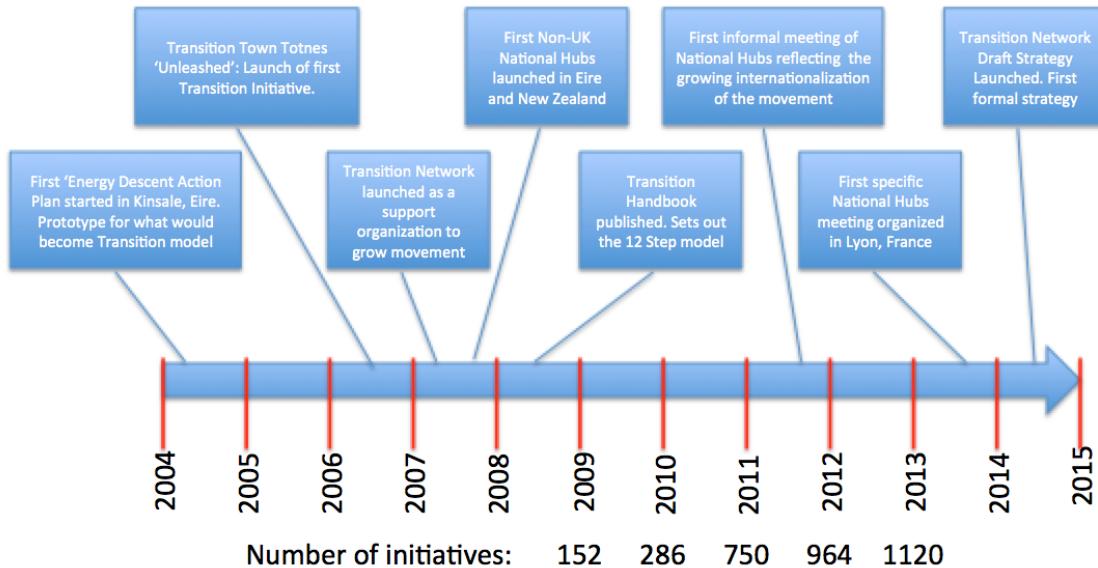
The movement as a whole then consists of a network of Transition Initiatives which are locally focused and are intended to stimulate the emergence of projects that contribute to enhancing local economic resilience, partly through the development of parallel forms of infrastructure and through enrolling other actors (from ordinary citizens to political leaders) to work towards the overall goal of a transition. Transition activists also argue that it is a response to climate change and the global economic crisis. Most recently, Hopkins (2014) positions Transition as a third alternative economic strategy to either ‘Austerity’ or the ‘Green Deal’ in other words “local resilience as economic development” (Hopkins, 2014).

The origins of the movement can be traced to 2004/5 when permaculture teacher Rob Hopkins worked with his students to develop an “Energy Descent Action Plan” for Kinsale, Eire which detailed how the town could adapt to life with less oil. This work provided the seeds for the Transition model, and following his return to the UK, Hopkins launched the Transition Town Totnes project in September 2006, along with another ‘peak oil’ activist Naresh Giangrande. The Transition movement has expanded internationally over the last 8 years (see figure 1). There are now over 1,000 local initiatives across several continents and likely to be others doing work that is inspired by Transition which are not formally registered. However some initiatives have also slipped into ‘hibernation’. The spread of the Transition model was facilitated by the internet and in particular the *Transition Culture* blog¹ that Rob Hopkins wrote daily for the first couple of years of TTT and which developed a significant following and profile. Other social media such as You Tube, Facebook and coverage in ‘old’ media also contribute to spreading the model as has Transition Training and the Transition Network. TN was established in 2007 as a UK registered charity with the explicit aim of supporting the development of the movement and the establishment of TIs. It was initially set up as a response to the wave of enquiries and requests for support that followed the establishment of TTT. Its website provides a key platform for the movement.

¹ Transition Culture (<http://transitionculture.org>) was ended as a standalone blog in 2013 and Rob Hopkins now blogs as one of several bloggers on the Transition Network website.

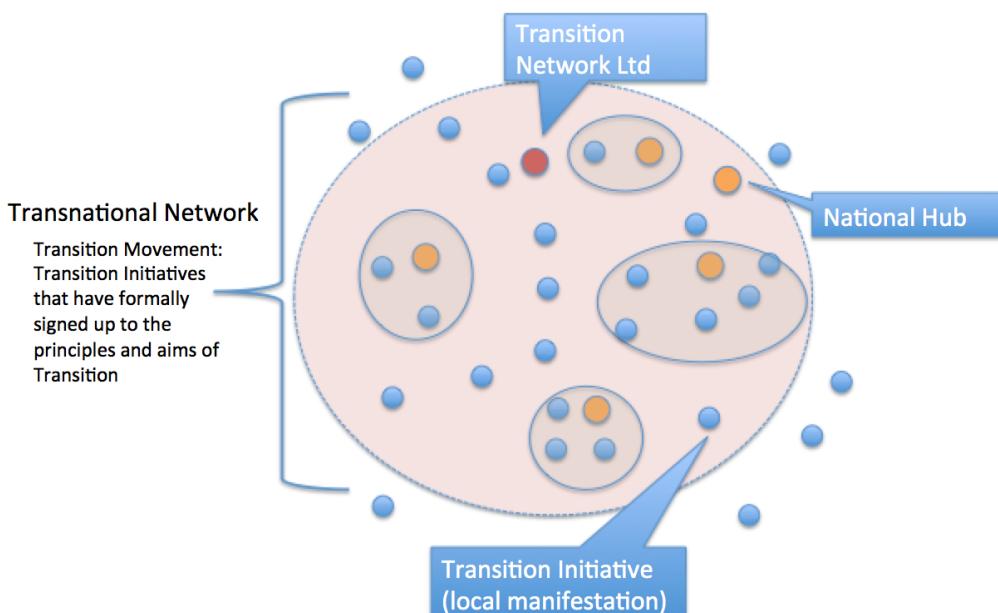
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Figure 1: Timeline of development of Transition Movement



The first national hubs were established in Ireland and New Zealand in 2007. Since then over 20 hubs have been established and the hubs have emerged as a distinct level and set of actors within the overall movement. Since 2012 there have been annual meetings of the hubs, organised and supported by TN, which seek to support collaborative work, and explore their role in the movement and relationship with TN. Indeed, exactly what a national hub actually 'is' is something that is still under discussion, and was considered at length at the most recent hubs meeting in Denmark in September 2014. Whilst they are playing a growing role in the governance of the Transition movement as a whole the hubs also play an important role in the further spread of initiatives within their own specified territories. One important aspect of this international diffusion of the transition model is the different way in which it is being re-embedded in different territories. So for example, in Brazil it is being used as a community development tool within the *favelas*, a very different context to the primarily middle class community activist context of the UK. Figure 2 provides a visualisation of the overall movement.

Figure 2: Transition Movement as a transnational network



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2 Aspects of Change and Innovation

The Transition approach is underpinned by a theory of change that is based on community based activism stimulating wider systemic change towards a post-fossil fuel, high well being society. The establishment of place based Transition Initiatives is intended to contribute towards the development of local resilience and a more localised economy. Transition initiatives provide a supportive experimental space for citizens to work towards changing their systems at a local level. It is a positive and engaging process that is intended to encourage people to engage in areas where they are passionate about change and work towards the building of new localised systems of provision (e.g. energy, food). The theory of change is set out in a set of narratives about why a transition is required and how it should be undertaken. It is offered as a rational and necessary response to the threats of peak oil, climate change and the global economic crisis. It proposes a set of processes for organizing initiatives and projects. The model is innovative in the way that it brings together various ideas and practices into a coherent model. It combines ideas from ecology, addiction studies, system thinking, permaculture, with techniques for participatory community organizing and engagement. It could be characterised as a radical form of Community Economic Development (CED). A key purpose of the model is to support citizen led experimentalism (i.e. innovation). Innovation can also be seen the projects that emerge, particularly in their diffusion and incremental development. Some of the key ideas about change are as follows:

- That citizen led movements can contribute to societal / systemic change both at a local level and at higher scales.
- The role of positive stories and narratives as a key motivator and element of the change process.
- That given the right tools and support citizens can be innovative (“unleash the genius of the community”). Transition aims to create a supportive context for community experimentation to occur.
- That there is an urgent need for a shift away from consumer capitalism towards some kind of post-growth, localised steady state economy.
- At the heart of the model is the notion that changing systems can be achieved by changing people. This happens on at least three levels:
 - Behaviour/value change of the participants
 - Behaviour/value change of other local residents
 - Influence on decision-makers and the powerful (e.g. politicians, business leaders) who can shape systems. The leadership offered by the Transition movement is intended to enable them to be more radical in their actions.
- Societal change needs both system change and cultural change, i.e. shifts in values and worldviews. This is related to the idea of outer and inner transition.

The Transition theory of change has evolved over time. The first approach ('12 steps') was replaced by a more open set of 'ingredients'. More recently, activists have been reflecting on the theory of change, drawing inspiration from a wider set of ideas and theories. There has also been an increasing focus on the economic side of Transition, on the creation of Transition enterprises and livelihoods. This is based on the recognition that it is difficult to achieve the desired Transition based purely on the work and contribution of volunteers.

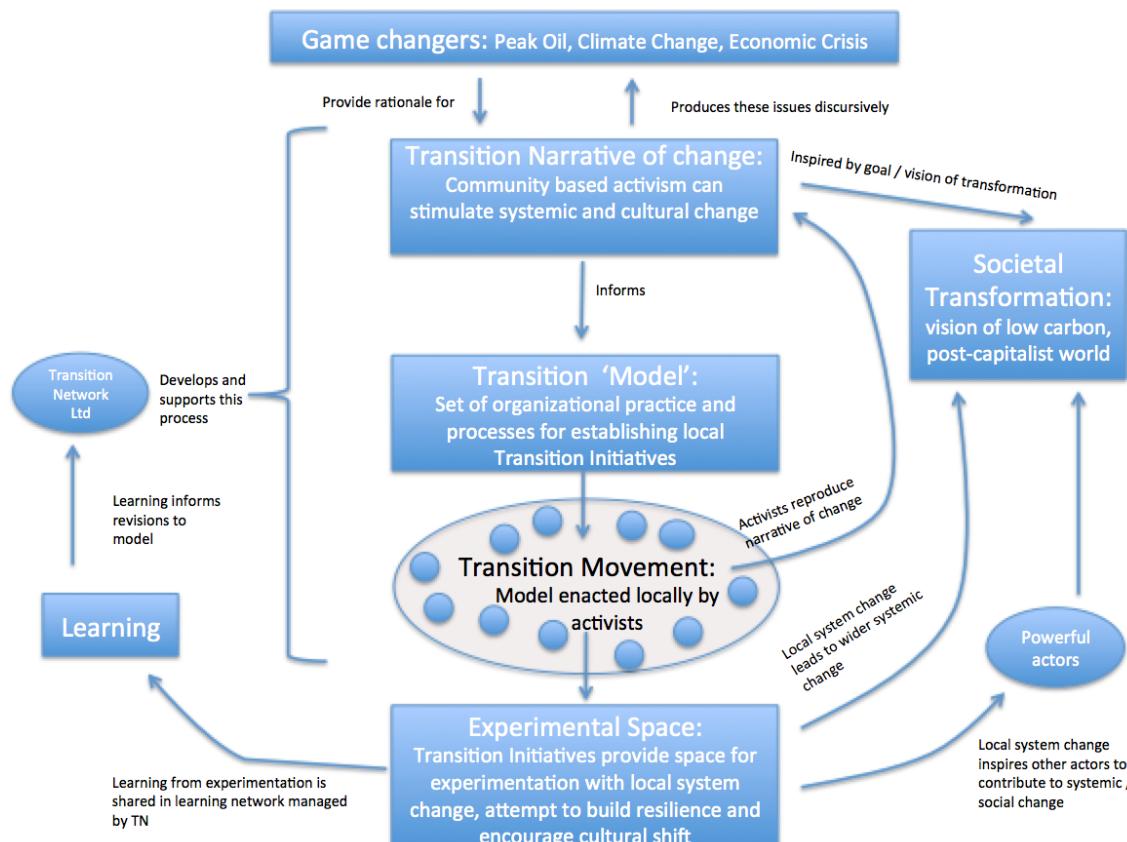
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Assessing exactly how it contributes towards change is difficult to clearly establish if the various dimensions of change outlined above are taken into account. The extent to which it has influenced the beliefs and behaviour of the various actors who have been involved or engaged by Transition activities would need further, detailed empirical investigation. Furthermore, the way in which the model is implemented differently in different countries adds a further layer of complexity in terms of understanding the possible impact. Some broad observations can be made:

- The growth of the movement has led to the proliferation of 1120 TIs in 43 countries (April 2014).
- Locally created 'experimental space' has led to new kinds of innovation emerging.
- Some projects have a tangible localised effect on their community.
- The Transition narrative has diffused widely. It has contributed to the discourse around the necessity and nature of a Transition as well as being part of the wider anti-growth / anti-capitalist discourse.
- The Transition model has contributed towards the argument that community based movements can contribute to social change, influencing government policy.

It is difficult to sustain the argument that Transition has (yet) contributed to a systemic change in any significant way. Even at the local level it is hard to find evidence of substantial systemic shifts that can be attributed to Transition. However, Transition activists would not necessarily claim that Transition alone can stimulate societal change, only that it can provide leadership and inspiration for other actors. Figure three represents a visualisation of the model of change.

Figure 3: Change and Innovation in Transition Movement



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3. Aspects of Dis/empowerment

A fundamental purpose of the overall Transition movement - and the associated model - is to convince citizens and communities that they can influence the economic, social and cultural development of their localities. The empowerment of community activism is therefore an important part of the model. The narrative of community-based change – coupled with examples from across the movement – is therefore intended to encourage participation in Transition activities. The experimental ethic and ‘permission’ to fail also empower activism. Local networks of participants provide ontological security (i.e. confidence based on a shared worldview), which is reinforced by a sense of being part of a wider, global movement that is also working towards shared goals. Emphasis is placed on the importance of creating new narratives and stories and these are shared via the internet, books, and films and through events and meetings. The multi-dimensionality of Transition means that participants can follow their own passions and interests which again contributes to a sense of engagement and participation. The model places a great deal of attention on using organisational processes which are participatory and allow individuals to express themselves and contribute. For example, the use of open space and fish bowl techniques for meetings. This ensures that participants feel that they are contributing and being heard.

Transition Network attempts to provide support to the movement whilst also policing the boundaries of what counts as Transition – ‘protecting the DNA’. It is not completely clear whether fulfilling this delicate role results in any form of disempowerment amongst participants. It provides significant resources in terms of knowledge, guidance, advice etc. which is intended to empower activists to establish and sustain Transition initiatives. However, not much financial resource flows from TN to the wider movement (although some small amounts have been distributed to support the development of national hubs). TN has also attempted to empower the hubs to take a greater role in the governance of itself as an organisation and in the strategic direction of the wider movement. It has achieved this through consultative processes and by changing the constitution of its board so that the hubs are represented. TN characterises the overall movement as a learning network and plays a critical role in attempting to gather and disseminate the lessons of this learning. More research would be required to assess the extent to which this function actually results in empowerment but there are certainly some examples of where network learning effects can be observed (e.g. amongst the Transition community currency projects). It is difficult to draw any conclusions about the role of monitoring in relation to (dis-)empowerment.

One final important point to note is the way that at the local level there can be opposition to the work of Transition Initiatives. This can partly be due to the fact that people can raise questions of legitimacy and representativeness when it is speaking on behalf of a place based community. Others may simply object to the ideas / values that are articulated. Whether or not this constitutes a form of disempowerment is debatable, but it is certainly a form of resistance, and one which can have a demoralising effect on Transition actors.

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