

# 17 Transition Initiatives



## *Dreaming of, Planning, Making and Celebrating the Transition that We Design Ourselves*

### About the authors and their positions

This text is the result of a communication process. Over the course of writing it, not only the text and the content underwent changes, but also the authors themselves.

The following people were involved in this transition process: Gesa Maschkowski (*Bonn im Wandel*<sup>1</sup> e. V.), editor for sustainable food culture, PhD student researching social movements and salutogenesis, transition trainer, presenter and activist; Stephanie Ristig-Bresser (*Transition Town Hanover* e. V.), culture studies practitioner M. A., freelance journalist and lecturer as well as project coordinator for the German transition network *Transition Netzwerk* e. V. and also active in the Economy for the Common Good movement; Silvia Hable (*Transition Town Witzenhausen* e. V.), journalist, community organiser, education consultant and mother, active with *Transition Town Witzenhausen* since 2011 and member of its board of directors since 2015, and from 2014 to 2016 member of the board at *Transition Netzwerk* e. V.; Norbert Rost (*Dresden im Wandel*), IT business engineer, regional developer of the *City of the Future* project of the Saxon capital of Dresden; and Michael Schem (*Transition Town Bielefeld* e. V.), doctorate in chemical engineering, works in an industrial development department and has been involved in *Transition Town Bielefeld* since 2009.<sup>2</sup>

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### 1. What is the key idea of Transition Initiatives?

#### **'Just getting on with it' – outdated paradigms, plan B, and the self-empowerment to change**

Transition means shift, transformation, or even change. We want to preserve and nurture the earth as a living system, to treat each other with respect and to share the earth's resources justly and fairly with one another now, and with subsequent generations to come. These values have their origins in permaculture but they are also represented by the global climate justice movement. This kind of fair and respectful global community could also be called a post-growth society or a degrowth society.

The key question posed by people in transition initiatives around the world is: What will our neighbourhoods, villages and cities look like in the future when they hardly need fossil resources anymore, when they have vibrant regional economic structures and when we live a good and meaningful life? And what can we do now to start this process of transition? The answers and approaches are as diverse as the people involved. Since the

<sup>1</sup> Literally 'Bonn in transformation'

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establishment of the first transition town, Totnes, in 2005, a colourful portfolio of projects, ideas and approaches has emerged –a toolkit for transition. The network has inspired, encouraged and given strength to many people.

#### *Misconceptions of the growth-orientated and information society*

We question two paradigms that are still present in our society:

1. If only there is enough growth, then even the underprivileged of the world will benefit;
2. If we just educate people enough, then at some point their behaviour will become 'correct', i.e. environmentally friendly and sustainable.

Both assumptions have proved false. First, capitalist economic practices are causing collateral damage to environmental and social systems –climate change and resource depletion, social inequality, indignity and the dehumanisation of working conditions are the symptoms. Secondly, efforts over the past forty years to raise awareness and inform people on this subject have failed to bring about the desired lifestyle changes. Considering the products produced for Germany in other countries in the world, Germany has reduced neither its greenhouse gas emissions, nor its land and resource consumption since 1990 (Schrader and others 2013). Information and educational campaigns may even have the opposite effect; they can lead to denial, to 'climate fatigue' or even to eco-anxiety (see Maschkowski 2015). Many therefore feel powerless and helpless in view of the overwhelming challenges. These kinds of feelings play a large role in determining whether societal transformation succeeds or not –why would you want to get involved if you thought: This problem is so huge that I won't be able to make a difference anyway?

#### *Plan B for the growth model or: What would be the future that we long for?*

Campaigning has not led to the societal changes we desperately need. This was also recognised by the British permaculture teacher Rob Hopkins, who decided to focus on the power of positive vision. In 2005 he developed an energy and cultural transition plan together with his students from Kinsale College. The group worked on questions such as: What would our educational system be like if in 2025 we needed almost no fossil resources anymore? What about our transport system, our health care system, our food system? And what measures do we need to take today to make this vision a reality? Hopkins and his students relied on the widespread involvement of citizens, the administration and politicians. After all, the Energy Descent Action Plan for Kinsale was adopted with broad support by politicians. Based on these experiences Hopkins founded the first Transition

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Town in Totnes, in South West England. The founders of the initiative started to document their ideas, methods and processes. They published them on their website and in books and they developed 'Transition Trainings'. The British *Transition Network* became a central contact point and networking centre for initiatives in Great Britain and worldwide.

Now, there are about 4000 transition initiatives in fifty countries. In Germany, there are about eighty. They arise in places where people dream of a positive future, where they have the courage to experiment and make mistakes. Research shows that transition initiatives thrive better in small cities than in larger ones. They grow well in a favourable context and in cooperation with other actors. 'Among the characteristics of successful Transition Initiatives are: a large number of founders, a good representation of diversity in the broader community, the presence and size of a steering group, the organization in thematic subgroups, the official recognition of Transition Network, the acquisition of a legal statutory form, specific training in transition and permaculture practice, resources (time and external funds)' (see Feola/Nunes 2013, p. 1).

#### *Objectives of the transition movement*

'We aim for a society that respects the human rights of present and future generations, that is appreciative and peaceful', states the German Transition Charter:

'We want to live in a frugal and environmentally-friendly way, to be less dependent on non-renewables and more resilient than today, that is to say more resistant and adaptable. The transition movement aims to inspire, encourage and support people to develop a positive vision of the future and to be active agents of this change. The solutions and ideas for implementing the vision are manifold.'

In addition to the objectives, the Transition Charter contains values and principles that form the basis of transition work. The charter aims to provide guidance and a minimum consensus on which transition activists can easily agree.<sup>3</sup>

#### *The basic principle - self-empowerment to act*

The transition approach can be understood as a pragmatic response to policy failure. In his second book Hopkins describes the problem in a nutshell:

'If we wait for the governments, it'll be too little, too late; if we act as individuals, it'll be too little, but if we act as communities, it might just be

<sup>3</sup> *The Transition Charter was adopted with broad approval at the network meeting in 2015 and comments are currently being submitted.*

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enough, just in time.' (Hopkins, 2011: 17)

Thus, it is about self-empowerment in the spirit of Gandhi: 'be the change that you wish to see in the world.' The support and the development of effective groups are at the heart of the work. Training and publications promote competence to effect change and aim to empower people to (re)gain more influence over their living environment. It is often this positive and pragmatic approach that attracts people to the idea: 'It's so refreshing to see how the weight of the world is broken down into small, achievable steps,' wrote a visitor at the premiere of the film *In Transition 2.0* in Bonn. In many transition projects, in gardens, community-supported agriculture, repair cafés or regional currencies, it's about the joy of a structural and social change, which you are shaping yourself. But the transition idea is also able to inspire transition processes in regions, for example within the scope of the REconomy project (see below).

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## **2. Who is part of Transition Initiatives, what do they do?**

### **Diversity: The people involved and their topics**

The first German transition town was created in 2009 in the district of Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg in Berlin, followed by Bielefeld. In 2010 the first German Transition Conference took place in Hanover. Since then, the conference has been held annually at changing locations. The growth of initiatives was significantly supported by Transition Trainings. In parallel the co-founder of the Bielefeld initiative Gerd Wessling began to establish a transition network. In the year 2014 the network reorganised itself and formed an association. The German transition network intends to encourage interaction between the initiatives in Germany and to initiate common projects. For example, in June 2016 the network launched the project: '[Developing a pool of knowledge, experts and disseminators on ecological, social and economic local processes of change](#)'.

The people involved in transition initiatives are very heterogeneous. A survey of visitors at the third German Transition Town Conference in 2012 showed that all ages and largely all income groups were represented among the participants. The education level, however, was above average (see Maschkowski/Wanner 2014). We therefore assume that the founders often come from the middle class. Nonetheless, the setting approach (i.e. working in a neighbourhood) enables the initiatives to reach other population groups, for example through repair cafes, community gardens or with the project Transition Streets (sustainable neighbourhoods). Often, young families or parents with their children are active in transition groups. This in itself leads to a multi-generational approach that is perceived as enriching.

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As in other groupings, time is the limiting factor in transition initiatives, as most people are volunteers. Even if many activists would like to be less dependent on money in the future, it is virtually impossible to build the necessary infrastructure with volunteer work only. On the other hand, although there are some groups that provide permanent jobs, this can lead to the establishment of unwanted hierarchies or reduce people's motivation to get involved on a voluntary basis. At federal level, there are for the first time two part-time transition actors working in a paid position at the *Transition Netzwerk association*.

#### *Topics and tools of transition initiatives*

Something quite unique about the transition movement is that there is no elaborate blueprint. The projects and methods come from many movements and fields of research. The transition initiatives did not invent the World Café or the gift economy, deep ecology or repair cafés. They experiment with them and develop them further. The activities on the ground closely match the skills of the people involved, and they are shaped by the motivations and needs of the people on site. Practical projects include:

- Projects for improving food sovereignty such as community gardens, community-supported agriculture, food cooperatives, edible city initiatives;
- Share and repair initiatives such as share and give-away shops, repair cafés, bicycle workshops, upcycling projects and bartering clubs;
- Projects referring to alternative mobility and sustainable urban development such as cargo bicycle projects, a car-free 'good-life day', transition city tours, transition city maps;
- Cohousing communities and alternative construction methods such as Earthships, straw-bale and clay construction;
- Projects with renewable energy, such as solar cookers, pyrolysis stoves or biomeilers (compost heating);
- Educational projects and programmes on sustainability such as reskilling, workshops or 'transition days';
- Community-based projects such as the operation of culture and neighbourhood centres, support and exchange of experience on health issues and care activities, as well as neighbourhood assistance;
- Projects on the culture of change, for example transition storytelling, transition theatre, and groups that look at deep ecology, inner change, or the psychology of change.

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Some transition projects and formats have a trans-regional relevancy:

- Transition manuals and films, which pass on proven tips and tricks, methods and examples from the whole world;
- Training and coaching programmes for people who want to start transition initiatives or are already active in this field, for instance [Werkzeuge des Wandels \('Transition Training\) I and II](#);
- Transition street projects and other [initiatives on sustainable neighbouring](#), for example to cut energy use and strengthen the neighborhood. [REconomy](#), a concept that includes various approaches to restructuring the economy such as local entrepreneurs' forums, community-supported enterprises or analyses on the economic potential of a relocalised economy. Best practice examples include the ['Local Economic Blueprint'](#) for the region of Totnes, the analysis of food resilience in Bristol ([Who feeds Bristol](#)) or the [peak oil report by the University of Münster](#).

#### *Top-down meets bottom-up*

In some places there is a fruitful relationship between transition initiatives and municipal bodies. Those involved in initiatives contribute their know-how in urban development processes, for example as facilitators (Marburg or Eberswalde), as consultants (Climate Advisory Board in Bonn) or in vision or strategy processes as is the case with the *Dresden City of the Future project*. In Witzhausen the transition group stood for the municipal election. With two elected representatives, it now represents transition interests in the city council.

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### 3. How do you see the relationship between Transition Initiatives and Degrowth?

#### **Degrowth: a goal – Transition: a path**

Before we answer the question about the relationship between degrowth and the transition town movement, we have to talk about two assumptions shaping this question: first, that the transition movement and the degrowth movement comprise two more or less discernible and definable groups, and second, that they can be distinguished from each other. We do not agree with either assumption. We understand degrowth as an appeal to put an end to an unsustainable economic system and to work on alternatives. In our opinion 'green growth' in industrialised countries is not a solution anymore. Key issues in the transition movement are how this social change can be supported, what conditions are needed to make this happen, and what new forms of economy are appropriate and vital. This is a good reason

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for those active in the transition movement to also engage in degrowth events and debates. Perhaps degrowth can be understood as one of the many goals of a post-growth society, and transition as one of several approaches to experiment with social change.

More and more people are now trying to rethink and reshape society. In this regard degrowth activists have used their presence and their activities to create platforms and opportunities for meetings and conferences reaching a broad audience. This is in our view a good starting point to leave the 'you' and 'us' mentality behind and form a community of transformation movements. We therefore want to thank and acknowledge the organisers of degrowth events for launching a debate on transformation that has inspired and mobilised many people.

#### *Networking as an opportunity for the future of degrowth and transition towns*

The exchange of experience between both the initiatives and the movements is often too brief due to capacity constraints. Degrowth conferences and transition network meetings are good opportunities to facilitate this exchange. Another important step was the establishment in 2014 of the European grassroots network, [Ecolise](#), with the support of the British Transition Network, the international ecovillage movement, the permaculture movement and many other organisations. It seeks to enable an exchange of experience, education, research and lobbying beyond the movements. A possible future of the movements could lie in creating synergies between networks.

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#### **4. Which suggestions do they have to each other?**

##### **Transition movement proposals: Growth in the right places**

Conceptually, the transition movement goes beyond the degrowth or sufficiency perspectives. We ask not only how we can consume less –we also ask what kind of economic system will satisfy the needs of all people in the long term rather than satisfying the needs of few people in the short term. One inherent question in this discussion is: To what extent does our current economic system fulfil basic needs such as meaningful work, creativity, leisure, freedom, affection and participation?

##### *Growth of skills and quality (of life)*

In our view the term 'degrowth' does not make it clear enough that in many areas we do still need growth to achieve '[The Great Transformation](#)'. This applies to both skills and qualities: We need growth in courage, confidence and organisational capability, in participation, empathy, solidarity and sense of community. We need more and better self-organisation and decision-making skills. It is all about adding more meaning and more sustainability

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to life and work. And not least: The climate justice and post-growth movements need more people, time and resources to prove successful in the long run. This is another issue that needs to be debated in society. How and when do we gain skills and resources for a large-scale societal transformation?

*Weaknesses: The social and psychological requirements for change*

In many degrowth and transition debates not enough consideration is given to the cultural and psychological dimensions of change. Many events and debates continue to rely on a cognitive and hierarchical education model, where degrowth and transition experts explain to 'lay people' how the world works and what they need to do. After the latter have listened to this and perhaps put in a word or two, they go home and nothing happens. Forty years of environmental education, but also health and transition studies show that this education concept does not hit home effectively. The great transformation is a process of social learning (see Manzini 2009). This process requires empowerment and not indoctrination; it calls for empathy and enquiry. For example: What do people need in order to feel that the great transformation is meaningful and feasible? The transition movement draws here, at least in theory, from the experience of environmental and health psychology (see Hopkins 2008). An examination of which social and psychological conditions facilitate change and what methods and formats develop transformative power would be of great value –not only for the degrowth debate.

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### **5. Outlook: Space for visions, suggestions or wishes**

#### **Growing together - Inspiration and cooperation**

In the long run we see many opportunities to strengthen each other, and we would like to see collaboration take place. Here we let the individual authors have their say:

*Gesa:* Self-empowerment for a sustainable life is created and lived by people in the settings of their everyday life; where they learn, work, play, and love. Transition initiatives are part of a network of active movements that are present on the ground and pursue real change through their projects and activities. Their strength lies in an extensive array of approaches and many encouraging practical examples. The humanistic, person-centred approach of the transition movement is of great significance for me. It enables change to come about through experience in a relationship. The potential of different movements working on the ground can lie in kick-starting transformation projects together and using diverse routes to get there.

*Stephanie:* If we want to achieve the great transformation, this is only

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possible in collaboration with many initiatives, based on trust and respect – underpinned by the fundamental position that we all make a valuable contribution to this change and sometimes the one, sometimes the other movement will take the initiative. Between the movements we need respectful communication and behaviour that is based on mutual trust, with which we already live the good life that we want, and shake off the old and firmly established thinking of ‘higher, further, faster’, ‘who’s number one?’ and ‘who’s winning?’. This is a great task and transition tools can certainly contribute to its successful fulfilment. Fields of experimentation can be large, global issues such as TTIP, where we are all on the same page and are thereby perceived in society as one voice. In this way our proposals are ‘leaked’ and this means that we can draw greater attention subsequently with other activities and projects.

*Silvia:* We have already managed to create utopias that encourage people. They show that change (on a smaller scale) is possible. These experiences are transferable and repeatable and therefore of greater social relevance. Even though the transition movement works mainly with concrete projects such as gardens, repair work, neighbourhood assistance and the like, it is not only the ‘what’, but in particular the ‘this’ (movement as a whole) that encourages and inspires people to (re)assume responsibility and the power to act in all areas of life and particularly in their own life! This rids us of a diffuse feeling of hopelessness that is based on fear and is pushing people into the arms of conspiracy theorists or the new right wing, which play with the unfulfilled longings for structure and order.

*Norbert:* The core issue above all is how we can work across different milieus. How do we also reach out to consumerists, postdocs, clerks working in economic development, Radio RTL listeners, neighbours? If we succeed in building bridges and initiating transmission processes, we will also manage the same at a meta level, i.e. between the different ‘emancipatory’ movements.

*Michael:* The BUND<sup>4</sup> coined the motto: ‘Fewer, better, more beautiful.’ We must change our world by freeing ourselves from our obsession with consumption and starting a simpler life. To reach a large audience it is important not to preach what people have to renounce to, but to emphasise the advantages. Here degrowth is a great inspiration, which we would like to combine with the transition slogan: ‘Just getting on with it’. Transition aims to develop and test in practice those examples, which open our eyes to another world in which all people live more self-sufficiently and enjoy life.

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### Links and Literature

<sup>4</sup> German Federation for the Environment and Nature Conservation (Friends of the Earth)

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#### Links

German transition initiatives' website: [www.transition-initiativen.de](http://www.transition-initiativen.de)

Transition trainers' website: [www.transition-training.de](http://www.transition-training.de)

British Transition Network website: [www.transitionnetwork.org](http://www.transitionnetwork.org)

In Transition 2.0 - documentary film: <http://www.intransitionmovie.com/>

#### *Applied as well as further literature*

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