Community Collaboration at the Flax-roots as a Means to Progress

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Introduction

Non-governmental groups play several important roles in society. Whilst some groups function mostly to advance discrete projects, other groups are effective players in the important task of holding the government to account amongst a range of 'watchdog' functions (Roberts & Jones, 2005). In New Zealand, single-issue community groups and projects have long been a part of society. Contributions on this level are both easier to conceptualise and perhaps have been advantaged by New Zealand's project-oriented funding landscape for work in the community sector. Ongoing community development roles are more difficult to fund. Multi-issue initiatives are fewer in number, perhaps reflecting these funding realities combined with the difficulty of managing multi-facetted programmes through reliance on volunteers over the longer timeframes often required. Multi-issue groups that have persisted are often organised around thematic areas of interest to significant segments of society. Amongst these are groups addressing cultural, religious and environmental values.

A recent development in this field has been the establishment of new multi-issue initiatives seeking to revitalise whole communities. A common theme is a renewed focus on aspects of societal progress and well-being. An increasingly prominent group of these initiatives is found in the so-called 'transition town' movement in addition to similar ventures under a range of different names. This article provides an overview of this phenomenon and reviews the key aspects of this movement based on recent literature and examples drawn from Canterbury and elsewhere in New Zealand. The possible relevance of the transition movement for community planning is then discussed.

The transition movement and re-localisation

Responses to future-focused concerns have been a part of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) landscape for some time, with sustainability concerns being of particular note (Capra, 2005). For the most part such initiatives have targeted particular aspects of becoming more sustainable, including the practices adopted by certain industries, calls for conservation of resources, or support for desirable behaviours such as organic food production and education for sustainability. Although the transition town movement is also concerned with some of these issues, its major defining factor is the mode of operation which focuses on well defined geographical units. Specifically, these units are existing communities. Communities are immensely important to the transition town model due to the perceived importance of a central organising principle; that of re-localisation (Hopkins, 2008; Brangwyn & Hopkins, 2010). Re-localisation refers to the local provision of goods or services where the capacity exists to do so. This might involve a return to the production of goods and services that were produced within a community in the past.

As a consequence, the application of 'transition thinking' involves heightened engagement, interconnections, and activities within communities. Although the exact geographical boundaries to which this refers are dependent on the context of 'community', enhancement of the social connectivity which might define and support the notion of a functioning community is a common element of on-the-ground activities (Goldsbury, 2006; Murphree, 1993). In this way, transition thinking works first on community processes before proceeding to any specific action on other issues. This relates to perspectives on social capital, a term referring to a wider range of social connections capable of facilitating individual or collective action, including networks of relationships (Portes, 1998). In transition thinking, reversing the perceived loss of social capital is regarded as one of the substantive issues to be addressed, especially at the local level, as many believe this to be a by-product of western economic imperatives (Jackson, 2009; Orr, 1992; Schumacher, 1973).

The evolution of transition thinking in civil society

In recent years the growth in community groups taking an interest in these concepts has been rapid, and for convenience the term 'transition' will be used here to refer to all such groups. However it is important to note that these ideas were not exclusive to the transition or 'transition town' model. Very similar ideas had occurred to many people working on sustainable development issues, who recognised the potential role of strong functional communities in determining appropriate responses to concerning trends and likely change. Some of these groups invented their own frameworks aimed at building social capital in their communities, and many had put these ideas into practice long before the first transition town was born. For example, the Cittaslow or 'Slow Cities' movement originated in Italy in 1999, performing similar work to the transition initiatives of today (David Currant, 2010; pers. comm.). The movement has also seen considerable growth since, and by mid 2009 had been adopted by at least 93 towns across 14 countries (Cittaslow UK, 2010).

Here in New Zealand there were also similar initiatives getting underway prior to the first transition town. Two such initiatives in Canterbury remain at the cutting edge of this field work today. The first of these began in the early 1990s as an historic restoration project. However, in 2002 the project was transformed around an idea to create a vision statement for revitalisation of the entire community and the result was 'Project Port Lyttelton'. The fact that the residents created their own vision for their community in a facilitated process has been a significant factor in the success of the project (Jefferies & Everingham, 2006). Under the new name of 'Project Lyttelton' the original inclusive philosophy towards all ideas linked to this vision remains a defining feature of the project in action.

A different set of circumstances led to the establishment of another group in the Lincoln community. The group started as a sub-committee of the Lincoln Community committee in 2005 before forming 'Lincoln Envirotown Trust' in 2006. Those involved developed their own model for creating change in the community based on perceived needs; in part guided by a survey revealing that many residents were concerned about the nature of growth and development in their area. From the outset the concept was assisted by a high level of support for a community-led initiative from many individuals and organisations in the community (Sue Jarvis, 2010; pers. comm.). From these beginnings the group conceptualised the key objectives for a local initiative, as are now reflected in the 'Lincoln Envirotown' mission. A year's discussion and consultation resulted in a sustainability action plan with a focus on improving awareness of environmental sustainability issues in the Lincoln community, providing opportunities to address those, and being a role model for other communities (Jarvis, 2007). Many parts to the plan have now been completed or are being actively worked on.

At around the same time that Project Lyttelton and Lincoln Envirotown were developing new community initiatives in New Zealand, the 'transition town' concept was being developed in Ireland. The term arose from the work of Louise Rooney and Catherine Dunne, who were students studying under Rob Hopkins, a permaculture tutor. In working on the three main permaculture principles of earth care, fair share and people care, Hopkins engaged his students in future scenario planning in order to consider important questions about local resiliency in the face of change. In addressing the Peak Oil phenomenon, Hopkins became heavily interested in the concept of 'energy descent', a term first coined by the ecologist Howard Odum (Odum & Odum, 2001). Alongside their studies on other permaculture issues, Hopkins worked with his students to produce a plan to reduce their town's energy dependency. This led to the creation of the Kinsale Energy Descent Action Plan in 2005. In addition to a focus on energy, the plan helped raise the profile of sustainability in the town and began to influence subsequent planning decisions within the community. The 'Energy Descent Action Plan' concept was adapted and expanded throughout 2005 and 2006 through the work of Rooney, Dunne and others, who developed the transition town model as a means of putting ideas into practice.

To date the transition concept has been taken up by more than 300 official initiatives worldwide, with many more in the initial stages of consideration. Here in New Zealand there are now at least 75 active community groups identifying with or using the term, following the lead of the first official 'transition initiative' on Waiheke Island in 2007 (James Samuel, 2010; pers. comm.). In Canterbury, as elsewhere, the growth of the transition movement has been strong, and has been advanced by Sustainable Otautahi Christchurch, a local NGO that has facilitated an ongoing transition dialogue in the area since 2008. This led to the establishment of several new transition initiatives in Christchurch communities. In other parts of Canterbury additional groups have arisen, inspired by the Lincoln Envirotown lead in the Selwyn District (Sue Jarvis, 2010; pers. comm.). There are now at least 14 transition groups in the greater Christchurch area alone, in addition to many other Canterbury groups in localities including Rangiora, Timaru and Oamaru. Given that nearly all of these initiatives have arisen since 2008 these examples demonstrate that the rate of uptake of the transition concept has been surprisingly fast.

Key concepts

Transition thinking has certainly proved successful in terms of attracting the interest of communities worldwide in addition to facilitating real change on the ground. Many of the similar initiatives that pre-dated the transition movement also readily identify with 'transition concepts', as they have come to be known. A striking feature of many of these community organisations is the commonality of ideas arrived at by the initiators and leaders involved. What perhaps has changed with the advent of transition towns is increasing recognition for, and analysis of, the key ideas. This is attributable in no small way to the work of Rob Hopkins and others who have set about not only implementing the ideas, but also documenting and disseminating them via a range of media.

Although there are a great variety of actions promoted by transition initiatives, there are also many similarities and some philosophical commonalities that are becoming apparent. Amongst the most prevalent of these concern the vulnerability of communities and their resources, and resilience to foreseeable change (Hopkins, 2009). The transition town model clearly identifies practical responses to change associated with Peak Oil and climate change as key concepts (Hopkins, 2008). As a result, the practical measures promoted are often capable of addressing more than one problematic trend simultaneously, and the re-localisation concept is frequently portrayed as such. For example, it is suggested that a renewed local focus might improve the adaptability of communities to change through reducing the length, and thus vulnerability of supply chains (Porritt, 2009). The re-localisation premise also suggests that, although responses to climate change and Peak Oil are required in respect of many institutions at many different scales, there is a need for engagement at the level of communities to drive the process. In addition, re-localisation embraces the idea that increased collaboration within communities can lead to better decision making processes, which can improve other aspects of well-being (Allen et al, 2001; Ostrom, 1990; Winstanley et al., 2005).

Since a common focus is on coping with change, issues that create common concerns for all communities feature in most transition initiatives. These include planning for Peak Oil and climate change, but may also include questions relating to other aspects of well-being identified by communities as being important to a vibrant and sustainable way of life. A common perspective is that the bigger challenges involve how models such as 'Energy Descent Action Plans' can become the shared prerogative of many, rather than the preferences of a small number of influential practitioners or gatekeepers. This indicates that transition thinking is inherently collaborative and contextual, despite the fact that there are several 'How to' guides on setting up transition initiatives, which might be interpreted as top-down tendencies within the movement (Hopkins & Lipman, 2009). The set of principles and practices embraced by transition initiatives typically require building over time through observation and experimentation unique to each local community. In some respects the transition concept has produced a principled approach to community development whilst recognising and embracing the role of contextual interpreta-tions of priorities by local communities as the essential catalyst for change.

The transition movement and community planning

It would appear that transition thinking has come at an opportune time and its popularity suggests that the issues embraced are meaningful for many people. Certainly the need to build adaptive capacity to change is becoming better known even in developed countries. For example, Government policy in the United States depicts previous assumptions of relatively low vulnerability and high adaptive capacity in respect to dealing with stresses such as climate change, assumptions that have recently been challenged (Moser, 2009a).

Studies in the United States now consider that investment is required in achieving better assessments of vulnerabilities, capacities, and governance barriers across all scales (Moser, 2009b). Governance and political aspects cannot be ignored since, as Hopkins (2009) suggests, the necessary responses may also include "… *making unelectable policies electable, creating the groundswell for practical change at the local level*".

In New Zealand, investigations into vulnerability and adaptability concepts have highlighted similar concerns (Ministry for the Environment, 2006 & 2007; New Zealand Government, 2009), and there are many plausible scenarios concerning the future we face, some of which are very challenging (SANZ, 2009).

All such assessments illustrate that a real call to action is due for all organisations with statutory roles in community planning and development. As the famous Einstein quote goes:

> "*The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.*"

If so, then perhaps the thinking behind the transition movement might offer some of the 'new' thinking needed. Without a change in thinking there is considerable danger that mal-adaptations to contemporary drivers of change could create costly liabilities for future generations.

Transition initiatives are working with new approaches to community development to engineer a transition away from potentially undesirable trends that are becoming embedded in the status quo. There are several practical implications for policymakers, analysts and planners, and perhaps now rather than later is an appropriate time for statutory agencies to increase their interest in these concepts. An early step that can be taken is to ensure that momentum around transition initiatives and other community-based collaborative projects is not lost, such as by ensuring their facilitators are funded and that supporting resources can be accessed. At the very least, a commitment to collaboration with such groups to gain a better understanding of the plurality of perspectives on perceived problems may afford us a better chance of investing in the right courses of action.

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