

## **BUILDING COMMUNITY FOR THE GREAT TRANSITION - AN AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE AND INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT**



**David Towell**

*For much of my life, I have joined with the disabled people's movement and its allies in recognising the need to build strong and **inclusive** communities if disabled people are to participate fully as equal citizens (1). In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century we all face the even bigger – and now critical - challenge of working together to find ways of living in harmony with our planet so as to achieve a **sustainable** future. Disabled people and their allies need to be part of this broader movement but equally our communities need their participation, if broader strategies are to be successful.*

*This short article considers how we can bring these two agenda together for mutual benefit so as to build communities which are both sustainable and inclusive and thus achieve what has rightly been described as 'The Great Transition' (2) to a better future.*

### **The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Imperative: Living in harmony with our planet**

Let's start from the big picture. We can't go on as we are. There is overwhelming scientific consensus that the threat posed by man-made climate change is both serious and urgent. Our continuing failure to rise to this challenge promises an intolerable future for later generations as we destroy our own habitat and the wonders of nature that depend on it. Long before then, we will have passed the peak in oil production even as energy needs rise with global population growth. Quite visibly, for example in the massive extinction of species and rapid disappearance of the polar ice caps and rain forests, our culture of over-consumption is causing massive damage in important eco-systems upon which human well-being depends. These environmental crises are closely connected to the failure of the global economic system, while incredibly, political leaderships still look for salvation in a return to GDP growth. We have learnt at huge cost that the world's financial system is an unaccountable casino but attempts at reform seem slow and unconvincing. We are living with massive and growing inequalities both between and within countries which make the 'richer' countries like the UK and even more so, the USA, dysfunctional for their own people (3). In these richer countries, people's life satisfaction is stagnant or declining. Indeed, as the New Economics Foundation puts this, we are living in a situation characterised by four 'U's: it is unsustainable, unstable, unfair and unhappy.

As citizens, we have a clear and present duty to join together with hope to address these multiple crises and regain control over the future (4), accepting our responsibility for securing the welfare of children being born today (many

of whom might reasonably expect to live through this Century) and subsequent generations.

### A compelling vision

‘Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing’  
Arundhati Roy

As Arundhati Roy says, it doesn’t have to be this way. As citizens we can reset our compass according to what we really value. We can develop a more intelligent perspective on the long-term inter-relationships of environment, economy and society.

And together we can start to create a compelling new vision of how it will be possible for human beings to flourish, live together cooperatively and pursue higher levels of well-being while acknowledging our debt to Mother Earth and appreciating the ecological limits to human activity: in short to have *Prosperity without Growth* (5).

There is a growing literature to help us with this task. I find Tim Jackson’s book of this title especially helpful. Current economic models are ecologically illiterate in seeing stability as dependent on ever increasing growth in consumption and making materialism central to our social status. He argues for an alternative set of values grounded in family, friendship and community, in which we redefine ‘prosperity’ as residing in the quality of our lives, the health and happiness of our families, the strength of our relationships, our sense of shared purpose, our trust in local communities and our potential to participate fully in the life of society.

Others have taken up the challenge of describing the forms of economic and social organisation required to advance these values while we make rapid progress in cutting our carbon footprint, especially by ending our dependence on fossil fuels: that is, as we achieve *The Great Transition*.

For example, in *The Resilience Imperative* (6) Michael Lewis and Pat Conaty envision the transformation to more local and resilient economies i.e. where banks serve the public interest, energy and food production are mostly done much closer to home, we rethink construction and transport, we invest in public spaces and reclaim the commons, strengthen authentic civic leadership and reconnect with nature.

Fairness is an important value in itself, but we will also need greater equality to support the public ethos and cooperative working required to tackle these challenges together.

In turn, this renewed emphasis on community can help us awaken the power of families and neighbourhoods to help each other, for example in educating our children and caring for people needing support (7), especially if in the new economy we find better ways of balancing the time spent at ‘work’ and the time we have available for making other contributions.

And at the local level, these new ways of thinking are finding a myriad of practical expressions, most notably in the 'Transition Towns' movement (8), starting in the U.K. and now constituting a global network of citizen-led initiatives bringing people together to tell a new story about the places where they live and what they could become in a sustainable future.

### **Being part of this**

Our theme here is the need to bring the agenda for inclusion and sustainability together in order to secure this better future for all.

Local sustainability initiatives like 'Transition Towns' need to welcome the contributions of disabled people and their allies, as one major aspect of community diversity, because:

- ✓ Success in creating and acting on this new vision depends on reflecting the widest range of voices and experiences; there is work here for everyone.
- ✓ Disabled people bring distinctive experience and skills, for example in overcoming the barriers to equal participation, establishing trust, meeting effectively and communicating simply.
- ✓ Radical action is more likely where it is possible to forge alliances among different interests and establish 'convergence' ('win-win' initiatives) on shared priorities (9).

Reflecting the widest range of voices and experiences

Equally, disabled people and their allies need to be part of this because:

Ensuring that social justice and inclusion are central to the transition agenda

- ✓ As fellow citizens this is their future too. Indeed disabled people, especially in 'poorer' parts of the world are likely to be among the main victims of continuing climate failure.
- ✓ Providing things are organised accessibly, some disabled people not only bring experiences and skills but also have time.
- ✓ Most importantly, since every local community faces trade-offs among multiple challenges, disabled people need to join others in ensuring that social justice and inclusion are central to the transition agenda.

### **Achieving positive action through everyday democracy**

Clearly our vision of a better future will require informed action at all levels from the local to the global. But we can have little confidence that either states or markets will meet this challenge unless driven by people coming together across a diverse range of interests locally to build trust and common purpose around the programme for radical change we now require. Marc Stears calls this process the renewal of 'everyday democracy' (10).

Again, *The Transition Companion* (8) provides us with encouraging examples of what this might involve if we start from real places, provide good 'public spaces' in which people equipped with useful information can dare to dream (11) about a different future and organise around their enthusiasms to initiate practical action upon which further work can build.

Fortunately there are a range of well-developed 'social technologies' for inviting local citizens and other stakeholders into the room and promoting constructive dialogue: for 'hosting conversations which matter' (12). For example, my colleague John O'Brien and I have used both 'World Café' (13) and 'Open Space Technology' (14) to frame a series of conversations about building sustainable and inclusive communities in two English Counties (15). We have also identified six practices for diverse participation and creative engagement in different aspects of local planning (16).

Practically we need civic leadership, local government and other agencies to recognise the inter-connections in the agenda for local development, welcome diversity and promote cooperative working on local priorities to optimise 'win-win' scenarios and promote well-being for all. Equally we need disabled people's organisations (and other associations representative of local diversity) together with commissioners and providers of services to these groups, to make strengthening community central to their work and to promote the contribution of disabled and other disadvantaged people to the collective agenda. We all need to be active citizens continually searching for, and creating opportunities to play our part in building communities that are both sustainable and inclusive.

The time is now. To quote Alice Walker,  
'We are the people we have been waiting for'

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[http://inclusiveandsustainable.ning.com/?xg\\_source=msg\\_mes\\_network](http://inclusiveandsustainable.ning.com/?xg_source=msg_mes_network)

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## Notes

1. The fullest contemporary statement of what it would mean to include disabled people as equal citizens is set out in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* 2006.
2. *The Great Transition* New Economics Foundation 2009 provides a succinct guide to the scale of the multiple current challenges – and a call to radical action.
3. The social ills produced by inequality in the rich countries are comprehensively discussed in Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett *The Spirit Level: Why more equal societies almost always do better* Allen Lane, 2009.
4. This statement of our challenge comes from Susan George *Whose Crisis, Whose Future? Towards a Greener, Fairer, Richer World* Polity, 2010.
5. Tim Jackson *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a finite planet* Earthscan, 2009. The shift from GDP to a focus on well-being also requires a new form of national metrics: see for example Stiglitz, J, Sen A, and Fitoussi, J, *Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress* CMEPSP, 2008.
6. Michael Lewis and Pat Conaty *The Resilience Imperative: Cooperative transitions to a steady-state economy* New Society Publishers, 2012.
7. John McKnight and Peter Block *The Abundant Community: Awakening the power of families and neighbourhoods* Berrett-Koehler, 2010.
8. Rob Hopkins *The Transition Companion: Making your community more resilient in uncertain times* Transition Books, 2011.
9. The idea of convergence is drawn from Anthony Giddens *The Politics of Climate Change* Polity, 2009.
10. Marc Stears *Everyday democracy: Taking centre-left politics beyond state and market* IPPR, 2011.
11. See for another impressive example *Dreaming Planet Earth Methods: Methods for mapping future food and energy systems at the local level* Bioneers for the Dreaming New Mexico Project, 2012.
12. An excellent introduction to the principles underpinning good conversation is Margaret Wheatley *Turning To One Another: simple conversations to restore hope to the future* Berrett-Koehler, 2002.
13. Juanita Brown and David Isaacs *The World Café: Shaping our futures through conversations that matter* Berrett-Koehler, 2005.

14. Harrison Owen *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide* Berrett-Koehler, 1997.

15. John O'Brien and David Towell *Conversations about building sustainable and inclusive communities – an invitation* 2010. Available in the on-line library [www.centreforwelfarereform.org/library/](http://www.centreforwelfarereform.org/library/)

16. John O'Brien and David Towell *Six Practices for Creative Engagement* 2011. Also at [www.centreforwelfarereform.org/library/](http://www.centreforwelfarereform.org/library/) For a fuller introduction to participative methods useful in strategising sustainable development, see *The Weave: Participatory process design guide for strategic sustainable development* 2011. Available at [www.theweave.info/](http://www.theweave.info/)