

Problems and opportunities by transition towns movement politics essay



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‘ Transition Towns’ also known as ‘ Transition network’ or ‘ Transition Movement’ is an environmental and social movement founded upon the principles of permaculture initialized by Rob Hopkins in Kinsale (Ireland) and in Totnes in the United kingdom. “ The Transition Towns network is a fascinating and deeply significant grass roots response to the converging ecological, economic, cultural, developmental and wider geo-political/security crises of the coming century.” (Quilley) The aim of the Transition Network is to inspire, encourage, connect, support and train communities to self-organise around the transition model, creating initiatives that rebuild resilience and reduce CO2 emissions. The vision of local resilience and self-reliance emerging from community engagement with sustainability issues lies at the heart of the Transition Towns concept. Their goal is to equip communities for the challenges of climate change and peak oil. The Transition Towns movement is an example of socioeconomic localisation where resilience is considered to be the driving force. ‘ Resilience’ refers to the ability of a system, right from an individual to the whole of the economy, to hold together their ability to resist the changes and shocks from outside. The focus here is to minimize the CO2 emissions as a result of resilience building. ‘ Peak oil’ and ‘ Climate change’ also referred to as ‘ hydrocarbon twins’ are the major factors this concept is based on. The major fear is the end of availability of the cheap oil since the oil discovery is believed to have peaked 40 years ago thereby forcing change to the wholly oil dependent society to sustainable ways of living. Out of 94 discovered oil reserves, 68 have already got exhausted and the oil production is believed to have peaked in 2005 i. e. 40 years from the peak in discovery which was in the late 1960s. Also climate change which is the issue of greatest severity <https://assignbuster.com/problems-and-opportunities-by-transition-towns-movement-politics-essay/>

has been occurring at a faster rate than what was expected and this can be noticed by studying the reports on global warming, green house gas effects and the extent of melting in the Arctic sea of the recent past.

The concept of 'Transition Towns' concept was designed as a strategy of helping the small towns move away from fossil fuel dependency. It promotes public participation and citizen action within the context of a sustainable and self-sufficient community where local forums are created for the citizens to get together and decide on ways to develop low-carbon energy resources or in other words to discuss on better to survival prospects in a post peak-oil world. Planning for a future with economic disruption, dramatically lower energy consumption, and climate instability, the Transition Town movement encourages re-localization of decision making and seeks to 'unleash the collective genius of our communities' to create networks of mutual support. The Transition Towns network is a grass roots response to the climatic and resource crisis of the near future. This concept focuses on 'planned relocalisation' which in turn includes: local resilience, carbon reduction, decentralised energy infrastructure, re-skilling, localised food, energy descent plans, local medicinal capacity and local currencies. The Transition town movement is considered to be a 'social innovation' where climate change is its major challenge. The ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) after investigations has made the social and economic aspects of climate change a priority for its research funding. The maintenance of social justice, opportunities for the fulfilment of livelihoods within the local economics and the role played by the culture and the creative classes as the new drivers of growth will all be the social issues caused due to the increase

in the fuel prices and the downfall of the economy ultimately caused by the latter. The Transition Town movement is a social innovation that can be viewed as a radical response to the need for a different way of life post peak-oil and post climate change. It is focussed on reducing the carbon emissions to control climate change and to control peak-oil crisis which suggests that it has an ideology which is an alternative way of organizing the economy. The Transition Town movement has spread rhizomically from Totnes to 134 other places all around the world. Also according to an article “ The two limits debates: “ Limits to Growth” and climate change”, the real solution for the problem of climate change should include the reorientation of public values away from consumption and must emphasize more on sustainable production and resource usage. The Transition Towns movement which is based on community level action and awareness; communication across multiple sectors, community and governmental levels; and local adaptation to environmental changes is one such approach. Indeed these two notions: values reorientation and governmentally provided technological solutions are mutually constitutive.

The people have lost their interest in politics and the democratic institutions are in a crisis. Democracy has not been able achieve power for the people in most parts of the world. Democracy basically means political equality i. e. equal rights of participation in the political decisions made by the governments. On the contrary, democracy does not guarantee political equality anymore. In times like this, with people not interested in voting, the concept of ‘ Transition Towns’ gives way to ‘ Participatory democracy’ in which there is a greater involvement of the general public in making political

decisions for their prosperity and thereby democracy becomes a reality again. Participation lets people and officials make decisions on how the broad policy commitments can be carried out. The Transition Initiatives can be successful only when there is a bridge between the transition community and the government. For example, when an 'Energy Descent Plan' has been created by a transition network, it will be progressive only if there is a positive and productive relationship with the local authorities of the government. This creates an opportunity for democracy. The Transition movement engages people in a way that even conventional politics are failing to do in the present world and emotions like enthusiasm, idealism and passionate commitment can be observed in the people as a result of this concept. The Transition movement generates local-activism on the issues of peak-oil and climate change which would ultimately force the political intervention in these issues which also shows that the governments are forced to take action concerning the interests of the people which can again be seen enabling the functioning of the democracy. In this concept, transition normally results with the failure of the government and the market in convincingly and effectively not being able to address the issues of peak-oil and climate change. The assumption of the social innovator that he is on his own and that the market has failed to achieve sustainability results in a liberated political action as a need to answer the political problems by the micro-political community processes instead of normal macro-political approach. Although, lobbying and involvement of 'transitioners' in dialogue with the local authorities is not a key aspect of the Transition concept, Penwith transitioners are invited to be a part of their local Sustainable

Communities Strategy. The six district councillors in Stroud are huge

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supporters of the Transition process and also the US peak-oil expert, Richard Heinberg was invited to give a speech in the cabinet which was attended by 450 attendees. All these scenarios take democracy to very new levels encouraging the free will of the common public which is a very good sign for the future in this perspective. According to Deleuzean, micro-politics involve 'minorities' doing something motivated by desire. These actions disrupt the dominant practices showing them creative solutions. Deleuze argues that, a minor or deviant element is capable of destabilizing the macro socio-economic codes and the actuality here depends on the internal and the external factors of the force relations between those elements that enable and those that restrain the change. The Transition Town movement can therefore be considered to be a tactical approach where resistance is used to achieve democracy but this approach cannot be taken for granted to deliver positive effects always.

There have been questions raised on the development of sustainable cities because of the complexity involved in their planning and implementation. It has been observed that sustainability obligations demand not only active involvement of civil society but also leadership from government. As discussed earlier, the Transition Town concept is based on the fact that the idea of sustainability is introduced into their local areas by the communities as a result of their resilience. All the features of insurgent planning can be clearly noticed in the Transition Town concept. Insurgent planning or oppositional planning is a type of planning which challenges the already established structures of power, transgresses 'time and place' through a re-claiming of historical consciousness and imagines the concept of a different

world as being both possible and necessary'. A significant principle that differentiates the Transition Towns concept from other community-focussed sustainability initiatives such as Local Agenda 21 is that the latter is initiated and driven by the community rather than the government. The way in which the Transition representation has been scattering shows its insurgent nature. The framework of this concept is very easily accessible to any community or individual with interests in sustainable living which ultimately leads to the unstructured spread of the Transition Towns thereby causing varied expressions to meet the local concerns. The problem that arises here is that, different people have different mindsets and when every individual comes up with a different solution for the same concern, it might lead to tension which is a problem for democracy. The insurgent nature of this concept makes it anti-democratic. And also the fact that the transition network has a list of 14 criteria to be fulfilled in order for a community to be considered as a Transition Town or a Transition community raises questions on the very basic principles of the concept. Rob Hopkins states that this concept is not 'prescriptive' but the fulfilment criteria for formalisation are in fact a prescription. Rather than allowing communities to be Transition Towns for the sake of sustainability, this concept seems to be forming Transition Networks which doesn't support the concept of the Transition Town movement as a whole and this is also an emerging problem for democracy as this will have major impacts on the smooth-functioning of the local governments. The Transition Town concept is based more on a survivalist principle which is not very similar to the green activist principles which are more inclined towards the ideologies like democracy, liberalism, global engagement and universalism. (Quilley) The Transition Towns movement can <https://assignbuster.com/problems-and-opportunities-by-transition-towns-movement-politics-essay/>

be viewed as a social movement with an 'eco-authoritarian' perspective evolved as a result of the 'limits to growth' and the ecological collapse of modern industrial society ending the liberal democracy in the long run. Questions are also being raised about 'resilience' on which the Transition Town concept is solely based, whether it is attuned with the features like individualism, liberalism and pluralism and the impacts re-localisation would have on the gender relations which are all again problems in the democratic system. Individualism is not limited in human nature and therefore it raises concerns that the members of the transition communities might get carried away and over-enthusiastic and end up acting against the law which is also not healthy in a democracy. Alex Steffen 'Transition Towns or Bright Green Cities, argues that even though the Transition town movement has successfully inspired the communities to take action, its places of interest have sadly remained very low. There are also fears that re-localisation and resilience which are the main principles of the Transition Town moment might lead to self-sufficient tribalism which thereby reverses the direction of the civilising processes. According to Quilley, any reduction in the territorial scale of state pacification is believed to cause a decline in the pervasiveness and intensity of relations of the interdependency between individuals and the various groups. This shows that on a long run, the Transition Town concept becomes a very predictable phenomenon in the grounds of the basic principles and goals of democracy being directly or indirectly getting affected by the latter. Reactions have not been entirely positive in Totnes where the Transition town movement was initially started. Many say that this movement was made up of ideas of other people and networks who had already been trying to make Totnes a more sustainable town at that time

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and this situation raised questions in relation to aspects of the Transition town movement and its impact on communities and also its reputation there were doubts that it was colonizing existing networks. The interesting fact is that this concept cautions against taking a strong political stand on specific issues, leaving it partly up to individuals Transition Towns to decide what is applicable in their context. The Transition Network stresses the importance of Transition towns creating and maintaining links to local government but it can be argued that even though it is necessary for the local initiatives to have the support of local government but the basic fact is that the local governments are not bottom-up institutions. They operate within legislative frameworks and receive their funding from central governments and therefore they need to comply with the governing legislation. There is very high scope for the local governments to initially support the Transition communities but later decide on withdrawing the support which might create tension between these communities and the local governments which ultimately leads to political disturbances as a result of the tension created between the public and the local authorities which is again a problem for democracy as a whole.

The Transition Town movement is like any other social movement but has been more successful because of the two core drivers it is based on – peak-oil and climate change which have got obvious attention from the public. It has had good results in small towns around the world so far but there are doubts about its success more at a national level which still remains a question. As discussed, this concept has been very effective among communities in making them participate in decision making and the

organizational aspects for making the Earth a better place to live in. It has succeeded in bringing the people of these communities together to get prepared for the post peak-oil world and also a world affected by climate change. As mentioned by Rob Hopkins, this concept has made the government respond to the actions of the transition communities fulfilling the basic goal of democracy. It has created room for what is known as ‘participatory democracy’ and therefore it can be clearly said that this concept has generated opportunities for democracy for sure. This concept also has few areas where more research needs to be done. This concept aims at creating sustainable livelihoods outside the normal economy by self-provisioning and by creating alternative currencies. These ideas when looked at in a broader perspective don’t seem practically possible and might also lead to political imbalance. When there is a government in place to administer, the presence of smaller groups having their own networks and currencies make the conditions very critical for the smooth functioning of the government and it seems more like a rebellious or an anti-social group i. e. when it goes out of hand. I also think that this concept cannot be successful in the global South. I strongly believe that there should be official representation in a democracy and networks like the transition town movement should only play a vital role in instigating the governments to take actions on issues of peak-oil and climate change or any other issue for that matter but they should not be forming their own communities and currencies which is against democracy. The freedom can be misused of and this concept might ultimately result in forming groups and networks which might prove unhealthy to the community as a whole with growing self interests of these networks. After all, man is a selfish being!