

GREEN SHOOTS OF SUSTAINABILITY

The 2009 UK Transition Movement Survey



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Introduction

The Transition movement aims to mobilise community action and foster public empowerment and engagement around climate change, with the objective of catalysing a transition to a low-carbon economy (www.transitiontowns.org). The Transition Town idea was developed in Kinsale, Eire, in 2005 by Rob Hopkins, a permaculture teacher. Hopkins was concerned about the implications of 'Peak Oil', the point at which the rate of growth of oil production begins to decline. His students developed an 'Energy Descent Action Plan' which set out practical steps that might be taken by Kinsale to prepare for a post-cheap-oil future. This plan proposed *transitions* to more sustainable socio-technical systems and infrastructures. From this seed, a network of grassroots Transition initiatives has been growing rapidly in the UK and internationally, and has evolved to address the twin challenges of climate change (the need to reduce carbon emissions), and Peak Oil. The first UK Transition Town was Totnes, formed in autumn 2006 and by February 2009 there were 94 Transition Towns, Villages, Cities and Islands in the UK and a further 40 around the world, principally in Australia, New Zealand and the USA (*ibid*). The Transition movement has to date been very successful at replicating its model of community-led initiatives (Hopkins, 2008). In addition, Transition Network Ltd is a formally-constituted body which supports and coordinates activities among local groups (Hopkins and Lipman, 2009).

Yet despite this phenomenal growth and the wave of positive publicity the movement has received, there has to date been very little empirical research into the development and character of these initiatives, or the impacts they have achieved and the barriers to be overcome. This information is vital for the continuing development of the movement, both for local Initiatives and for the Network and the movement as a whole. To address this need for knowledge, this report presents new empirical findings from the first survey of UK Transition Initiatives. It was a short survey which used open- and closed-ended questions to collect basic information about the origins, development, character and activities of the UK's Transition Initiatives. The online survey was conducted during February 2009, with email invitations sent to coordinators of all 94 Transition initiatives in the UK. Two follow-up reminders were sent, and a total of 74 responses were attained (an outstanding response rate of 78.7%).

The Geography of the UK Transition Movement

Although 'Transition Town' is the most common term used to describe these initiatives, it is noteworthy that many of the groups surveyed cover rural areas, villages, even islands. Figure 1 shows the distribution of different geographical areas and scales of these groups. The most common type of initiative is one which covers a small town and its rural surroundings (29.0%), echoing the movement's roots in small market towns in the south-west countryside. A further 23.2% cover a small town, and 27.5% cover a large town or city - although working on this scale is not unproblematic, and consequently several city-wide groups have made the decision to subdivide into smaller geographical groups covering neighbourhoods or districts, with a central coordinating hub - 8.7% of the survey respondents were from groups which covered a part of a town or city. The remaining 11.6% of initiatives cover a variety of other types of geographical area, from villages, islands, rural areas, forests and so on.

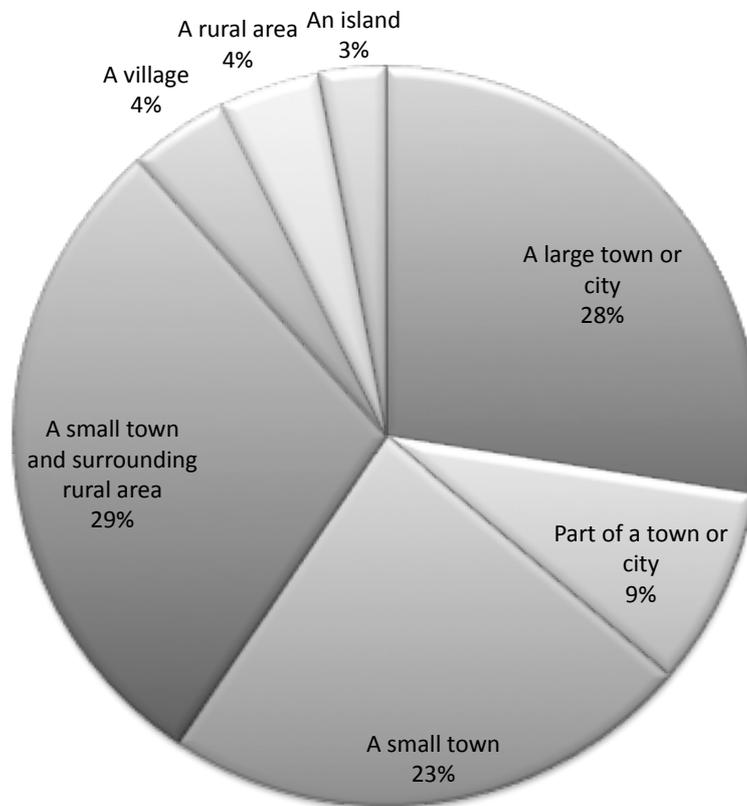


Figure 1: Geographical area covered by UK Transition Initiatives

Origins, Actors and Partners

Who sets up these Transition groups? The survey reveals that the vast majority (89.0%) are set up by individual citizens (76.7% are set up by several individuals coming together to instigate the group, and another 12.3% are set up by just one person at the outset). At the same time, 19.2% have one or more pre-existing groups involved in setting up the group. Only one of the respondent groups (1.4%) had a business involved in setting up the group, and none of them were started by local councils. This finding substantiates the movement's claims to be a citizens' movement, demonstrating energy and action from the grassroots.

Transition groups around the UK are working with a wide variety of actors in developing their networks of community action, as shown in Figure 2. Unsurprisingly, there is almost universal engagement with members of local communities as individuals (reported by 98.6% of groups). The vast majority (86.5%) are also engaging with local voluntary environmental groups, and with other local voluntary organisations as well (73.0%). Working with government is clearly a priority for these groups, as 82.4% of Initiatives report that they are working with their local government, and 21.6% have made links with political parties, although only 8.1% are engaging with national government, reflecting the local nature of this initiative. Although fewer groups are working with businesses (58.7%), charities (44.6%) and social enterprises (39.2%), these are still important partners for a significant number of initiatives, indicating that overall the movement is active in forging links with a wide range of other community actors.

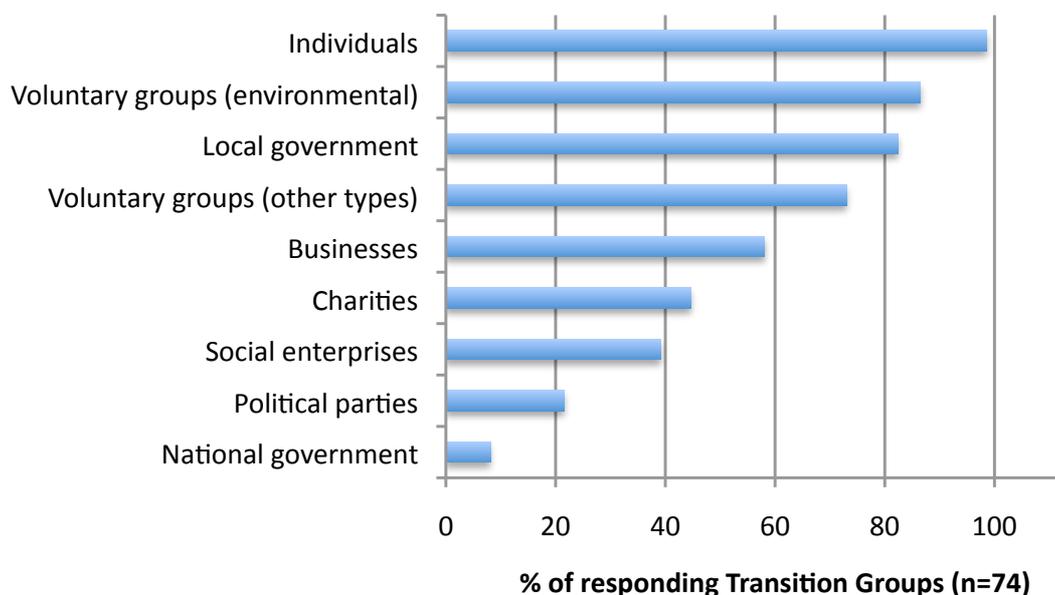


Figure 2: Profile of actors working with UK Transition initiatives

Priorities

The range of issues addressed by Transition initiatives is wide-ranging, covering economic, social, environmental and personal systems. The Network itself is founded on a twin concern with climate change and peak oil (see above). How do local groups perceive the issues, and prioritise them? Interestingly, in a ranking exercise of six possible priorities, neither of these were the highest-scoring priority (see Figure 3). Instead, 'building local self-reliance' scored most highly, and was ranked first by the majority (55.2)% of respondents. This result may have come from the fact that while peak oil and climate change are the contextual issues for Transition groups, it is building self-reliance which forms the focus of their activities and attention locally. In addition, several respondents objected to having to rank the issues, arguing instead that several took equal precedence, and that ordering them was an artificial exercise when the impacts and implications of them were so intertwined. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see so clearly what is the main focus of local groups, and the way that their actions are framed and conceptualised.

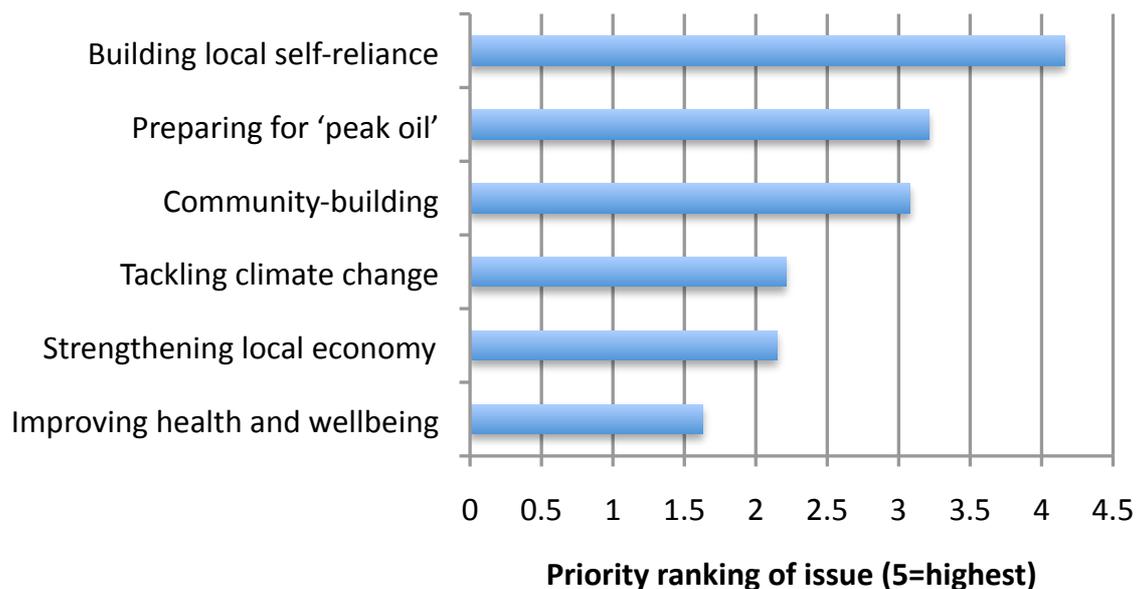


Figure 3: Priority issues for UK Transition initiatives

Group Development

How well-developed are the UK Transition Initiatives? One way of measuring this is to use the Transition Network's '12-step' guidelines for setting up a Transition Initiative. These key steps have been proposed as being constitutive actions for a successful group to become established and begin preparing its Energy Descent Plan. Respondent groups indicated which of these steps they had begun or achieved. The findings (shown in Figure 4) indicate that the Transition Initiatives are becoming well-organised and taking institutional structures seriously: almost all the groups (89.2%) had set up a steering group (and planned its demise from the outset), and 73.0% had formed subgroups on different themes. In terms of practical action, the most commonly-reported activity was awareness-raising (94.6% of groups were doing this), followed by developing visible practical manifestations of the Transition idea in their communities (56.8%). Two-thirds had begun building a bridge to local government (64.9%), and a third (32.9%) had begun the 'great reskilling' project of facilitate the public learning of practical skills for everyday life. Only a quarter of the groups (25.7%) had organised or were organising an official launch (sometimes termed a 'great unleashing'), but this is not surprising given that most of these groups were less than a year old at the time, and almost half (47.3%) were willing to 'let it go where it wants to go', responding to local situations and interests and energy, rather than imposing an inflexible template for how the group should develop.

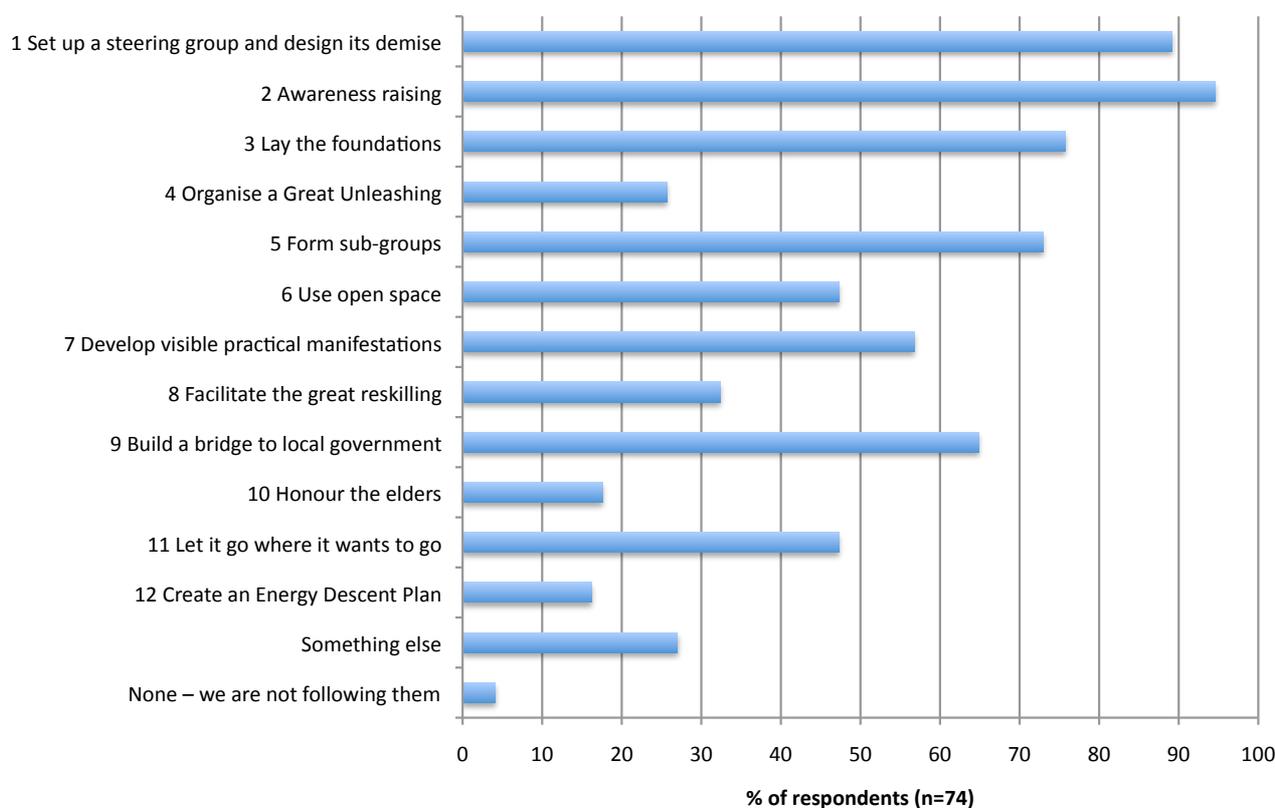


Figure 4: UK Transition Initiatives and the 12 'Key Steps'

In addition to these steps, a few groups reported further activities which they felt were important in their development, including forming regional networks, managing internal conflicts in the group, getting to grips with good communications (publicity, newsletters etc), making films, and changing the steering group's role. Some groups felt the '12-step' guide was not helpful, one reported "*some of our members think the 12 steps sound a bit like a cult*", and a small minority were not explicitly following the list.

Achievements

What, then have the UK's Transition Initiatives achieved? Coordinators were asked open-ended questions about their groups' top three achievements, and their free-text answers were coded into thematic categories, and analysed as shown below in Figure 5 and detailed in Table 1. Given the relative newness of the Transition Initiatives, it is not surprising that over half of the survey respondents (52.1%) reported various aspects of their steering committee group governance as major achievements. These included setting the group up (27.4% reported this), setting up subgroups – either themed or geographical (20.5%), formalising the group with structures, constitutions, getting (or applying for) funding etc (9.6%), and creating good communication and publicity channels through websites and newsletters (9.6%). One group reported that they were "*gaining a reputation locally for being well-organised and doing what we say we're going to do (this is a virtuous circle - the more we do well, the more support we get, the better things go...)*".

Almost half of the groups (46.6%) were proud of the links they had built with other local organisations, with 28.8% reporting positive bridge-building to local government (for instance being 'adopted' by local councils), 12.3% with other local groups such as "*getting a representative in the Local Sustainability Partnership*", and 11.0% with schools, for instance through Environment Weeks ("*different sub-groups take over the timetable for a day each*"), or growing vegetables on the school gardens.

Similarly, reflecting the early stages of the groups, the most frequently-reported achievement was awareness-raising and community engagement through talks, film shows, open meetings and so on (68.5% of groups reported this), which is taken as a precursor to more practical actions. One reported "*we have definitely raised the profile of climate change and peak oil among residents, and we have demonstrated locally that ordinary people are taking it seriously and making major changes to their lives and work in response to it*", and another stated "*getting the community together to engage as a Transition Town*" was one of their major achievements. Another felt that they had created "*a broad, interwoven, upbeat community that is working together in a very creative way*".

However, many of the groups did report more practical external activities, with food and gardening being the most popular area for groups to be actively working on (39.7% reported achievements in this field). Within this category a range of different activities were being pursued, from promoting local food through farmers’ markets, local food guides and food festivals (13.7% of groups had done these), to developing community-supported agriculture (8.2%): one group reported they had “*completed feasibility study for a community market garden and are now seeking land*”. In terms of encouraging participants to grow their own food, 13.7% had promoted and increased allotment provision, 11.0% had established community gardens and orchards, and 5.5% were involved in setting up garden-sharing and growing-support groups. For instance, one initiative had a “*grow-your-neighbour’s-own*” project where people grew vegetables on previously neglected private gardens, and another “*set up a Gardeners’ Network to bring together experts and beginners*”. Another had set up a new Farmers’ Market, and felt that although it was small, there were “*lovely traders and a hard-core of dedicated regular customers, and it acts as a visible focus for what we’re all about*”.

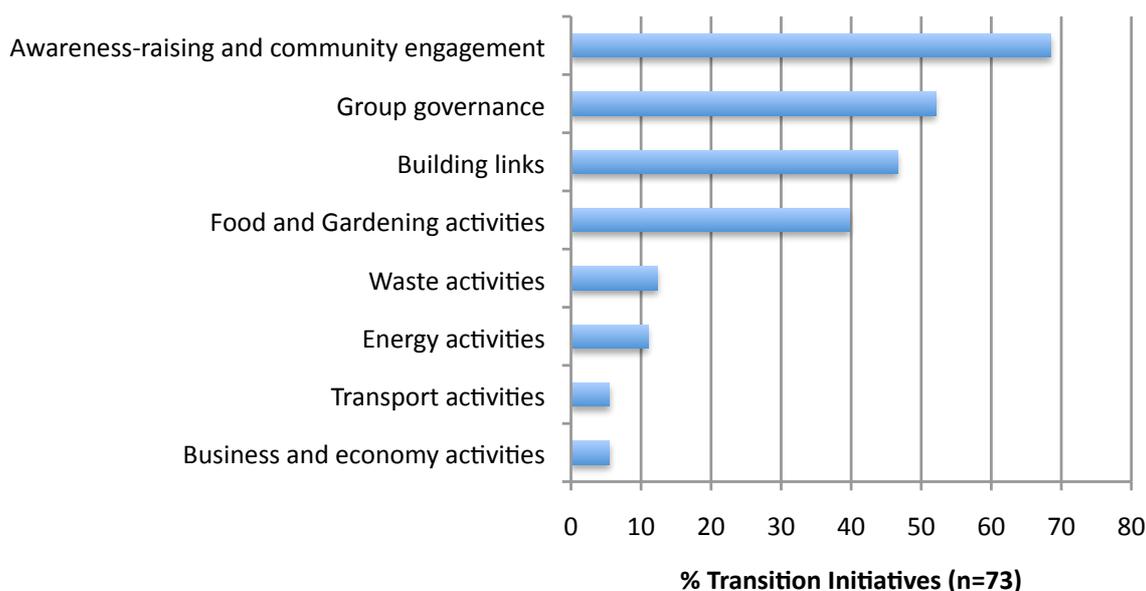


Figure 5: Main achievements of UK Transition initiatives

Other areas of activity were less-well developed, with waste being the next most popular area (12.3%), which included community composting, battery-recycling and various activities around shopping bags (8.2% of initiatives had promoted plastic-bag-free days, or produced branded reusable shopping bags). Energy actions were an area of achievement for 11% of the groups, including one event where “*we made thermal curtain linings for people in the community, with 250*

meters of thermal fabric”, and 5.5% of groups had achievements to report in the areas of transport such as car-free days and “*working on cycle routes, cycle racks, cycle links and paths with the co-operation of the local council*”. Finally, 5.5% reported business/economy-related activities, for instance launching local currencies, promoting local businesses.

Table 1: Detailed list of achievements of UK Transition initiatives

AREA OF ACHIEVEMENT		%
Group governance		52.1
	Establishing the group	27.4
	Formalising the group	9.6
	Setting up sub-groups	20.5
	Communications	9.6
Building links		46.6
	With local government	28.8
	With other local groups	12.3
	With schools	11.0
Awareness-raising and community engagement		68.5
Food and gardening activities		39.7
	Promoting local food	13.7
	Community-supported agriculture	8.2
	Allotments	13.7
	Community gardens and orchards	11.0
	Garden sharing / support	5.5
Waste Activities		12.3
	Shopping bag projects	8.2
Energy Activities		11.0
Business and economy activities		5.5
Transport activities		5.5

Challenges Faced

Survey respondents also outlined their three biggest challenges to date, and these responses were also coded and analysed thematically. The challenges faced by the UK's Transition Initiatives are shown in Table 2 and Figure 6. Interestingly, many of the same issues come up in this analysis, as the achievements, indicating that while groups struggle with some of these issues, they are successful at meeting the challenges they face. In addition, some mentioned the strategies they were using to overcome their challenges; a few of these are detailed here.

Group governance issues are raised as a problem by over half the survey respondents (52.8%), and this covers several areas. Having established the groups, 9.7% reported difficulties maintaining momentum and keeping going, especially if some of the original members left the group. Several mentioned issues such as *“members of the core group keeping up the momentum trying to juggle day-time jobs, family etc - we've not overcome this one!”*. Managing group dynamics, *“dealing with each other”*, handling internal group conflicts and learning to work together in *“making decisions and moving forward”* was a challenge reported by 22.2% of the initiatives. The most common solution was clear communications: *“honest talking is the best way to deal with this”*, and one suggestion was to introduce group facilitation training into the Transition training package. A quarter of the groups (25.0%) felt that managing their group's development was a problem, for instance struggling with formalising the group for the purposes of getting bank accounts or applying for funding, or alternatively managing the process of devolving and delegating to subgroups. One explained that a major challenge had been *“going from an informal group to a more organised formally-constituted body. [we] overcame this by finding people who wanted to serve on the steering group, prepared a constitution and set up the organisation about a year ago. This has led to our being far more organised and getting more work done”*. At the same time, these processes arrive at a cost, as one reported *“being able to get funding meant spending far too many steering group meetings on constitution and policies”*. A few respondents (5.6%) reported feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of the (environmental and social) problems they were addressing (*“it feels like a drop in the ocean”*), and the speed at which the groups were growing and evolving.

A major related governance area is that of the resources that groups have available to meet their objectives, and 58.3% of groups reported challenges in this area. These are interrelated, and include a need for funding (16.7%), a lack of time (29.2%), and a need for more active group members to take on some of the workload (36.1%). One group reported that *“We're all working full-time so it's a huge commitment initially from the committee. Gradually we are getting more people on board to run with initiatives”*, and another described a problem with *“getting enough people in the group to take on jobs and do more than attend meetings - I think we need to match the task to the person, or do a list of jobs that need doing, that are simple and have an end-date, so that people are not taking on an ever-expanding/unmanageable role.”*

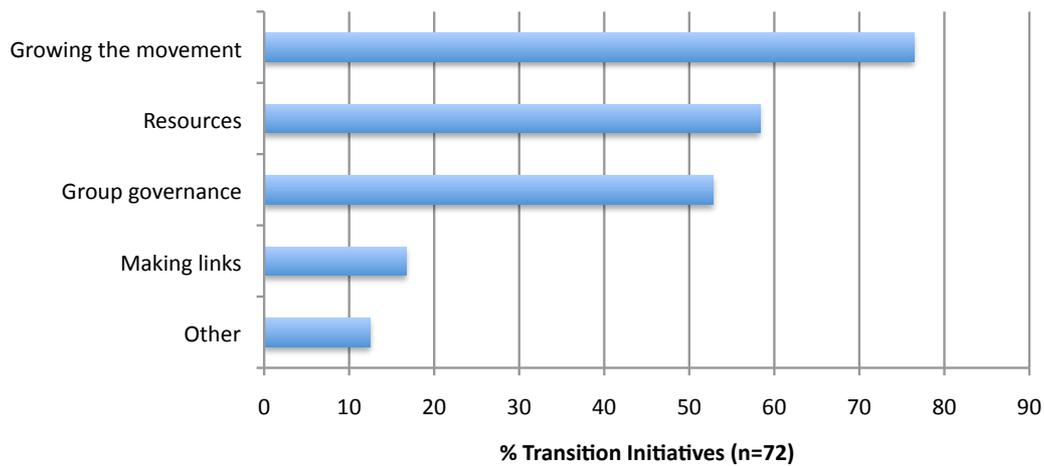


Figure 6: Main challenges faced by UK Transition initiatives

Bridge-building with other local actors was a challenge for 18.7% of groups, with 8.3% reporting a lack of support or interest from local or national government and businesses as a problem, for instance one reported *“most of our local businesses are chains, and it’s impossible to engage them. We are overcoming this by working with the ones that are local”*. An equal number explained that they had had to carefully negotiate the terrain of existing groups in the area so as to liaise productively and avoid *“treading on people’s toes - we talk to everyone, endlessly”*. One described how they struggled to *“identify what is already going on, and what is Transition? We deal with this by not trying to label any project and just let things happen”*.

However, the greatest challenge faced by the UK Transition Initiatives, reported by over three quarters of the survey respondents (76.4%) is that of growing the movement. Several distinct but related issues fall into this area. The first is the need for good, consistent communications and publicity (16.7% reported this, including one that was *“engaging ‘friendly’ journalists”*), and thereby to reach out to a wider, more diverse community than has hitherto been involved (30.6%). Linked to this is a perceived need to do more awareness-raising in the community (23.6% reported this challenge), and so overcome apathy (12.5%). For instance, several groups mentioned the need to extend *“outside the ‘green-belt’”* and one mentioned *“getting our message out to the ‘unconverted’*. *Our original public awareness raising events were well-attended, but are now not so. We feel as though we must take our message out to other community groups and will be starting a programme of getting invited to give talks”*. Another described how they were attempting to *“get beyond the ‘usual suspects’... we’ve tried to give presentations to groups beyond the env/social justice groups, and actively seek to work in partnership with other local groups on our activities... these include the Community Partnership, Chamber of Trade, WI, local churches”*. This strategy of taking the message out to other local groups was one that a few were attempting, in order to overcome a declining interest in their own public events and film shows.

But despite this widespread concern with spreading the Transition message further afield, a small number of groups (12.5%) reported that they wanted to avoid “*death by meeting*” and had decided to concentrate instead on practical actions, as a means of growing the movement: “*we want the whole town to be involved, yet the need to get going and ‘do’ something is also pressing so we don’t want to turn into a talking shop*”. Another group went further, and explained that for them, the theoretical aspects of meetings was an actual barrier to public involvement, and that “*we’ve had to work at things from the other end, getting interest in gardening, cutting bills, saving money and having fun, and then moving towards organics/climate change/peak oil awareness*”. This approach was echoed by another who said “*we have decided not to focus on awareness raising any more, rather we will attempt to get some projects up and running and let the word percolate out and gather support as we go*”.

Table 2: Detailed list of challenges faced by UK Transition initiatives

AREA OF CHALLENGE		%
Group governance		52.8
	Keeping up momentum	9.7
	Managing group dynamics	22.2
	Group development	25.0
	Dealing with ‘overwhelm’	5.6
Resources		58.3
	Lack of money	16.7
	Lack of time	29.2
	Need more active members	36.1
Growing the movement		76.4
	Getting good publicity and public communications	16.7
	Reaching out to wider community	30.6
	Awareness-raising	23.6
	Overcoming apathy	12.5
	Moving from talk to action	12.5
Building links		16.7
	Lack of support from businesses / local government	8.3
	Liaising with other local groups, avoiding ‘treading on toes’	8.3
Other		12.5

Conclusions

This survey has provided a snapshot of the UK Transition movement in 2009, and has revealed a great deal about the character, origins, objectives and achievements of the Transition groups springing up around the UK. Although the movement is relatively young, the Transition model offers new groups the opportunity to learn quickly from others' experience, and the Network is pro-active at developing best practice, ideas-sharing, training and publications to support these local groups. This research aims to inform that process.

The key findings from this research are:

- Establishing Transition groups and maintaining momentum are big achievements for volunteer community activists, and managing the dynamics of voluntary groups is not a trivial issue. Support and training in group management and conflict resolution would be a welcome addition to the training available;
- There is a limit to how much support or interest can be gained using awareness-raising strategies as a starting point. Attracting people to join in practical projects might be a more effective way of building community engagement;
- Transition initiatives struggle to achieve a lot, with limited resources, and would benefit from funding (financial or in kind) from other organisations to support their activities. Many have links with local government and there is clearly a role here for local councils to support (not direct or lead) Transition initiatives in their work;
- Food and gardening projects are far and away the most popular practical ways for Transition initiatives to start engaging people in hands-on action. Local councils could promote these activities by offering more land for allotments and community gardens, as a first step to wider community engagement in sustainable development;

Future research into the Transition movement could usefully examine in more detail the impacts of these initiatives, their mechanisms and strategies, and evaluate their success at mobilising widespread community engagement in action to tackle climate change. As a foundation for this sort of in-depth work, a regular national survey of this type provides a good snapshot of the movement's growth and development, issues arising and emerging trends. I therefore propose to repeat this survey every one or two years, evolving the questions to incorporate themes that emerge from previous responses, but maintaining enough standardisation to allow longitudinal comparisons. The aim of this research is, of course, to help the movement to understand itself better, and to inform the movement's development; suggestions for topics to include in future research are welcome.

Acknowledgements

This research forms part of a wider programme of research on grassroots innovations for sustainability (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Seyfang, 2009), which aims to improve understanding of the ways that community-led initiatives for sustainability can develop and grow, diffusing their new ideas and practices into wider society. I am grateful to the UK's Economic and Social Research Council for supporting this research through an Academic Fellowship, to the activists of the UK's Transition movement for participating in this survey, and to Alex Haxeltine for collaborating on this research. More information on this work, and forthcoming papers on our study of the Transition movement, can be found on the website below.

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