



Local Environment

The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability

ISSN: 1354-9839 (Print) 1469-6711 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cloe20>

Resilient communities: sustainabilities in transition

Stewart Barr & Patrick Devine-Wright

To cite this article: Stewart Barr & Patrick Devine-Wright (2012) Resilient communities: sustainabilities in transition, *Local Environment*, 17:5, 525-532, DOI: [10.1080/13549839.2012.676637](https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2012.676637)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2012.676637>



Published online: 30 Apr 2012.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1856



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 47 View citing articles [↗](#)

COMMENTARY

Resilient communities: sustainabilities in transition

Stewart Barr* and Patrick Devine-Wright

School of Geography, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK

In this brief commentary, we focus on the notion of resilient communities in developed nations through the lens of social, economic and individual “transitions”. In so doing, we aim to chart the trajectory of the shifts between “thinking global and acting local” and the new emphasis is being placed on reactions to ecological and economic threats in particular localities. We do this initially by outlining three changes that have occurred in many communities in the last 20 years that mark shifts in the conceptual, pragmatic and political responses to sustainability before considering the ways in which resilience, as a conceptual device, has been deployed in a particular niche alongside other reactions to global change, such as vulnerability, mitigation and adaptation. The commentary will then examine the ways in which pathways to resilience are being shaped through the evolving discourse of transition, which is rapidly becoming the vehicle for accelerating a sense of community resilience in Western nations. Through an exploration of transition, we will provide some reflections on the potential opportunities and challenges for creating resilient and sustainable communities in an age of climate change and “Peak Oil”.

Keywords: resilience; community; sustainability; transition

Resilient communities: sustainabilities in transition

The lexicon of sustainability is forever in development, but few words can so clearly mark out the change that has occurred in the ways some communities¹ in developed nations have come to view the shifting environmental and economic conditions in the early twenty-first century. “Resilience” marks the change that some within communities are making between apparently altruistic and ecologically motivated reactions to global environmental change to a situation where concerns are focusing more on the pragmatism of greater self-interest and survivability that, in theory at least, should mark a period of transition for people and places (Dale and Newman 2006). Indeed, it is the very notion of “transition” that is used to create a viable pathway for achieving community resilience, focusing as it does on not only social and economic changes, but also on transitions for the inner-self. Such a trajectory in developed nations should and must not detract from the importance of resilience as a both a conceptual and pragmatic device embedded and embodied in places and practices in many developing nations, where resilience is framed by ever-present economic and environmental shocks that have the power to threaten life itself. Nonetheless, in this brief commentary, we focus on the notion of resilient communities in developed nations through the lens of social, economic and individual “transitions”. In so doing, we aim to chart the trajectory

*Corresponding author. Email: s.w.barr@exeter.ac.uk

of the shifts between “thinking global and acting local” and the new emphasis being placed on reactions to ecological and economic threats in particular localities. In so doing, we outline three changes that have occurred in many communities in the last 20 years that mark shifts in the conceptual, pragmatic and political responses to sustainability. We will consider the ways in which resilience, as a conceptual device, has been deployed in a particular niche alongside other reactions to global change, such as vulnerability, mitigation and adaptation. The commentary will then examine the ways in which pathways to resilience are being shaped through the evolving discourse of transition, which is rapidly becoming the vehicle for accelerating a sense of community resilience in Western nations. Through a critical exploration of transition, we will provide some reflections on the potential opportunities and challenges for creating resilient and sustainable communities in an age of climate change and “Peak Oil”.

The notion of resilience

As we outlined in the introduction, to believe that we have somehow discovered resilience in an age of environmentalism and sustainability is clearly misleading and a rapid overview of the literature of “resilient communities” would not point towards reactions to Peak Oil or climate change, but rather the challenges of natural hazards, disaster management and disease prevention (Bernard 2005, Cohen *et al.* 2010). Nonetheless, over the last 20 years, resilience has become an important and inseparable part of the sustainable communities agenda in developed nations (Dale and Newman 2006).

The term “resilience” has its origins in the natural sciences (Adger 2000) and refers to the ability of systems to cope with shocks or major changes in external circumstances. As Adger (2000) has noted, there are clear similarities between the natural and social configurations of resilience, and therefore in social terms resilience is the

... ability of a system, from individual people to whole communities, to hold together and maintain their ability to function in the face of change and shocks from outside. (Hopkins 2008, p. 12)

In this sense, resilience is clearly different from other strategies associated with social responses to global environmental challenges. Clearly, it has components of reaction and prevention that attempt to build up strength within communities to deal with external shocks. In this way, it may involve measures aimed at mitigation (prevention) and adaptation (one form of reactionism), but resilience is also an active, community-based, internally driven and holistic approach that should, in theory, provide greater protection against external shocks. In this way, resilience in a community context is concerned less with a desired end state, but rather

By shifting focus away from an ultimate end goal of sustainability, to an ongoing process of enhancing resilience, managers, planners, council members, and residents can examine the community in its entirety, the interrelations among the various elements within a community, and how these elements collectively enhance community resilience and ultimately move a community toward sustainability. (Callaghan and Colton 2008, pp. 932–933)

From sustainability to resilience?

Taking an overview of local sustainability in the developed world in 2011, one could be forgiven for assuming that sustainability has been comprehensively over-taken by the

language, if not substance, of resilience. Yet rather than resilience having emerged from nowhere to become the “new” sustainability, we need to initially recognise that as a form of living out sustainability, resilience is a term that embodies the numerous ways that communities adapt to changing social, economic and environmental contexts (Dale and Newman 2006, Callaghan and Colton 2008). To this extent, although resilience in the sustainability context has been a relatively emergent theme in academic writings, it has been ever-present in the daily practices, routines, strategies and policies of communities as they meet the challenges of major social and economic adjustment in a post-industrial world (Agyeman *et al.* 2003, Reich *et al.* 2010). That stated, the recent upsurge of interest in resilience clearly emanates from a sense that social, technical and economic adaptations will be required at a local level to guard against the impacts of global issues such as climate change and Peak Oil, an issue that we outline in more depth below (Hopkins 2008). In this context, we can identify three important shifts that have occurred in local sustainability over the last 20 years that mark out a set of emergent transitions in community sustainability.

First, in charting the development of “resilience” as a term, we note the thematic shift in discourses of community sustainability from ill-defined and poorly communicated notions of global environmental concern to the specific and place-based threats posed by climate change and Peak Oil. When the United Nations (1992) published its *Agenda 21* document, there was a palpable sense that “communities” were being encouraged to look outwards to “Think Global and Act Local” (Hinchliffe 1996, Collins 2004). In this sense, the specifics of place and community were largely irrelevant to the argument for change – all communities need to mitigate against global environmental problems for the good of the global community. In this way, the local was conceived as the most appropriate scale to encourage change for the benefit of the global commons (Meacher 2002). Yet new forms of community resilience are now partly reversing these messages, putting forward the argument that communities need to look inward and, in celebrating the uniqueness of place, insulate their communities against the (inevitable) onset of global change. In this sense, there is a re-defining of space through the guarding and celebration of the local “commons” and, to a certain extent, a withdrawing from the responsibility of individuals and communities towards the global commons.

Closely related to the shift from global to local concerns is a second trend, which highlights the ways in which local community approaches to sustainability have shifted from modes of simple reaction and activism to new practices of resilience and pragmatism through the establishment of locally situated responses to externalised global pressures. Many of the early exhortations of *Local Agenda 21* campaigns were characterised by promoting practices that lacked local context or spatial specificity (Tuxworth 1996, Morris 1999), for example, the widespread roll-out of recycling initiatives that often adopted a “one-size-fits-all” model of resource management and public participation. With the growing emphasis on resilience, there is a renewed focus on exploring the vulnerabilities of communities and the likely changes that will be required to make communities more resilient through locally specific practices of pragmatism that maintain the integrity of local resources, skills and expertise. In this way, promoting resilience necessitates a spatially and socially situated approach to assessing vulnerabilities and resultant strategies for change.

Third, new practices of resilience and pragmatism mark a change in the governance of sustainability, one that has shifted from national level, state-led “initiatives” that prescribed local community responses to a situation where local communities can now begin to frame their own agendas through a renewed focus on forms of consensus decision-making (as an aspiration, if not a reality). As authors such as Selman and Parker (1997, 1999) noted in the

late 1990s, a considerable amount of sustainability activity in communities focused on the roll-out and promotion of plans derived largely from local authorities, lending them a form of official endorsement from the political establishment. Yet the growth in Transition Town movements across Europe and North America has led to attempts to “de-politicise” (in a party political sense) community responses to major environmental challenges and spawned the use of approaches such as Open Space events and consensus-based decision-making tools that seek to provide inclusivity and legitimation. In this way, transition movements are new social, rather than state-led, movements and represent an attempt to create a participant driven and thus “bottom-up” democratic process, a characteristic which perhaps marks them out from recent state-initiated policies to create a so-called “Big Society” in the UK to promote community-led action (Cabinet Office 2010). Such movements are, of course, not without their own politics (as we shall see below), but they seek to build community resilience by legitimation and consensus. It is, therefore, to this very specific but increasingly prolific form of community resilience that we now turn our attention.

Sustainabilities in transition

The term “transition” has emerged as a particular framing of community resilience and is implicated with the emergent notion of Peak Oil (Deffeyes 2001) that continues to generate considerable debate in the scientific and economic communities (Graefe 2009). In brief, the contention is that either recently or in the near future, global oil production will peak and the era of cheap oil (and its attendant products) will slowly fade away. Thus, the “peak” is just that, the maximum extraction of economically available resource, rather than a sudden and catastrophic decline in production. Accordingly, advocates of transition (Hopkins 2008) argue that because individuals and communities have become so reliant on oil for basic services such as cheap commodities, reliably available global foods and seemingly hyper-levels of mobility, any reduction in cheaply available fuel will result in a series of price and availability shocks as a new “world order” emerges. It is to these shocks which communities must become resilient and, in so doing, they can also create capacity to tackle the other, related, issue of the moment: global climate change. Transition is, therefore, concerned with giving communities the skills, competencies and, some argue, values to live in a world of increased fuel scarcity and the potential de-globalisation in trade and commodities which such a form of scarcity might bring about.

In exploring transition movements, we focus here on our experiences of action research with such organisations in the UK through a 2-year Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project, but the transition movement does, of course, need to be placed into geographical context. Although transition is a term that has some conceptual underpinnings in Hopkins’ (2008) *Transition Handbook*, it is not a term that universally encompasses attempts to promote community resilience in the light of issues such as Peak Oil and climate change. There are variations within and beyond transition and because these are place-based movements, geography is implicated throughout their constitution and practice. However, there are certain pragmatic commonalities that are to be found in most transition initiatives, including an emphasis on energy descent planning,² local food growing and community-supported agriculture, reduced consumption and a reliance on local procurement, environmentally sustainable mobility, and active discussion of transition through regular community meetings and open space events.

In turn, the characteristics of transition groups as new forms of resilient communities have certain conceptual similarities. First and foremost, transition is implicated with the

notion of community. As Hopkins (2008) notes, community is the central building block of resilience through the notion that shared values and visions can be realised through partly re-discovering a lost age of co-operation and also fostering a renewed sense of place that celebrates the local. In this way, the term community has become somewhat romanticised through forms of nostalgia and has been cast as universally positive in its invocation by transition advocates who view it as the most appropriate scale to effect social change. Accordingly, exhortations to join transition, like the following excerpt from *Village Vancouver's* website (Village Vancouver 2011) are typical

Have a desire to advance ecological sustainability, community self-reliance, and social well-being in Vancouver? To grow more food? To connect with others in your community to create positive local responses to things like climate disruption, depletion of natural resources, and economic instability?

This extract highlights a second conceptual commonality amongst transition groups, which relates to a re-connection of people with nature. Accordingly, many transition groups have focused on food as a key access point for engaging individuals in building-up resilience to the potential instabilities in food markets in an era after Peak Oil. In this way, some in the transition movement have emphasised not only the economic and social value of local food economies, but also the intrinsic value of becoming re-connected with nature. As Macy and Brown (1998) have argued, there is a sense that the separation of humans from nature in a "... mechanistic view of reality" (p. 61) is to blame for our current state of peril, and thus re-finding our ability to work alongside nature (from growing allotment vegetables to permaculture to composting) lies at the heart of successful transition. Such a view characterises a third commonality, the notion of "inner transition", transition of the self. Those starting off in transition groups are often pointed towards Johnstone's (2006) *Find Your Power*, in which positive thinking is regarded as a way of bringing about major social change. In pragmatic terms, transition groups are characterised by finding solutions to the challenge of Peak Oil, but in many instances the greatest resilience for the community is, it is argued, to be found in an inner changing of the self that becomes open to change and alive to the possibilities of new ways of living in a post-transition world. Such inner transitions are also about the change towards a more resilient form of governance and decision-making. In this way, the work of transition is about stripping away hierarchy and encouraging participation through consensus decision-making and providing open spaces for ideas and collaboration. Accordingly, transition also relies on inclusivity and a collective sense of purpose and values to drive forward action.

Challenges for resilient communities in transition

The transition movement is clearly only one example of steps taken towards the creation of resilient communities in an age of climate change and Peak Oil. Yet as a fast growing initiative³ that has particular pragmatic and conceptual characteristics, it is worth reflecting on the likely challenges that this movement will face both now and in a future defined by increasing scarcity.

The first challenge is centered on achieving what so many in the transition movement would argue is a fundamental pre-requisite for attaining a low carbon society. Reducing consumption and, by definition, the *need* to consume at current levels is clearly something that resilient communities must achieve to resist the predicted shocks that could occur in an era of scarcity. Yet despite attempts to re-connect people with nature and to generate an

inner transition that places less reliance on consumption, it is questionable how far transition groups can get within existing socio-political frames. Despite the calls of authors such as Jackson (2009) and the work of think tanks like the New Economics Foundation (2008), it seems likely that the cautious attempts to measure social well-being (National Statistics 2011) and find new ways of measuring “happiness” and quality of life beyond economic measures like GDP are at best marginal gestures and that there is little prospect of changing our basic economic system from its current Neo-liberal state. Accordingly, it seems likely that for the vast majority of the population, resilience plays second fiddle to the everyday acts of consumption that define us as practicing, mainstream members of a high-consumption society.

The second challenge is, therefore, to examine the appeal of resilience as a notion in itself for the majority of the population in the communities that have transition groups. Both Peak Oil and climate change are heavily contested topics, with which there is limited public engagement and often outright scepticism. Proponents of transition and wider attempts to engage the public in sustainability, therefore, need to consider the very logic, from a consumption perspective, of highlighting the ecological challenges ahead when these are so contested. As some environmental social scientists have begun to argue (Shove 2010), “environment” holds little resonance to everyday practices and, therefore, the potential for change, apart from amongst a few enthusiastic campaigners. A potentially more significant role is, therefore, for transition groups to more directly tackle the challenges of the current economic downturn and price increases as a way in to open up discussions over scarcity and community economic resilience, as some groups are now doing.

A third challenge is that of vision. Transition groups are encouraged to use visioning as a technique for creating new, positive futures post-transition (Hopkins 2008). Yet our understanding of any post-transition world (where communities are able to live sustainably without a reliance on oil and other fossil fuels) is wanting. Partly this stems from our conceptual understanding of what a sustainable community might constitute. Questions of scale, political power, democracy boundaries and authority abound and are overlain by the essential issue of who is included and, by definition, who is not . . . and who decides. In considering resilient communities, therefore, we need to question whether resilience is universal or selective, a right, or something earned. The likelihood is that, as Dennis and Urry (2009) have recently argued, any transition away from an oil-based economy is likely to be politically troublesome and highly divisive. Resilient communities may, therefore, emerge, but their constitution may not be a form of Utopian or romanticised local pastoralism, but rather constitute a resilience based on power, prestige, position and influence that could ultimately lead to a dystopian future marked out by inward-looking and even “gated” forms of community.

Conclusion: an uncertain transition

Although researchers and practitioners have talked about sustainable communities for over 20 years and about resilience for nearly as long, we need to acknowledge that the changes in our communities have been relatively modest thus far. That is not to reduce the importance of what has happened, but rather to stress the significance of what remains to be done. There is little doubt that resilience is a driving force in the sustainable communities agenda and much of that is down to the notion of creating a transition. This has spawned real change within the social and physical, and sometimes economic, fabric of our communities. Yet it is all too easy to get swept up in the excitement of community resilience and transition,

to believe that major social change is happening. For the majority of people in those communities with transition movements, the everyday practices of consumption continue. Resilience is still, therefore, the concern of the few and is often characterised as a middle-class niche pursuit for the ecologically minded. Indeed, we cannot say here whether in 20 years time we will be any further ahead in creating resilient communities in the way that those in transition groups have framed such communities. What we would forecast is that if the predictions of climate change and oil scarcity become realised, there is likely to be a diverse geography of resilience within and between communities that maps onto existing social, economic and political systems and inequalities.

Acknowledgements

The reflections in this review are based partly on research funded by the AHRC (UK), grant number AH/H038574/1.

Notes

1. In this review, we focus on the commonly applied notion of communities of place in which geographical scale is utilised as the framing device, but it should be recognised that virtual communities of resilience and resistance have also emerged as responses to climate change and 'Peak Oil' through communities of interest that are not place-based.
2. Energy Descent Planning (Hopkins 2008) refers to a community-based strategy for both reducing energy use through limiting consumption and energy efficiencies, as well as switching reliance towards renewable forms of energy production.
3. For example, in the USA, there are now 103 Transition initiatives, with 54 million Americans living in communities with a transition group (Transition Network 2011).

References

- Adger, W.N., 2000. Social and ecological resilience: are they related? *Progress in Human Geography*, 24 (3), 347–364.
- Agyeman, J., Evans, B., and Bullard, R.D., 2003. *Just sustainabilities: development in an unequal world*. London: Earthscan.
- Bernard, E.H., 2005. *Developing Tsunami resilient communities*. Dordrecht: The Netherlands.
- Cabinet Office, 2010. *Building the big society*. Cabinet Office Press Release [Online], Cabinet Office, London. Available from: <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/407789/building-big-society.pdf> [Accessed 29 July 2010].
- Callaghan, G. and Colton, J., 2008. Building sustainable & resilient communities: a balancing of community capital. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, 10 (6), 931–942.
- Cohen, L., Chavez, V. and Chehimi, S., eds., 2010. *Prevention in primary: strategies for community wellbeing*. 2nd ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Boss.
- Collins, A.J., 2004. Can we learn to live differently? Lessons from going for green: a case study of Merthyr Tydfil (South Wales). *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 28 (2), 202–211.
- Dale, A. and Newman, L., 2006. Sustainable community development, networks and resilience. *Environments Journal*, 34 (2), 17–27.
- Deffeyes, K.S., 2001. *Hubbert's peak: the impending world oil shortage*. New Jersey: Princeton University press.
- Dennis, K. and Urry, J., 2009. *After the car*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Graefe, L., 2009. The peak oil debate. *Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta Economic Review*, 94 (2), 1–14.
- Hinchliffe, S., 1996. Helping the earth begins at home: social constructions of socio-environmental responsibility. *Global Environmental Change: Human and Policy Dimensions*, 6 (1), 53–62.
- Hopkins, R., 2008. *The transition handbook*. Totnes: Green Books.
- Jackson, T., 2009. *Prosperity without growth: economics for a finite planet*. London: Earthscan.
- Johnstone, C., 2006. *Find your power*. London: Nicholas Brealy Publishers.

- Macy, J. and Brown, M.Y., 1998. *Coming back to life: practices to reconnect our lives, our world*. Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers.
- Meacher, M., 2002. Putting theory into practice: towards action at the local and community level. *Eg Magazine*, 8, pp. 4–5.
- Morris, J., 1999. Chasing the millennium deadline: is Local Agenda 21 on target? *Eg Magazine*, 5, pp. 2–5.
- National Statistics, 2011. *Measuring national well-being: measuring what matters*. London: TSO.
- New Economics Foundation, 2008. *Five ways to well-being: the evidence*. London: NEF.
- Reich, J., Zautra, A.J. and Hall, J.S., eds., 2010. *Handbook of adult resilience*. New York: Guildford Press.
- Selman, P. and Parker, J., 1997. Citizenship, civicness and social capital in Local Agenda 21. *Local Environment*, 2 (2), 171–184.
- Selman, P. and Parker, J., 1999. Tales of local sustainability. *Local Environment*, 4 (1), 47–60.
- Shove, E., 2010. Beyond the ABC: climate change policy and theories of social change. *Environment and planning A*, 42 (6), 1273–1285.
- Transition Network, 2011. *Transition network newsletter November 2011* [Online], Transition Network, Totnes. Available from: <http://www.transitionnetwork.org/news/2011-11-03/november-2011-transition-network-newsletter> [Accessed 11 November 2011].
- Tuxworth, B., 1996. From environment to sustainability: surveys and analysis of Local Agenda 21 process development in UK local authorities. *Local Environment*, 1 (3), 277–297.
- Village Vancouver, 2011. *Village Vancouver Internet Site*, Village Vancouver, Vancouver. Available from: URL: <http://www.villagevancouver.ca> [Accessed 14 October 2011].