

Chapter 18 Transforming Cultures Case – Transition Towns Canberra

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What are Transition Towns

Transition Towns (TT) are members of a worldwide Transition Network (www.transitionnetwork.org). The Transition Network aims to move human society to *a low-carbon, socially-just, healthier and happier future, which is more enriching and more gentle on the earth than the way most of us live today.*

In our vision of the future, people work together to find ways to live with a lot less reliance on fossil fuels and on over-exploitation of other planetary resources, much reduced carbon emissions, improved wellbeing for all and stronger local economies.

The Transition movement is an ongoing social experiment, in which communities learn from each other and are part of a global and historic push towards a better future for ourselves, for future generations and for the planet.

The Transition movement two main programs are Energy Descent Plans and Economic Resilience Plans. These are developed through grassroots democratic processes and taken by the community up to governments at all levels for adoption and implementation. These plans use a cycle of learning process to draw neighbourhoods into participations. A neighbourhood can scale from streets, suburbs, work places to towns. The program model divides conversation and planning into five sectors to provide structure to the conversations: Energy, Water, Food, Transport and Waste. This also permits individuals to work on areas that interest them most.

In Canberra the TT seeks to provide a headline banner around action for ecological and social sustainability for the ACT within which members groups can collaborate. It provides a unifying focus for what otherwise maybe just be isolated local activities. The Canberra TT intends to strengthen rather than replace existing activities in the ACT, create opportunities for collaborations and the efficient use of resources, and minimise the duplication or creation of new work.

The aim was to avoid setting up another organisation but instead to:

- *Provide support for the transition of life.*
- *Raise awareness and challenge the ACT community.*
- *Encourage and support each other.*
- *Pool resources, share skills and knowledge, and other assets.*
- *Acknowledge the groundwork that is already being done in the ACT.*

That is, to coordinate, share and strengthen.

Operationally the group is a collaboration between organisations; it has collaborators rather than members. Terms of Reference establish the aims and intent of the organisation, defines access to the website, and the clear process rules to permit a useful loose working relationships between

collaborators. There is no formal governance structure as such; all collaborators may attend the bi-annual events and join in discussions occur. There are no decisions on policy and alignment and organising of projects and events beyond the two held each year. It embodies ‘organisation lite’; perhaps a loose-structure organisation.

A Secretariat, drawn from three of the collaborating organisations and auspiced by one, undertakes the three operational responsibilities:

- Coordinate arrangement of two TT gatherings per year; this includes sharing and reflecting on each event, facilitating conversations in organisations and developing and maintaining a ‘running sheet’ for the following event.
- Maintain a website (bit.ly/CanberraTransitionTown) that has summary information and holds the links to each of the collaborators own webpages where more detailed information about activities and projects is held.
- Maintain a register of people and groups interested in being associated with the Transition Town Canberra.

Activity occurs by collaborators forming their own issue or event focused collaboration and working together on this. Thus subgroups can form using the links on the website to find groups/people with a common interest. Urgent matters are handled similarly: collaborators contact each other. This loose framework allows self-direction around issues, interests and passions at all degrees of urgency. Or as Jodie put it: “allows the magic of self-nominated activity and non-coerced commitment.”

The one activity being undertaken at a whole organisation level is to map out the groups in Canberra that are active in the broad transition space. That map is on the website and input is desired.

Transition Towns Transforming Cultures

The Transition Network explicitly aims to change how communities and hence general society operates. It fits then the definition of a transformative movement. Lots of resources detailing the process exist on Transition Network websites.

Specifically they use a Trans-theoretical Change Model, based in DiClemente’s Stages of Change work that recognises change occurs in stages, and that the process of changing needs to begin at the stage that a person is at, and begin with the issue that a person is interested in / excited about. Therefore there needs to be leadership, implying leaders, to push progress / draw people along.

TTs use the FRAMES model of change.

Stage	Explanation	Comment
F Feedback	Perceive an issue	Have a reason to consider change = raise concern
R Responsibility	Realise I can do something	Offer hope
A Advise	Show what can be done.	Offer solution
M Menu of options	What can I do	Personalise solution(s)
E Empathy	Provide support	Support action
S Self-efficacy	Reinforce optimism	Or reinforce hope; capacity + hope = action

Discussion

Bottom up vs Top Down: to achieve change success at the grassroots will need to engage the top echelons of the system to change.

The nature of systems is that they will adjust. If enough energy / force comes from the community then the top will react. There will be bureaucratic or regulatory change. Space needs to be allowed for the system to evolve on an as-needs basis. If the bottom-up provides a clear action for government, then regulatory change can occur.

What if the top echelon reaction to change (system resilience) is resistance or suppression?

Don't anticipate resistance until it emerges. The system dynamics may not produce it. So don't over plan. If resistance emerges then work with it or work around it.

Clear by provoking discussion about how the world, that is human society can be better (in terms of the TT aims), the transition Towns Movement is fundamentally about changing cultures.