

Imagining the Transition from the Grass Roots

An interview with Rob Hopkins

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Positive environmental transitions are not impossible, but they require imagination and a compelling narrative. Although some of the world's most powerful politicians and policymakers continue to drive a destructive, macho politics, developments on the local level are sowing the seeds of change. We spoke to Rob Hopkins, environmentalist and co-founder of the Transition Network, about how citizens can work together to address the challenges they face and lay the foundations of a better future for all.

Green European Journal: What do you see as the most powerful levers of change for local communities?

Rob Hopkins: There are three main levers of change: effectiveness, initiative, and the power of story. Effectiveness means communities realising that they don't need to wait for permission from above in order to effect change. At the [Transition Network](#) we have run projects in 50 countries around the world, and we've witnessed how a group of people with a shared goal create the kind of momentum that money can't buy. The stage where more support and input is needed to move forward comes later.

Initiative, the second lever, has been used most powerfully in cities like [Preston](#) in the north west of England. The city was hit hard by austerity in the years after the 2008 financial crisis. With the economic situation only getting worse, Preston City Council, with the help of the Centre for Local Economic Strategies, decided to take a different approach to spending. The Council brought together the organisations that spend most public money – the hospital, the university, the schools, and the municipality – and started looking at where all this money was going. It turned out that only 4 per cent of 750 million pounds' worth of public money actually went to local actors, despite the moral responsibility public institutions have to the people of Preston. This prompted a complete rethink of how to run local government services, and they completely changed their practices of procurement, pension scheme management, and investment. They began to break up big development projects so local companies could qualify, not just the big conglomerates.

The new approach created 12 000 new jobs and the Preston model is now an example discussed all over the UK. The Preston model is the Transition approach on a big scale, making sure that money circulates as many times as possible locally before it leaves.

The third lever of change is the power of the story. The difference that a real story can make can be seen in the success of one Transition group in the Belgian city of Liège. Born out of a simple idea, the [Ceinture Aliment-Terre project](#) now allows the city to acquire most its fruit from nearby land. Today the project has 21 cooperatives and has raised five million euros from local people and the municipality.

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This whole project started with a really good ‘what if’ question and a narrative to go with it. It simply asked whether local land could supply our fruit and set out to prove that it could. The municipality was a bit suspicious, but after two or three years it recognised that it is not just an amazing story, but also a feasible project. The mayor now considers the project “the story of the city.”

How do you come up with a good story?

It is a skill that activists have to acquire. We need storytellers to counter the narratives of politicians who try to divert attention from the gravity of climate change by questioning whether there really is anything to worry about if the planet gets 3 or 4 degrees warmer. 2 or even 1.5 degrees would already be catastrophic. Staying below that – and I think it is still possible – will depend on society being able to change the way it thinks.

Effective stories can help bring about the revolution of the imagination that is needed to make rapid and far-reaching changes to all aspects of society. A new economy, a new society, a whole number of paradigms – these will all need people who can stand up against the current model and articulate that it is not acceptable and must change.

What do you mean by a revolution of the imagination?

My new book, *From What is to What If*, explores how to rekindle a collective imagination. It was inspired by the observations of thinkers such as Bill McKibben and Naomi Klein who kept saying that climate change is a failure of the imagination. Reading their works, I identified four possible conditions that we can create to overcome this: space, places, practices, and pacts.

First of all, space. Our best ideas usually come when we are on holiday, when we soak in the bath, when we are out walking without our smartphones, when we’re cycling or when we’re knitting. It’s at times like these that our brains can start to be imaginative. When work deadlines are coming up or there are 400 Facebook notifications to check, there is no space left for the imagination. People work harder and are increasingly exhausted. Proposals like universal basic income and three or four-day working weeks are important for people to regain their space.

Secondly, to foster the imaginative process, people need places where they can reflect on how the world can be different. That is generally not the workplace, and neither is it schools. The current design of the education system is about passing tests, not giving children space for daydreaming.

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Thirdly, new practices can encourage people to ask what if, as can movements such as Transition. In Tooting, a district of London, a [Transition group](#) transformed a bus turnaround into a green space, laying grass, playing music, and getting the whole community involved. In Bologna, the municipality has created a [civic imagination office](#) that acts like a Transition group. It runs an open space and hosts big ‘what if’ events where people can envision and dream.

Fourth and finally, pacts with municipalities can help people secure their good ideas with money, human resources, and other support. In the last five years, Bologna municipality created nearly 500 pacts that range from painting a new bench and planting some flowers to turning an empty building into a school for classical music.

How can schools help the imagination?

The chapter of my book on education was heartbreaking to research. So much of education systems works against children's imaginations. In the United Kingdom, schools are obsessed with testing children from the age of 4. I have heard of 4-year-old children who were taken off school because of anxiety. In Finland schools don't even start to teach children anything until the age of 7 – they let them play until then.

Tools that can drive imagination in childhood are increasingly a function of privilege. The children of wealthy families that can afford private schools will have access to amazing arts resources, drama classes, theatre performances, and musical education. On the other hand, people affected by government austerity, who have to choose between feeding their children or heating their homes, will not have the resources to improve their children's imaginations.

Moving on from imagination, how can we convince people to change comfortable but environmentally harmful ways of life?

Overloading people with terrifying information and expecting that they will change won't work – clearly not with most people. The Transition Movement has developed a tool called Transition Streets. People get together with six to ten of their neighbours and agree to meet seven times in the next seven weeks in each other's houses. In the first week they talk about energy, then water, then food, and so on. We have developed a workbook that they go over together before starting to make changes as a group.

Individual decisions about consumption and behaviour can bring positive change too. This approach is not about doing this on our own, but acting together with the people around us.

And this really gets them to change their daily life?

Plenty of proposals are met with scepticism but work nevertheless. Banning plastic bags in supermarkets has been successful in Ireland, later in England, and in many other countries. Policy tweaks can change people's idea of normality.

Individual decisions about consumption and behaviour can bring positive change too. This approach is not about doing this on our own, but acting together with the people around us. In one of our projects, households who participated in our Transition Streets programme cut their carbon emissions by about 1.3 tonnes per household and saved roughly 700 euros a year in bills. Asked afterwards, they didn't mention energy or money as the most important part of the programme, but feeling more involved in their community and getting to know their neighbours. Many of the groups carried on meeting for years and started other projects, because they realised they actually quite liked each other and enjoyed working together.

How has the Transition Movement fared in the last years?

The Transition movement has been active for 13 years and has achieved some incredible things – but not enough. We would achieve much more if we had the necessary support from local and national governments. Fortunately, some governments now provide exactly the kind of help that is needed. The mayor of Liège, for example, believes that the main role of the municipality in supporting the Ceinture Aliment-Terre project is just getting out of its way

so that it can continue with the good work. The municipality only acts when members of the project ask for help, removing blockages, making land available, and switching school canteens to local food bought through Ceinture Aliment-Terre.

Are Transition projects accessible and beneficial to all?

Absolutely. In Liège, Ceinture Aliment-Terre shops are full of people from all backgrounds. Everyone appreciates good quality, affordable food. The social component is always important in environmental projects. Social, educational or mental health crises do not exist independently from the climate crisis. If we can tackle the problems in a way that understands these issues as connected, then the solutions can be just fantastic. In London, there is a project in which people with mental health issues learn to bake their own bread – their slogan is “baking is the new Prozac”. Urban agriculture also has many mental health benefits. Seeing food growing when you look out the window, not to mention getting outside and using your hands, can be a magical feeling.

Why do you think that fear and greed dominate over magic and imagination?

Oil companies and leaders like Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Donald Trump in the US lack imagination. They are part of this toxic, very masculine mindset that needs to be the biggest and the strongest, a mindset that fuels economic growth. It is this kind of thinking that we must get away from.

Fortunately, at the local level ordinary people are doing incredible things, and not just within the Transition movement. School strikes are taking place all over the world, often led by extraordinary young women who are brave enough to say that they do not need congratulating or patronising; they need our support. They want us to join them on strike and at their protests, and this is really hopeful.



Rob Hopkins is the co-founder of the Transition movement and author of several books including *The Transition Handbook*, *The Power of Just Doing Stuff* and, most recently, *From What Is to What If*. He lectures widely on Transition, tweets at @robintransition and blogs at robhopkins.net.

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