

A NEW ENERGY BALANCE:

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE FOUNDER OF THE TRANSITION MOVEMENT

PEAK OIL, CLIMATE CHANGE, A SCARY FUTURE. ROB HOPKINS SAYS THE ANSWERS TO THESE PROBLEMS LIE NOT WITH GOVERNMENTS, BUT IN OUR OWN COMMUNITIES.

Words by Orlando Hughes. Photography by Joseph Zakarian.

WE ARE LIVING BEYOND our means. It is a matter of fact that humans, particularly in the 'Western' countries, are consuming the world's resources faster than the planet can replenish them. In the case of ancient deposits of oil and ore, this is self-evident. But we are also highly inefficient in terms of feeding ourselves, managing water, transporting goods around the planet and acting as stewards of our environment.

On the one hand, it is certain we will run out of oil sometime in our future, since it is a finite resource. Many commentators would say that we are already on the downward slope, and that the point of significant oil depletion will be soon. This is known as the concept of peak oil. On the other hand the climate is changing, leading to a vast range of predictable and unpredictable changes, few of them painless. Like it or not, our lifestyles will have to change—or calamity will change them for us.

A number of thinkers have been taking a positive view of this situation, and wondering how a transition to a sustainable way of living can be orchestrated. The key to this process is to inspire enthusiasm, creativity and positive visions for a better future.

Rob Hopkins, a founding and leading member of the Transition movement, and author of its first guide, *The Transition Handbook*, takes just this approach. What the *Handbook* engagingly explains is that while peak oil requires one set of responses and climate change requires another, the combina-



START A GARDEN: MAKING LOCAL LAND AND COMMUNITIES PRODUCTIVE IS ONE OF THE KEYS TO TRANSITION.

tion requires an altogether different set.

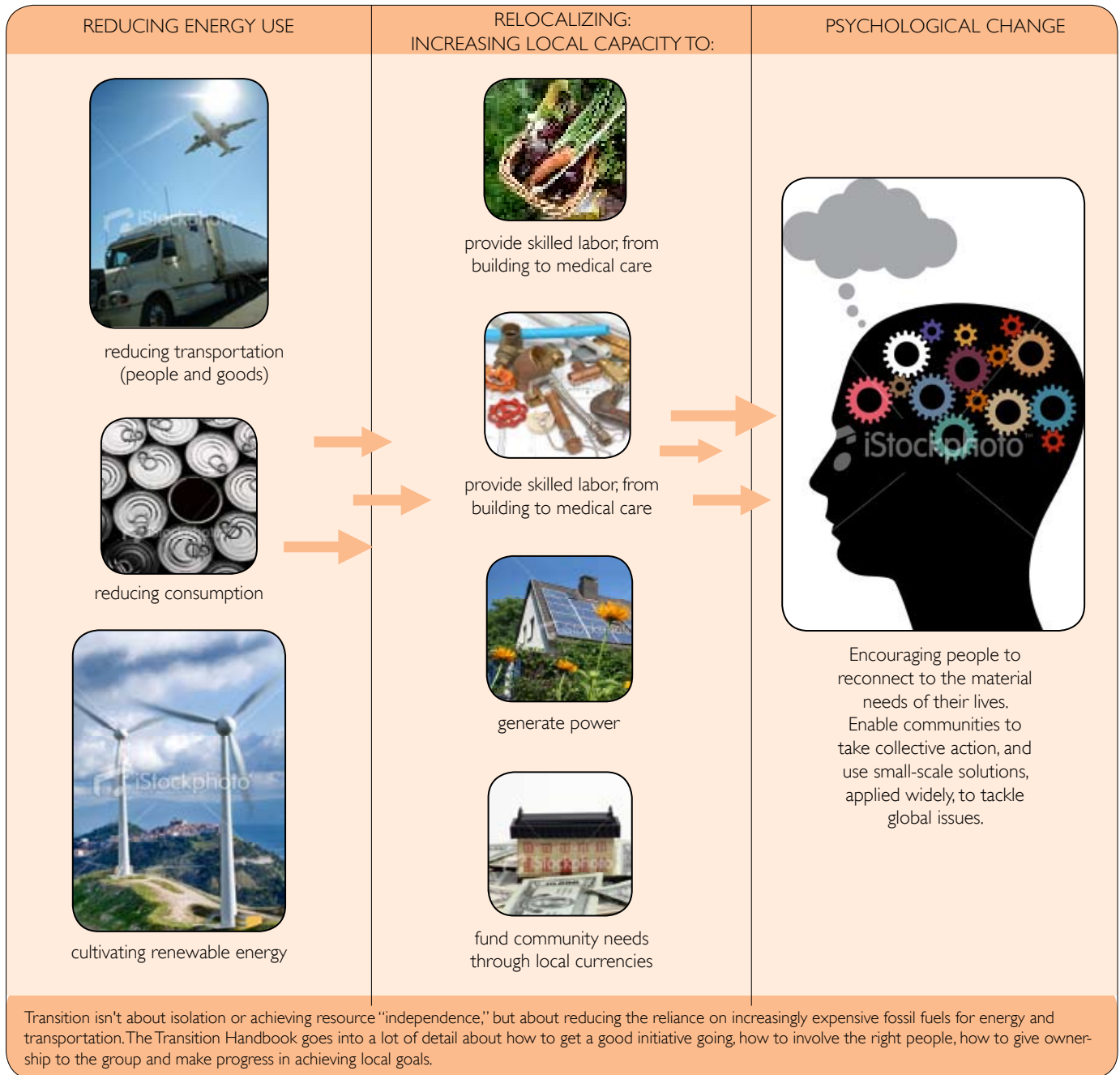
The Transition movement describes how we can bring about a future that not only addresses these far-reaching and necessary changes, but which is also a better way of living. This means using and wasting less resources, including energy. It means reinforcing and recreating healthy communities, living more locally and being more locally resilient in terms of food and skills. Finally it means reconnecting ourselves to nature and to the material conditions of our lives. So

not just more sustainable lives, but happier, healthier ones.

In the *Handbook* we are encouraged to see a bold and beautiful vision for our future. And we are all welcome to join in it—more than that, we are all needed.

To date, around 100 "transition towns" (and cities, and districts) have been officially established, and more than 600 that are considering it, or are in the early stages. The existing transition towns are moving in the direction of more locally produced and

TRANSITION IS:



organic food (no chemicals, and healthier for the soil and the consumers). They are restoring basic practical skills in their communities, and launching local currencies to enable a community to retain, reinvest and control its own wealth. They are working to reclaim public land, particularly in urban areas, for productive purposes, for example for market gardens.

There has seldom been such a need, nor opportunity to change the world around us and to be part of an astonishingly far-reaching reconfiguration of the world. As the guardians of our world we have a responsibility to listen to the warnings and to act. No-one says it

will be easy, but with the Transition model there is a convincing and inspiring approach to the necessary changes. The transition model has its roots in the small towns of the United Kingdom, so JO sat down with Rob Hopkins to find out about the applicability of the model to Jordan and the rest of the world.

Are the models and ways of thinking about change in the transition handbook as relevant to other countries, for example in the middle east, as to the uk? What issues might transition in developing countries bring up? For example, Jordan faces



RE-USE AND REDUCE CONSUMPTION: IN A COUNTRY LIKE JORDAN, CAREFUL FARMING AND RECYCLING OF WATER AND ORGANIC WASTE CAN MAKE LAND MORE PRODUCTIVE.

serious issues in terms of finding new sources of energy for the coming years, and balancing an industrial scaling-up with the severe water shortages already experienced by farmers and rural populations.

I think that the twin drivers of the Transition idea, the need to cut carbon emissions with unprecedented urgency and the need to rebuild resilience, are universal, as applicable to Jordan as to anywhere else. We are moving from a time in history when one's economic success, sense of well-being and personal prowess have been directly linked to the degree of one's oil consumption, to one where one's oil dependency equates to one's degree of vulnerability. The core challenge that faces us all is the need to find creative and imaginative ways to break our oil addiction.

Transition will look quite different in Jordan to how it will look in the UK, but in both cases it will be about being honest about the end of the age of cheap energy, the need to radically reduce energy dependency, and some creative thinking about how all of this actually offers the possibility for some creative and fresh thinking.

In Jordan, the general level of understanding of the environment, peak oil and climate change may well be lower, or at least very different, than in developed European countries. Do you imagine that this would pose a problem for the Handbook?

The first stage of Transition work is always awareness raising. Where

ever one is working, one can never assume that people are familiar with these issues. What is vital is to find imaginative ways of communicating these issues.

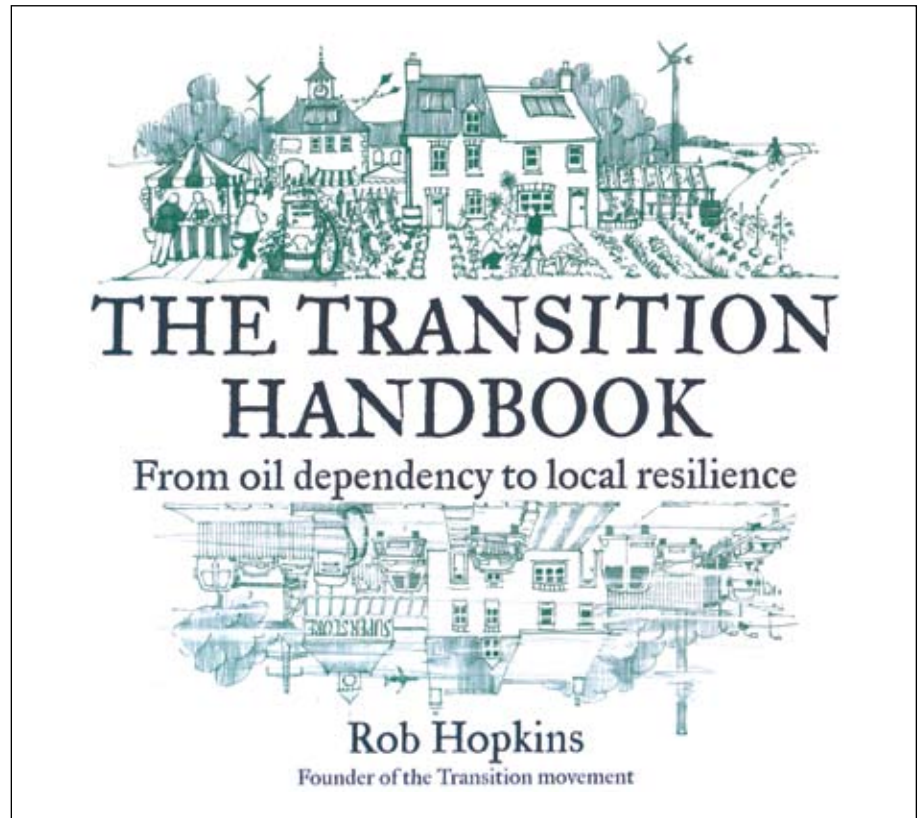
It is not enough to just show people a depressing film and expect them to spring into action. It is also vital, as the book outlines, to be mindful of the fact that telling people about these issues can be shocking and distressing, and so it is important to design into the awareness raising the possibility for people to talk to each other and feel supported.

The basic principles are to find ways of raising awareness which are creative, which interest and are relevant to a wide range of people, and which enable people to feel part of a historic process. Those of you in Jordan will have a clearer idea than me about how this might look in that cultural context.

Various Middle Eastern countries have of course developed their own systems for community participation over the years. Do you think that there might be systems there, such as farmers' collectives for the monitoring of water networks and leaks, that could give them an advantage? Would you envisage a flow of information in both directions as to what methods work well?

For thousands of years, human communities have worked out ingenious and sustainable ways of doing things. There are many models, such as those you mentioned above, which are powered by human

DOES THE BAWAB
HARBOR HIDDEN
DOES THE BAWAB
RESENTMENT?



communication and mutual support rather than by liberal lashings of fossil fuels. Rather than continuing to jettison many of these due to their being "old fashioned," we need to understand them and hold on to them, as they are vital to our ongoing resilience. Indeed, as we enter the post-peak world, the amount of such resilient infrastructure we have will relate directly to our ability to weather the storm. Transition is not a top-down approach that arrives somewhere with all the answers worked out. It is a catalyst. As such, it is designed in such a way as to ensure exchange of information in all directions.

Reading the Handbook sometimes gives the impression that there could be a reversion to the local communities of 50 or 100 years ago, albeit in an un-isolated way and with the benefit of some modern technology. Villages in Jordan are rapidly being abandoned as younger people head to the cities, and urban centres account for the vast majority of the national population, a trend common throughout the developing world. Migrant labour is now common on farms owned by big landowners. Can you comment on the impact of such urbanisation on the landscape, and how do you envisage the Transition model's application to major urban centres around the world?

Cheap oil has allowed us to devalue agriculture, to see it as menial and demeaning, rather than as one of the noblest of professions. This has been a global pattern, and it has led to the erosion of food

security, to the urbanisation you mention in your question, and, most alarmingly, to the sharp rises in the numbers of farmers committing suicide.

Richard Heinberg has noted that the UK at present has about 500,000 farmers, but if you take Cuba as an example, which, when its oil supplies vanished, moved from needing 1 percent of the population working in agriculture to needing 20 percent, then the UK will need 8 million farmers. Who are they? Where will they live? Where will they train? My sense is that we will see a de-urbanisation process, as national food security becomes more of an issue.

The big question, for me, is when we start to train an entire generation who have been taught to program computers and work in call centers, but has lost most of the basic skills food production requires. In terms of the cities, I think they will move towards becoming as productive in terms of food as possible, but there will still be a reduction in urban populations as people move back to re-engage with sustainable food production.

Are there any plans to "open source" The Transition Handbook, i.e. publish it under an open license that would allow people to freely share, modify and re-distribute the content? It could then be posted on, for example, a wiki website, greatly encouraging and enabling the wider Transition community to translate and modify it to better suit their own local needs—E.g., into Arabic in



REAP THE BENEFITS: THE REWARDS FOR TRANSITION ARE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC: MORE INDEPENDENCE AND LESS RELIANCE ON PETROLEUM PRODUCTS WITH VOLATILE PRICES.

the case of Jordan? Can you point readers to any existing online resources?

The second edition of *The Transition Handbook* will be produced via a collaborative rewriting. The book is being turned into a wiki format, and the thousands of people across the Transition network are being invited to update it with their experience and their stories of trying the model out, what works and what doesn't work. It is being posted on www.apropedia.org. We think it is a very exciting venture, inspired by Charles Leadbeater's book *We-Think – The Power of Mass Creativity*.

Of course at the moment, most of the work about Transition is in English and is emerging from the UK, although that is changing fast. We are seeing German, Italian and Spanish translations of the Handbook, and the Transition Primer being translated into a wider range of languages, including Japanese and Hungarian. For Jordan, the need is to translate the materials, both in terms of language, but also in terms of cultural context.

An extremely interesting part of the Handbook is the section on the psychology of change, which talked about using insights from addiction theory to inform the process of helping people to an understanding of the way ahead. What are your feelings on the applicability of this to other cultures?

I'm not the best person to answer that, as I am not a psychologist myself; that chapter was based on discussions with a number of people from that discipline. I don't know about applying it to other cultures, but my sense is that the observation that people change not all at once but in stages, and that what motivates them at each stage is different, is probably pretty universal.

The insight for me was that as environmentalists, for years we have thought that the way to initiate change is to give people lots of bad news and they will change. "Stages of Change" points out that this only affects those who had decided on some level that they were going to change anyway. The key to our success will be finding creative ways to reach those at different stages, and this will be culturally specific. My sense is that the concept is very powerful and is universal, and that its application will be culturally specific to the place. ■

More about the Transition Towns initiative:

www.transitiontowns.org

www.richardheinberg.com

www.energybulletin.net (including a peak oil primer)

www.greenworldtrust.org.uk/transtowns/ttportal.htm

www.apropedia.org