



Green communities: making sustainability work in the big city

Championing local communities and local people may be one way to make communities more self-reliant and more sustainable, but what about the big cities? A recently published article argues that the economics of cities – which will soon be home to most of the world's population – are crucial to sustainability goals and that cooperation in green city networks could reduce their collective impact on the environment.

The Transition Initiative is a movement that supports and trains communities – currently in 31 countries – to help them become more sustainable and more resilient to climate change. In Europe, Transition Networks have sprung up in Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the UK.¹ However, while the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) predicts that 80 per cent of people will live in cities by 2050², the Transition Initiative focuses on driving the transition in small towns through the efforts of local people.

The author argues that by neglecting cities, the Transition Initiative ignores more than half of humanity, as well as the larger, city-scale frameworks, economies, job markets and more diverse, creative communities that he believes will be needed to successfully implement its approach. The research builds upon a dual-scale 'local' approach, where 'local' can refer to either a smaller community scale or a larger city scale – the smaller scale is needed for mobilisation, the larger for economics.

The key to change, and in particular to cities becoming more self-reliant and therefore resource efficient the article argues, is 'import replacement' and 'diffusion of innovation' – the process by which local entrepreneurs imitate and creatively customise the manufacture of imported products to suit local conditions. But becoming more self-reliant does not mean a city can or should cut itself off from the outside world. The article imagines a world containing networks of green cities where non-local trade means trading with those cities closest to home in order to reduce ecological footprints, or 'netprints' when thinking in terms of the wider network.

According to the article, government-sponsored eco-towns are not enough and a new research agenda is needed that must explore "how a green network of cities might function and how we can make them come to pass". In June 2012, at the Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development, UNEP and Brazilian partners announced the launch of the Global Initiative for Resource Efficient Cities (GI-REC), inviting cities with populations over 500,000 to become partners.³ As well as setting up the network and developing a research agenda, the GI-REC roadmap to 2015 includes the establishment of criteria and targets for more sustainable cities.

1. See: Transition Network. (2012). About Transition Network. TransitionNetwork.org. Available: <http://www.transitionnetwork.org/about>
2. See: UNEP Division of Technology. (2012). Global Initiative for Resource Efficient Cities. UNEP. Available: http://www.unep.org/pdf/GI-REC_4pager.pdf
3. See: United Nations. (2012). UN and partners unveil new initiative to achieve sustainable cities. UN News Centre. <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=42264&Cr=sustainable+development&Cr1=&Kw1=population&Kw2=cities&Kw3>

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