

## **New environmentalism and Transition Pittsburgh**

Suzanne Staggenborg\* and Corinne Ogradnik

*Department of Sociology, University of Pittsburgh, USA*

‘New environmentalism’ refers to efforts to create social and economic sustainability in local communities, emphasizing ‘Green entrepreneurship’ as a means of achieving its goals. New environmentalism is the type of diffuse, fluid movement not typically studied by social movement researchers. As a worldwide network of groups aiming to create sustainable communities, Transition exemplifies new environmentalism. This study examines the local Transition initiative in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, using participant observation and in-depth interviews. We argue that the group’s fluid structure attracts grass-roots members, but may ultimately undermine its efficacy in mobilizing a social movement to achieve collective goals. Transition Pittsburgh’s entrepreneurial orientation and commitment to the open space model of organizing support a fluid movement, but limit its capacity to devise strategies and grow as an organization.

**Keywords:** new environmentalism; Transition movement; entrepreneurship; grass-roots organizing

The contemporary environmental movement includes a range of activities and structures, from ‘Big Green’ organizations that lobby governments and international governing bodies to grass-roots groups that organize in local communities. More broadly, the movement encompasses individual behaviors and preferences such as recycling, energy conservation, organic foods, and other efforts to create sustainable practices. One of the fastest-growing segments of this movement consists of grass-roots efforts to create local models of sustainable development. Labeled ‘new environmentalism,’ such efforts include community-based sustainability projects and a network of Green entrepreneurs (Hershkowitz 2002, Speth 2008, Connors and McDonald 2011). Frustrated by the ineffectiveness of conventional environmental organizations pushing for change via government actions, new environmentalists and other advocates of ‘localism’ or ‘localization’ have turned to community-based projects and entrepreneurial processes (Stevenson 2011, Felicetti 2013).

The Transition movement, which originated in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2005, is a good example of the new environmentalist approach. The movement

---

\*Corresponding author. Email: [suzstagg@pitt.edu](mailto:suzstagg@pitt.edu)

began as a reaction to climate change and ‘peak oil’ with the premise that societies will have to learn to live with less energy consumption and that this type of change in lifestyle can be a positive development if local communities create new, resilient cultures and structures (Hopkins 2008, 2011). The Transition framework focuses on grass-roots action that empowers individuals to initiate community-level support for sustainable projects and businesses. The movement has demonstrated strong appeal, spreading to many countries, including some developing nations. Despite its attractions, however, Transition has been criticized for a perceived rigidity of the original model, its apolitical nature, limitations of its narrative about climate change and peak oil, lack of sufficient local action, lack of attention to class and power dynamics, lack of diversity, and difficulties in connecting local efforts to global concerns (TRAPESE Collective 2008, Connors and Peter 2011, North 2011, Smith 2011, Stevenson 2011, Felicetti 2013).

Here, we examine new environmentalism by analyzing a local initiative of the Transition movement. We begin with a discussion of perspectives on social movements relevant to new environmentalism and a brief overview of the Transition model before turning to our case study. In analyzing Transition Pittsburgh’s experience, we examine both the attractions of the model and the problems involved in implementing it in an urban setting. We do not claim that the Pittsburgh case can be generalized to other Transition initiatives, but attempt to provide some theoretical understanding of problems with new environmentalism that might illuminate other cases as well.

### **Social movements and new environmentalism**

Social movements, as well as theoretical perspectives on movements, vary in their ‘linearity’ or ‘fluidity’ (Gusfield 1981, 1994). In relatively linear movements, social movement organizations (SMOs) typically mobilize participants, frame issues, and devise strategies aimed at achieving specific outcomes (Snow *et al.* 1986, Zald and McCarthy 1987, Gamson 1990). Studies focusing on linear aspects of movements help us to understand how goal-oriented challenges to authorities influence policy, but tend to neglect the broader cultural aspects of social movements. A more fluid approach emphasizes new meanings and values that ‘occur outside or in addition to organized and directed action’ (Gusfield 1994, p. 64). In contrast to the public nature of linear movements, fluid movements are embedded in everyday life, making them more difficult to study. Nevertheless, social movement researchers from various traditions have recognized the importance of understanding the fluid and cultural as well as the linear and political aspects of social movements; while movements may be more or less linear or fluid, few are tidy phenomena.

Collective behavior theorist Herbert Blumer (1939) saw ‘general’ social movements, consisting of changes in values and largely uncoordinated behaviors, giving rise to more organized ‘specific’ movements. **Ralph Turner’s (1964, Turner and**

Killian 1987) 'emergent norm' approach emphasized the role of movements in creating new values and a new vision of the world. Although their resource mobilization approach is often associated with goal-oriented movement activity, Zald and McCarthy (1987, p. 20) viewed social movements broadly as 'preference structures' or sets of opinions and beliefs directed toward social change that may be taken up by SMOs but are 'never fully mobilized.' They also focused on the role of 'movement entrepreneurs' as leaders who manipulate images, organize groups, and attract supporters (1987, p. 374). Zald (2000) later attempted to broaden the scope of movement research by using the concept of 'ideologically structured action' (ISA) introduced by Dalton (1994) to refer to actions in different arenas that are motivated by ideological concerns. This approach aimed to expand the study of movements beyond political movement organizations to a wide range of cultural, political, and institutional arenas, such as schools, families, and political parties, where movements might spread and survive.

Perspectives on the fluidity of social movements and ISA focus on the new meanings, values, and ideologies associated with movements and the diverse forms that movements take in a variety of venues. Transformations of values and meanings in the larger culture are part of a general movement that supports specific organized efforts, which in turn help to expand the larger cultural movement. Fluid movements do not fit neatly in the bounds of SMOs, but include individuals, activities, and events loosely connected by a shared ideology or collective identity. One of the challenges for researchers is to show how such movements organize and what problems are associated with efforts to create change through diffuse structures and activities. In a study of the 'straight edge movement' as a diffuse cultural movement, for example, Haenfler (2004) finds that participants are tied together in a 'community of meaning' by a shared collective identity that leads them to put their values into action as they pursue an alternative lifestyle.

Discussions of new environmentalism suggest that it is a fluid movement with decentralized organizational structures, entrepreneurial leaders, and innovative tactics. Dalton (1994) analyzed the 'New Environmental Movement' (NEM) as a 'new social movement' that engages in ISA. In contrast to older conservation groups that worked to preserve wilderness areas and species through traditional interest group lobbying, ecology groups in the NEM call for new cultural values, advocating 'a new societal model' in line with the 'postmaterial' values of other new social movements (Dalton 1994, p. 47). While focusing on these fluid aspects of the NEM, Dalton combines his analysis of ideology and culture with a more linear resource mobilization approach. Thus, he looks at NEM organizations, showing that ideology leads new environmentalists to favor less conventional organizational structures and tactics, influencing resource mobilization and responses to political opportunities.

More recent analyses of new environmentalism also focus on widespread cultural change and the diffusion of new values through various sectors of society (Wapner 2008). Some focus on radical ideologies, such as deep ecology,

that underlie new environmentalism and its 'broader-based view of nature-society relations' (Cutter 1994, p. 225). Many emphasize technological innovations, Green business models, and entrepreneurial activities in local communities (Hershkowitz 2002, Speth 2008, Murray 2012). Seyfang and Smith (2007) point to grass-roots innovations and the 'innovative niches' that community actors contribute to sustainable development in comparison to market-based innovations. These niches allow entrepreneurs to implement new ideas such as demonstration projects and community currencies 'within the social economy of community activities and social enterprise' rather than relying on the market economy (Seyfang and Smith 2007, p. 591). Additionally, North (2011) describes a 'wide ranging and diffuse' climate activism, which takes place in a diverse range of spaces, and includes local initiatives such as Transition that are less visible than contentious politics.

Several features of new environmentalism stand out in these accounts: First, in contrast to traditional environmental lobbying of national governments, new environmentalism attempts to create social and economic sustainability in local communities. Second, this approach emphasizes 'Green entrepreneurship' as a means of achieving its goals; individual and group entrepreneurs create projects aimed at changing the culture and economy from the bottom up. Finally, while 'business-as-usual is unsustainable,' new environmentalism is open to 'progressive and sustainable business models' (Murray 2012) and cooperative efforts among community, business, and government to create a sustainable society based on environmental values.

Despite the potential of grass-roots initiatives, analysts recognize that new environmentalism faces numerous challenges, many related to the fluidity of the movement. These include the need to bring together skills and resources, the difficulties that projects have in surviving, and the problems in 'scaling up' from the community level to reproduce initiatives on a larger scale (Seyfang and Smith 2007, pp. 595–597). However, empirical research is needed to reveal the implications of a fluid structure for movement activity. If new environmentalism consists of Green entrepreneurs, engaging in ideologically structured action in a variety of arenas, how does their work come together in a larger social movement? To what extent is new environmentalism connected to a type of organizational structure such as the 'open space' model, and how does it function?

In studying a Transition initiative, we examine some of the problems and promise associated with new environmentalism. Transition is arguably part of new environmentalism insofar as it attempts to synthesize individual efforts to create sustainable communities and new economic structures through local actions. In Transition, individuals share values and the desire to create a sustainable community. While clearly not a conventional movement organization, Transition is an identifiable model and organizational structure of sorts that is part of a diffuse movement. It offers an organizational model for facilitating hands-on community work and the creation of new cultural values, and it also attempts to harness existing projects that promote sustainable living.

## The Transition model

Transition emerged as ISA rather than the strategy of activists working in SMOs. The movement began when permaculture teacher Rob Hopkins and his students at an adult education college in Kinsale, Ireland, learned about 'peak oil' and decided to develop an 'Energy Descent Action Plan,' which eventually led to the idea of a 'Transition Network' (Hopkins 2011). Transition groups spread quickly across the UK and, eventually, around the world (though concentrated in Western countries). Diffusion of the model was aided by Internet communications, two-day Training for Transition (T4T) courses, workshops at annual conferences, a Transition 1.0 film (followed by Transition 2.0), and *The Transition Handbook* (Hopkins 2008), which served as a manual for activists organizing Transition initiatives in their communities (Hopkins 2011, pp. 20–23). Hopkins (2008, pp. 148–173) explains the dual challenges of peak oil and climate change, and how the combination of the two problems necessitates change. He also describes '12 steps' to guide the formation of new Transition initiatives, including creating a steering group that would 'design its own demise' after serving its purpose, a 'great unleashing' to kick off a Transition initiative, and an Energy Descent Action Plan.

Hopkins (2011) later noted that the economic crisis, rather than peak oil or climate change, was dominating public concern and linked economic growth to rising carbon emissions. Transition promoted the development of resilient local economies with projects that involve creativity and entrepreneurialism, ranging from community gardens to local energy companies to time and skill exchanges among community members. Transition projects aim to combat the powerlessness people often feel in the face of global economic crisis and climate change, inspiring action to create communities that can thrive despite the need to 'power down' (Hopkins 2011, pp. 36–37). This positive approach, and the focus on local hands-on projects to create community resilience, is one of Transition's greatest attractions.

Existing research on Transition notes both its strengths and weaknesses and the difficulties involved in building the movement. Connors and McDonald (2011) put the rise of the Transition movement in the context of new environmentalism and describe how its focus on local initiatives has generated much enthusiasm. They note, however, that Transition Town Totnes (TTT) experienced tension because 'there was a perception that TTT had effectively taken over or co-opted existing networks' (2011, p. 564). Transition's promotion of 'a structure established and mandated by a group emanating from Totnes' can also undercut efforts to build relationships with existing groups (2011, p. 570). Thus, the process of engaging the ISA of existing projects and institutions has been challenging for Transition. Moreover, Connors and McDonald argue that, despite the focus on 'localization,' efforts to become 'official' Transition initiatives suggest that participants want to be part of a global movement (2011, p. 568). Amanda Smith also points to a problem of scale; implementing Transition in an

urban setting is much different from doing so in a town such as Totnes, and ‘community is a slippery term at the best of times’ (2011, p. 103). While there is some debate as to how the Transition model fares in urban settings (Mason and Whitehead 2012, North and Longhurst 2013), a survey of Transition initiatives in 23 countries finds that initiatives in urban areas tend to be less successful than those in smaller towns (Feola and Nunes 2014). The same survey found that initiatives with more resources, including active volunteers, internal group management, and partnerships with other local groups, were most successful (2014, p. 237). In a study of Transition initiatives in the Northeastern United States (US), Hardt (2013) finds that affiliates face multiple challenges, including problems with race and class inclusivity and leadership difficulties, as they attempt to employ non-hierarchical structures and practical projects. Thus, the Transition network has shown potential but also confronts obstacles in trying to crystalize the general movement toward local sustainability in communities of varying size and composition.

### **Transition and new environmentalism**

Several features of the Transition movement situate it in the new environmentalist paradigm. First, Transition’s focus on creating sustainable communities resonates with new environmentalism’s stress on grass-roots activity that taps the creativity and ingenuity required for effective environmental solutions (Hershkowitz 2002, Seyfang and Smith 2007). Transition also promotes Green entrepreneurial activities, another central tenet of new environmentalism, encouraging the building of sustainable models to prepare communities for a future with limited fossil fuels. Moreover, parallel to new environmentalism’s focus on multi-sector collaboration and grass-roots participation, Transition holds that to develop resilient communities, all community members must be involved, regardless of political or ideological persuasion or economic status. Transition’s commitment to ‘open space’ organizing also reflects its inclusive approach to mobilization. In the open space model, meetings do not have a formal agenda, group decision-making processes are decentralized, and every member is given the opportunity to set a vision for future action. Although new environmentalism does not require an open space model, the style is compatible with its decentralized nature.

While new environmentalism and various manifestations of it, such as local food movements, both predate Transition and continue to develop along with it, Transition provides an empirical window into how new environmentalism plays out on the ground. While Transition Pittsburgh is not representative of either Transition or the NEM, our study offers needed data and theoretical ideas regarding their potential. After discussing our methods, we examine two key issues. First, what attracts individuals to Transition, and how is the group’s appeal related to the concerns of new environmentalism? Second, what are the

challenges in trying to organize a Transition initiative, and how are these related to the fluid nature of new environmentalism?

### **Data and methods**

Our study employs data collected over the course of several years. First, we observed a wide variety of Transition meetings and events. Beginning in 2010, the first author began attending Transition events in Pittsburgh, beginning with a showing of the first Transition film, 'In Transition 1.0,' in March 2010, and continuing with a 'Training for Transition' workshop in June 2010, and several Transition Tuesdays in the summer of 2010 at a coffeehouse, where informal discussions were held and ideas for activities generated. In 2011, she attended a potluck to which persons who had attended T4Ts were invited, meetings during the summer, and a gathering at a restaurant in the winter. In 2012, she attended a showing of the 'In Transition 2.0' film, potlucks held twice a month, a Transition 'gift circle,' and a meeting of the Urban Green Growth Collaborative at the Kingsley Association (an African American community center), with which Transition became involved. In July 2012, she attended a four-hour meeting intended to evaluate Transition Pittsburgh and its structure, and in the fall of 2012 several more Transition film nights. In 2013, we both attended a Transition talk, and the second author attended a showing of the Transition 2.0 film and discussion at the Kingsley Association.

In addition to extensive participant observation, we conducted 16 interviews with Transition Pittsburgh members between 2012 and 2014, and an additional 2014 phone interview with a national Transition trainer who conducted multiple trainings in Pittsburgh. Our informants included the four founders of Transition Pittsburgh, several others who later took leadership roles, including an African American leader who became a Transition trainer, and regular participants encountered at various events. We asked about what attracted informants to Transition, how they experienced its organizational structure, their participation in Transition activities, Transition's work with other organizations, and their views on its effectiveness. We also analyzed Transition's Web site, internal documents, and related media articles. All field notes, interviews, and documents were coded using a qualitative analysis program.

### **The appeal of Transition Pittsburgh**

Numerous 'Transition-like' projects were underway in Pittsburgh before Transition Pittsburgh formed in 2010. That is, a general movement toward sustainable living, comprised of projects such as community gardens and efforts to promote renewable energy, already existed, with some networks among these enterprises but no central coordination or articulated shared vision. After learning about Transition, four local activists decided to form Transition Pittsburgh as a 'hub' where activists could come together and share ideas and resources. The

group aimed to provide a vision and channel the fluid movement into the Transition model. They succeeded in attracting numerous participants, including many young people, by holding a series of informal open space gatherings and sponsoring events such as films and speakers. However, the group never advanced to the point of promoting visible projects that might be used as models for other communities or as the basis for reducing dependence on fossil fuels.

Our field observations and interviews revealed that participants were strongly attracted to Transition's positive approach to creating sustainable and resilient communities. They found the Transition narrative about the urgency of action in response to climate change, peak oil, and the economic crisis convincing. They liked the focus on concrete local actions and community development, but also the idea of an international organization and model. Transition offered a shared vision and framework for action that could be adapted to local needs. Participants appreciated Transition's informal structure and open space gatherings where like-minded people, many of whom were already involved in various projects, could share ideas and perhaps find ways to work together. At the same time, Transition offered some diversity with its multi-generational composition and potential for race and class diversity, owing to the interest in Transition in some low-income, African American neighborhoods in Pittsburgh.

Many participants in Transition Pittsburgh were entrepreneurial types committed to new environmentalist styles of activism. Of the four founders of the group, one owned and operated a community-supported agriculture organic farm, one initiated a food waste composting program and landscaping service, one produced and promoted environmental films, and one renovated a family-owned grocery store into an educational 'Living Market.' The founders all believed that organizing at the local level was more effective than pushing for change through large bureaucratic organizations. Each was attracted to Transition because of its decentralized structure and commitment to a grass-roots, inclusive, and open-space style of community-based organizing. And they were all interested in its potential as a network for the initiation and promotion of Green enterprises.

Members were drawn to what they saw as an empowered style of activism and to the tangible results achievable through community-level entrepreneurialism. Activism at this scale was seen as addressing the unique needs of each community to create pockets of resiliency for weathering environmental change. As one activist explained:

There is a thing called micro-enterprise with a social component to it where you are making money, and you are doing something good for your neighbor, and good for your government, and good for everyone around you. Your whole community is bettered because you are making money doing something good for it ... When you start to think about all the things that people could potentially do inside of a neighborhood ... you have [the] ability for a community to achieve resilience. (Interview, November 23, 2012)

Furthermore, since community-scale projects typically require less capital investment than large-scale efforts, Transition members appreciated the financial accessibility of Green entrepreneurial activities. As a member who started an aquaponics business remembered:

I had been talking and writing about issues, you know, solar panels and electric cars and smart gridways and smart electric grids. All these big picture ideas that as an individual or family you can't really tackle. And I was already gardening and composting and, you know, biking, and walking and taking the bus, you know, and doing all the personal things on an environmental level, but what could I really do? I can't really build solar panels, I can't build electric cars, I can't build windmills. I can't do any of these other things. Then aquaponics came along and I was like, oh my gosh, I can do this. (Interview, May 23, 2013)

Several interviewees said Green businesses allow them to gain financial independence and express creativity in tackling environmental problems. One commented that the only way to generate environmentally sustainable livelihoods is 'to create cooperative models that can compete in capitalist systems' (Interview, November 20, 2012). Members with Green businesses saw Transition Pittsburgh as an opportunity for expanding their networks, learning new skills, sharing information and resources, and contributing to the broader environmental movement through their work. They found Transition's open-space structure compatible with entrepreneurialism; it created a space where grass-roots innovation could be nourished (Seyfang and Smith 2007). As the aquaponics enthusiast, who had recently moved to Pittsburgh, recalled about his first experience with Transition:

I wanted to connect with people. And I knew there would be a community there of people to at least connect with and to get involved with sustainability issues. And I didn't really know what would happen to it. And at the very first meeting, in typical Transition fashion, they say, 'okay, now's the time to say what you want to work on!' So everyone stands up and says, 'okay, I want to work on this' and then ... you break out into groups to see how many people are interested in your ideas. So I said, 'hey! I want to work on aquaponics in Pittsburgh.' And like four or five other people gravitated around me and said, 'Yeah, what is this aquaponics? I have heard about this. I want to do this, too' ... So, Transition was helpful in me getting to meet people here in Pittsburgh. (Interview, May 23, 2013)

Not all of Transition's entrepreneurialism involved alternative business models; in addition to economic entrepreneurs, Transition Pittsburgh also attracts artistic and 'free-spirit' types. Some of them organized, for example, an annual 'Peaceful Gathering of Hands' in Pittsburgh's Schenley Park to commemorate Global Peace Day. While not an official Transition project, the event was associated with Transition. Activists also organized numerous events in line with the Transition model, including 'gift circles' in which participants exchange

offerings of skills and material items, film series, and skill-sharing events to teach pragmatic skills such as bicycle and clothing repair.

Entrepreneurial organizing was viewed as an alternative to hierarchical organizations, and many of our informants said their interest in Transition stemmed from a lack of faith in the effectiveness of traditional environmental organizations. One compared Transition to a more traditional organization she had worked in, which seemed to ‘beam in’ national strategies rather than allowing for genuine grass-roots creativity (Interview, November 20, 2012). Another participant explained that in contrast to the ‘centralized, hierarchical, one issue at a time’ approach of many traditional environmental organizations, ‘the approach with Transition was more distributed, communal, fun – not so much like single campaign oriented, but broader, pulling from what people’s deepest desires are’ (Interview, January 25, 2013). Transition offered a flexible model of meaningful activism with the potential for bringing together a decentralized and fluid movement. Organizers hoped that Transition could engender a deeper commitment to the environmental movement and spread creative solutions. This approach was seen as highly compatible with entrepreneurialism, which allowed for the empowered participation and leadership of members who could support their own work.

### **Challenges faced by Transition Pittsburgh**

Some of the same features that attract participants to Transition Pittsburgh also create organizational challenges. Entrepreneurialism is critical to the success of the initiative, but poses several problems. One is that not all would-be entrepreneurs have the resources needed to start up projects. Without the ability to appeal for funds to a central organization or apply for grants, members were left to secure resources on their own. A related problem is that some important issues lack entrepreneurs; without individual entrepreneurs, Transition Pittsburgh had no structure for initiating and carrying out projects. When entrepreneurs existed, there was no mechanism for making them accountable to the organization; Transition Pittsburgh lacked control over the various ‘Transition’ projects as well as the use of the Transition model. For example, one entrepreneurial participant described her desire to do an ‘unleashing’ (one of the steps in the original Transition model) and her response to the opposition she encountered from a current leader:

I sent an email to [several Transition leaders] and I said I want to do an unleashing ... I just made it up! I made it up! We’ll do it from here [her project site] on the summer solstice, because we are ready. I got a phone message from [one leader]. He said ... ‘we are not ready for that yet. I want to meet with you.’ I said ... I am going to have [an unleashing] anyway. We’ve transitioned and hopefully we’ll have some people representing Transition. Whatever! It will be a big party – so maybe it’s a pre-unleashing party. (Interview March 13, 2013)

In another example, an entrepreneur who had purchased apartment buildings that he wanted to make sustainable, with features such as urban gardens, came to Transition looking for tenants and other forms of support. Transition activists became involved and aimed to make the project an official Transition one, but ultimately there were some conflicts with the landlord, who maintained control over the running of the apartments, and Transition canceled its affiliation with the project. Beyond such conflicts, individual entrepreneurs tend to decentralize resources and may capture group assets for their own purposes. For example, several participants started their own listservs to promote their projects using names gathered from Transition events rather than using and contributing to a central listserv. Beyond Pittsburgh, a national trainer suggested that many environmental leaders read the Transition books and incorporate ideas from them into their own work (Interview, May 9, 2014). While this spreads Transition ideas, such use of the model remains outside of Transition's control and does not build Transition as an organizational network.

Other dilemmas pertain to Transition's relation to the fluid and decentralized NEM already active in Pittsburgh. Whereas early Transition Towns were created in small towns in the UK such as Totnes, the model had to be adapted for use in urban areas. Transition Pittsburgh was supposed to operate as a hub for Transition initiatives in neighborhoods across the city. But the group never managed to create its own neighborhood projects, possibly, as one informant suggested, because there was never a large enough core of members in any one neighborhood (Interview, April 15, 2014). Because existing projects were plentiful in the city, it made sense to piggyback on them. However, this strategy raised two issues. First, what could Transition contribute to existing projects? Second, how if at all could Transition influence them without creating concerns about cooptation or other resentments? These are questions that Transition participants discussed frequently, but never resolved.

With regard to what Transition might contribute to the larger movement, leaders thought that they could help to connect the various sustainability projects occurring locally and provide a broader vision of the social and economic changes needed to address large-scale problems such as climate change. They also felt that the Transition focus on positive, concrete, local actions could be useful in reaching out to new people; as one leader argued, Transition can help with 'getting people in who don't already care in a fun, fulfilling and practical way' (fieldnotes, January 4, 2012). However, leaders never developed a strategy for going beyond 'fun' events to address issues such as resource depletion and climate change in a meaningful way. Because the Transition model is a loose one, it lends itself to use in various ways by a fluid movement. While Transition is highly relevant to much environmental activity in the city, its ability to channel that activity into a cohesive program is limited. Projects often flourish, but it is not clear if they are Transition projects or if official affiliation would create any benefit for either the project or Transition.

Furthermore, while many participants appreciate Transition's commitment to the open space model, this style of organizing creates difficulties. As one of the founders noted, problems were apparent in the group's earliest stages:

When we first had Transition meetings, it was every Tuesday ... and open to anybody to come talk about Pittsburgh and Transition Pittsburgh and making things happen. And it turned into Transition 101. We were having the same conversation every week. We'd host the meetings and people would come and we'd take notes because everyone had lots of ideas. And then we'd do some leg work to get that idea moving, and then they don't show up the next meeting. A whole bunch of new people show up. And they want to know what Transition is, and what they can do to be a part of Transition Pittsburgh. It was like half were coming to try to get things done, and the other half – it was more like an open door thing. (Interview, November 23, 2012).

Mobilizing under the open space framework offered the advantage of an inclusive and democratic structure for facilitating grass-roots participation in diverse communities, but it was hard to sustain participation under such a fluid structure. One member commented that 'we managed to have some meaningful, real conversations with people about things that [we] were caring about in the community,' but the group's style was ultimately 'too casual and comfortable' to make anything happen (Interview, July 21, 2013). Another activist said that many of the Transition meetings 'didn't have any clear goal or any clear actions come out of them' (Interview, April 2, 2013). Another stated, 'The only problem is that when you do go, when you do show up to one of these events, or one of these [meetings], it ends up being, like, there's absolutely no action you can take' (Interview, July 18, 2013). While many interesting ideas were proposed at Transition meetings, they were rarely followed through, and at subsequent meetings, entirely new ideas were typically proposed. The national Transition trainer who came to Pittsburgh suggested that the young activists there may not have understood the open space concept well enough, saying that perhaps she 'didn't emphasize enough that open space is about getting practical work done. It's all about getting concrete results' (Interview, May 9, 2014).

Nevertheless, most Transition leaders remained committed to the open space model. For instance, one of the founders claimed that as long as he was in charge, no one person (including himself) would have power over anyone else to direct the goals and actions of the group (Interview, July 18, 2013). Another founder said he was not interested in the power and 'glory' typically associated with a leadership position and that he desired instead to foster consensual decision-making processes (Interview, November 23, 2012). Underscoring these perspectives is the Transition principle that any steering group should 'design its own demise' (Hopkins 2008, p. 148). Although meant to encourage active and open participation and to discourage individuals from placing more importance on their own leadership roles than on the project, this style of organizing made it difficult to pursue projects and ideas.

Some members suggested that more directive leadership and a better defined organizational structure were needed to form a cohesive group and devise effective strategies. One leader with experience in another environmental organization with a more formalized structure urged Transition Pittsburgh to develop a steering committee and defined positions. He developed a list of five suggested positions (e.g., directors of outreach and education) and the responsibilities of each. He advised that these positions could be filled either by volunteers or through elections, and that some of them would likely involve committees of people. In July 2012, with the help of another leader, he organized a four-hour meeting with persons who had been active in Transition to discuss the group's mission, vision and goals, roles that needed to be filled, and projects that Transition is involved in or might undertake. The meeting produced much discussion, many concrete ideas, and agreement that a more formalized structure, with defined positions and an advisory board, would be useful. Following this meeting, however, few of the ideas and structural changes were implemented, in part because the two leaders were unable to recruit people to fill all of the positions and were limited in what they could do on their own. Few participants in Transition Pittsburgh seemed committed to a more structured organization, which was at odds with the entrepreneurial spirit and open space organizing that attracted them to the group.

Despite the merits of Transition's commitment to widespread and evolving leadership, this practice contributed to problems in sustaining the Pittsburgh group. We commonly observed a lack of consistent initiative to synthesize ideas and strategies discussed in meetings or internal communications. We also witnessed inconsistent direction, variable tactics, and little follow-through on many proposed actions. Some participants suggested that the dispersed geographical nature of Pittsburgh neighborhoods contributed to the challenge of coordinating community-based action in the city. Others commented that since each community's needs are different, no one person wanted to guide the group's collective efforts in any particular direction. These tendencies led to what one activist described as a 'paradox of inclusion and separation' among the group's leadership (Interview, April 22, 2013). While Transition Pittsburgh sought to mobilize widespread leadership within the city's numerous neighborhoods, many activists indicated they had limited resources and support for their efforts when returning to their own neighborhoods.

Moreover, those who assumed positions of leadership in Transition Pittsburgh explained that guiding the group under the open-space model was not an easy task. One founder discussed the nature of leadership required and the tension that sometimes arose when different members had different styles for guiding the group. He explained:

It requires a certain type of leadership ... someone who can step aside, someone who is okay with like the unknown parts of it. Because, as I mentioned, Transition doesn't really offer any answers, and a lot of people will get very frustrated. And

then that's the key because you can't claim to offer any answers, and you also can't steer the conversation, you can't steer the collective consciousness ... there's types of personalities of people who want to like, take the wheel and say, like, my thing is what we should be doing. And then that will, you know, cut the participation really fast. (Interview, May 6, 2013)

Another suggested that the time it took to reach consensus made for an 'exhausting' process that ultimately undermined the incentive to participate (Interview, July 21, 2013). Yet another stated that it was hard to balance the need to secure an income through her entrepreneurial initiative with her contributions to the collective efforts of the group (Interview, April 22, 2013). Perhaps most vividly, another leader said, 'I felt like I was herding cats, but I didn't know where I was herding them' (Interview, April 12, 2013).

An additional challenge facing Transition Pittsburgh was its inability to forge alliances with local environmental organizations and community groups. Consistent with new environmentalism's emphasis on broad-scale collaboration, Transition Pittsburgh desired collaborations but found them difficult for a number of reasons. One member stated, 'We always, like, wanted to be involved with other groups, but I don't think we ever really knew how' (Interview, April 12, 2013). Another suggested, 'I think our energies are just too scattered ... There are so many different things happening, and people approaching things with different lenses' (Interview, January 18, 2013). One participant suggested that individuals' desires to lead their own initiatives interfered with their willingness to work on a common project:

The problem is people want to be in charge of their own thing, not in charge of a project that's under a heading. And I think that that's almost a cultural shift that needs to happen within entrepreneurs and within environmentalism. You don't need your own project. It works a lot better if we can convince people that being under a larger label is worthwhile. (Interview, April 11, 2013)

Activists outside of Transition also worried about merging their projects with the group, as a Transition member observed:

We had approached other people about being involved and I think there was a lot of fear about people's movements being coopted, you know. And, you didn't want to do that, but I could see how people would be worried and I could see how that maybe could have happened if they did get involved. (Interview, April 12, 2013)

Perhaps the most significant reason underlying Transition Pittsburgh's inability to forge alliances was the lack of strategic direction offered within the group, connected to its commitment to the open space model of organizing. As one member explained:

Our capacity to actually build those relationships ... within each community is still possible. But, how will Transition Town leadership or its group of active

individuals come together to actually say that's what we are going to do? (Interview, April 22, 2013)

She went on to suggest that Transition's decentralized structure makes collaboration difficult:

We don't [form alliances] because we go into our separate neighborhoods. And we try to do what we can do for our own separate communities instead of pulling together the leadership, and trying to ... [be] more supportive of one another's needs and agendas. (Interview, April 22, 2013)

Despite problems in forming alliances and in creating a Transition hub in Pittsburgh, the group continues to survive as part of a fluid movement. One way it does so is through the use of social media by movement entrepreneurs seeking to initiate new projects. For the past few years, Transition Pittsburgh has relied increasingly on Meetup, a social networking tool, to organize activities. Quite a few events are organized in this manner by new members as well as longer-term leaders, keeping Transition Pittsburgh alive and enabling newcomers to locate the group. In June of 2014, for example, Transition activists announced a Meetup to initiate a skill sharing timebank in Pittsburgh, a tactic used by many Transition initiatives elsewhere. Other recent Transition Meetups include film screenings, a workshop on how to create 'seed bombs' for planting in vacant lots, and a permaculture class.

Some decentralized projects with connections to Transition also continue to flourish. In some cases, those projects are connected to ISA within established organizations, such as city projects to 'Green up' neighborhoods. In Larimer, a low-income African American neighborhood in Pittsburgh, the Urban Green Growth Collaborative developed ties to Transition through an African American leader working at the Kingsley Association, a community center serving the area. As part of his community development work, this leader helped residents with their plans to create a sustainable community. He encountered local Transition activists, who later suggested to the national Transition trainer who visited Pittsburgh that she meet with the African American leader. Transition elsewhere has often suffered from a lack of racial and class diversity (Hardt 2013, Alloun and Alexander 2014), and the national trainer not only met with the leader but invited him to become a Transition trainer. The two eventually ran several T4T workshops in Pittsburgh, including one attended by about 40 African Americans. The local leader was attracted to Transition because of its focus on community participation and because it provided connections to an international network. Several Transition activists became involved in supporting the Larimer project and attended a number of functions, but it was hard to sustain this participation because most Transition members were outsiders to the community. In Larimer and other neighborhoods, efforts to create 'Green communities' were underway, and some connections were made to Transition, but it was

unclear how Transition could help to develop and connect those projects to a larger movement. Nevertheless, some community leaders value the connection to Transition, and in January 2014, the Kingsley Association hosted another T4T workshop with the national Transition trainer and local leaders.

In sum, Transition's commitment to new environmentalist principles creates both opportunities and limitations. While Pittsburgh is not representative of other Transition initiatives, its experiences may help in understanding the dynamics of other new environmentalist enterprises. Several opportunities can be identified in Transition Pittsburgh's experience. First, the focus on local-scale, community-based activism fills a void in the broader environmental movement, traditionally dominated by large and centralized organizations. Second, Transition's orientation to entrepreneurial activities fosters empowered grass-roots participation, as activists are encouraged to lead their own initiatives while contributing to the group's overall vision of Greening the economy. Finally, the open space style of organizing, with its democratic decision-making process, is attractive to participants.

Transition Pittsburgh also suffers from several organizational weaknesses. First, the local focus of Transition activism may make it difficult to address global problems. This is one area where Transition initiatives are likely to differ greatly; for example, European initiatives may be much better connected to international climate-change efforts than those in the US. In Pittsburgh, efforts to build more resilient and sustainable communities are not nearly visible enough to serve as models for other communities in the global fight against resource depletion and climate change. Moreover, the group's entrepreneurial orientation and diffuse leadership style decreases its ability to forge broader alliances. While Transition Pittsburgh maintains connections to a more general movement, its organizational structure may ultimately undermine its ability to mobilize the collective energy of its individual members. Finally, Transition Pittsburgh's commitment to the open space model of organizing limits its capacity to devise strategies and grow as an organization. The reluctance of participants to identify specific goals and an agenda to reach them compromises its ability to create a large-scale movement out of fluid projects. Again, this may vary greatly in other Transition initiatives that implement the model differently (Ganesh and Zoller 2014).

## **Conclusion**

New environmentalism is a fluid movement consisting of decentralized ISA rather than goal-oriented collective action directed by SMOs. Our study of Transition Pittsburgh offers a much-needed empirical example of this emerging paradigm. Transition is, in a sense, a more specific movement or organization trying to harness a more general movement of efforts to create sustainability and new forms of community. Yet, Transition is not a formalized movement organization; in Pittsburgh, the initiative remains itself a relatively fluid structure. Here,

we have attempted to explain the numerous challenges Transition Pittsburgh faces as well as why it attracts participants.

We argue that the organization's fluid structure attracts grass-roots members, but its diffuse nature undermines its efficacy in mobilizing a social movement to achieve collective goals. Many participants enjoy Transition activities and like the idea of concrete, local actions as a positive means of building more resilient and sustainable communities. But insofar as Transition Pittsburgh wants to address seriously the threat of climate change, its diffuse structure compromises its ability to synthesize activist efforts, follow up on projects, form alliances, and devise viable strategies. While the values embodied in Transition seem to be spreading, a less fluid organizational structure may be required to channel those values into projects that can achieve goals such as building community resilience, cutting carbon emissions, and creating models for larger-scale environmental initiatives.

Our study contributes to theoretical ideas about the role of entrepreneurial leaders in social movements and, in particular, the NEM. While Zald and McCarthy (1987) saw entrepreneurs as critical to mobilizing preferences, other research distinguishes the role of entrepreneurs in initiating movements from that of professional movement leaders in creating formalized structures (Staggenborg 1988). Similarly, in the NEM, entrepreneurs initiate projects as part of a general movement, but are less likely to contribute to the development of more specific SMOs capable of directing strategies. In Transition Pittsburgh, we find that entrepreneurs are critical, but they are usually not the types of people committed to building an organizational structure that will ensure stability and follow up on ideas for collective action. Nor is the Transition model intended to develop such structures, but the Pittsburgh case raises questions about how effective the model can be without either a more formalized organizational structure or other adjustments that allow the model to work in an urban environment.

The experiences of Transition Pittsburgh are not necessarily typical of other organizations in the new environmentalist movement, but we have identified some of the problems facing participants attempting to employ this model. Further investigation is needed to compare the challenges faced by other Transition affiliates in other contexts and other new environmentalist groups, which share some of the central tenets of the Transition model. Such research is particularly important given the urgency of climate change and the need to address the crisis at local, national, and international levels.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### **References**

- Alloun, E. and Alexander, S., 2014. The transition movement: questions of diversity, power and affluence. Simplicity Institute Report 14g.

- Blumer, H., 1939. Collective behavior. In: R.E. Park, ed. *An outline of the principles of sociology*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 219–280.
- Connors, P. and Peter, M., 2011. Transitioning communities: community, participation and the transition town movement. *Community Development Journal*, 46 (4), 558–572. doi:10.1093/cdj/bsq014
- Cutter, S.L., 1994. Environmental issues: green rage, social change and the new environmentalism. *Progress in Human Geography*, 18 (2), 217–226. doi:10.1177/030913259401800208
- Dalton, R.J., 1994. *The green rainbow: environmental groups in western Europe*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Felicetti, A., 2013. Localism and the transition movement. *Policy Studies*, 34 (5–6):559–74.
- Feola, G. and Nunes, R., 2014. Success and failure of grassroots innovations for addressing climate change: the case of the transition movement. *Global Environmental Change*, 24, 232–250. doi:10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2013.11.011
- Ganson, W.A., 1990. *The strategy of social protest*. 2nd ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Ganesh, S. and Zoller, H., 2014. Organizing transition: principles and tensions in eco-localism. In: M. Parker, G. Cheney, V. Fournier, and C. Land, eds. *The routledge companion to alternative organization*. London: Routledge, 236–250.
- Gusfield, J.R., 1981. Social movements and social change: perspectives of linearity and fluidity. *Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, 4, 317–339.
- Gusfield, J.R., 1994. The reflexivity of social movements: collective behavior and mass society theory revisited. In: E. Laraña, H. Johnston, and J.R. Gusfield, eds. *New social movements: from ideology to identity*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 58–78.
- Haenfler, R., 2004. Collective identity in the straight edge: how diffuse movements foster commitment, encourage individualized participation, and promote cultural change. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 45 (4), 785–805. doi:10.1111/j.1533-8525.2004.tb02314.x
- Hardt, E., 2013. *In transition: the politics of place based, prefigurative social movements*. PhD dissertation. Department of Political Science, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.
- Hershkovitz, A., 2002. *Bronx ecology: blueprint for a new environmentalism*. Washington DC: Island Press.
- Hopkins, R., 2008. *The transition handbook: from oil dependency to local resilience*. Cambridge, UK: Green Books.
- Hopkins, R., 2011. *The transition companion: making your community more resilient in uncertain times*. White River Junction: Chelsea Green Publishing Company.
- Mason, K. and Whitehead, M., 2012. Transition urbanism and the contested politics of ethical place making. *Antipode*, 44 (2), 493–516. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8330.2010.00868.x
- Murray, J., 2012. Building a New Environmentalism. *Business Green*. 26 October. (<http://www.businessgreen.com/bg/james-blog/2220056/building-a-new-environmentalism>)
- North, P., 2011. The politics of climate activism in the UK: a social movement analysis. *Environment and Planning A*, 43, 1581–1598. doi:10.1068/a43534
- North, P. and Longhurst, N., 2013. Grassroots localisation? The scalar potential of and limits of the ‘transition’ approach to climate change and resource constraint. *Urban Studies*, 50 (7), 1423–1438. doi:10.1177/0042098013480966
- Seyfang, G. and Smith, A., 2007. Grassroots innovations for sustainable development: towards a new research and policy agenda. *Environmental Politics*, 16 (4), 584–603. doi:10.1080/09644010701419121

- Smith, A., 2011. The transition town network: a review of current evolutions and renaissance. *Social Movement Studies*, 10 (1), 99–105. doi:10.1080/14742837.2011.545229
- Snow, D., et al., 1986. Frame alignment processes, micromobilization, and movement participation. *American Sociological Review*, 51, 464–481. doi:10.2307/2095581
- Speth, J., 2008. *The bridge at the end of the world: capitalism, the environment, and crossing from crisis to sustainability*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Staggenborg, S., 1988. The consequences of professionalization and formalization in the pro-choice movement. *American Sociological Review*, 53, 585–605. doi:10.2307/2095851
- Stevenson, N., 2011. Localization as subpolitics: the transition movement and cultural citizenship. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 15 (1), 65–79. doi:10.1177/1367877911411793
- TRAPESE Collective, 2008. The rocky road to a real transition. *The Commoner*, 13, 141–167.
- Turner, R., 1964. Collective behavior. In: R.E.L. Faris, ed. *Handbook of modern sociology*. Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Turner, R. and Killian, L.M., 1987. *Collective behavior*. 3rd ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Wapner, P., 2008. The importance of critical environmental studies in the new environmentalism. *Global Environmental Politics*, 8 (1), 6–13. doi:10.1162/glep.2008.8.1.6
- Zald, M.N., 2000. Ideologically structured action: an enlarged agenda for social movement research. *Mobilization*, 5 (1), 1–16.
- Zald, M.N. and McCarthy, J.D., 1987. *Social movements in an organizational society: collected essays*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.