Transition US Annual Survey 2011: the results

Thank you to the 274 people who contributed their feedback in our recent annual survey!

Scope

With this broad survey, we wanted to get a sense of how Transition is evolving in the US and what kind of support is needed. Questions were focused on finding out some background info about Transition initiatives, how Transition initiatives are doing overall, if they have various working groups: how these groups are doing, what resources have been helpful and what participants envision would be helpful in the future; if groups have had any conflicts: how these conflicts were handled, and generally, how participants' insights on how the Transition movement can be most effective.

Here is a summary:

- Background
- A sense of how things are going
- Challenges
- Successes
- What is happening in Transition Initiatives?
- Supporting Initiatives
- Inclusivity and getting the word out
- Exploring group dynamics and cultivating leadership
- Handling conflict
- Thinking toward the future of the Transition Movement
- Summing up
- The following places were represented
Background
Transition US was established in 2009 as the non-profit national hub of the Transition Network. Since 2009, Transition US has been working in collaboration with the Transition Network based in the UK, to support the emergence of Transition Initiatives in the U.S.

Strategic Action Goals

1. To raise awareness of the need to work together to build resilience in the face of fossil fuel depletion, climate change and economic crises.
2. To support the emergence and growth of Transition Initiatives and leaders in all regions of the United States.
3. To mirror the diversity of the United States in Transition Initiatives by supporting Initiatives' efforts to include all major cultural and demographic segments of their local communities.
4. To support the continued development and delivery of high quality education, training and consulting in support of the advancement of the Transition Movement in the United States.
5. To achieve financial sustainability for Transition US and Transition Initiatives in the United States.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Started Survey:</th>
<th>274</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Completed Survey:</td>
<td>167 (60.9%)</td>
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The survey consisted of 37 questions. Approximately a third of respondents were involved in official Transition Initiatives. Another third identified themselves as considering transition, and the other third identified themselves as using aspects of Transition.
A sense of how things are going

We asked a few questions to gauge the general sense of how people thought their initiative was doing and there was a pretty distinct bell curve centered around things being “Good” to “Some bits great, others not so good.” Overall roughly 48% responded that things were “Good” or “Great,” 30% “Some bits great, others not so good, 20% “Struggling” and a last 2% choosing “It came to an end.”

Age

It was interesting to see the distribution in age of initiatives represented in the survey. Overall, the graph below reflects the relative newness of initiatives that have emerged, almost 40% being less than a year old, and another 34% being 1-2 years old. In contrast, of those involved in official Transition Initiatives, that pool consisted very few (less than 10%) younger than one year old.
What is happening in Transition Initiatives?

There was a huge breadth represented in the areas that Transition Initiatives are exploring. Food floated to the top of the list, along with communications/publicity, collaborations with other groups, skill sharing, and energy issues.

Other areas that initiatives are exploring that were added in the comments included: special events to gather people, water issues, multi-cultural community building and support eg. salsa classes and joint community gardens, building networking platforms for city-wide collaboration, speakers bureau, focus on neighborhood building, and group process or “support for activists.”

It was noted that there are a range of ways that groups are engaging in a given area in breadth/depth/frequency -- from sporadic discussions to regular working groups, and from neighborhood scale to state-wide collaboration.
Reflecting on ups and downs

We asked people what was working really well in their group and what the main challenges were. Just as our communities are diverse in population, culture, socioeconomic status and geography, it was interesting to note that some of the points that initiatives found to be the most successful in their organizing were also identified by other groups as the source of their main challenges. With that in mind, let's start with the challenges.

Challenges

Some of the challenges identified were:

- Clarification of specific goals and purposes
- Communication (One person identified: “There is tension between wanting to do and needing vision to guide.”)
- Balancing energy and health (As one person put it: “Time to live a life and be an activist”)
- Deciding on governance structure for the initiative
- Diversity, inclusivity and engaging newly interested people - (similarly stated: “Getting beyond the "usual group" in involving people”)
- Finances and fundraising
- Balancing efficiency with making time for real consensus
- Engaging volunteers on an ongoing basis
- Finding time to meet face-to-face, and “finding ways to structure our effort so that small steps can be accomplished between meeting”
- Navigating diverse interests and expectations

As this survey focused mainly on how the movement is evolving in the U.S., adapting a model that was initially applied in the UK, one particular comment stood out: “People get frustrated because building a community takes time. They have preconceived notions of Great Unleashings, EDAPs, etc. They expect that we are going to be like Totnes right away.”

Successes

On the side of successes, people mentioned specific projects like Time Exchange, potlucks, community gardens, film screenings, and farmers markets (also, a Fall beer fundraiser!). Some of the successful elements of group organizing were:

- Developing relationships within the community
- Organizers loving what they do and working well together -
  One person wrote “I think we are realizing that we can have diverse interests and still maintain momentum in our overall goals. We are willing to get help when we hit a snag.”
- Being recognized by and collaborating with more affiliated organizations in the region -
  One person wrote: “Working with the myriad other similarly aligned organizations in our county (Green Drinks, Defenders, Sierra Club, etc)”
- Holding regular events
- Communication -
  One person wrote “The newsletter has been one of our most effective efforts to date. People really rely on it for news and info on upcoming events.”
How is Transition making a difference on a personal level?
We asked survey respondents to share a brief story of how your Initiative is making a difference in your life or the lives of others. 163 people responded to this question. The responses were heartwarming. Here are a few:

“As a member of our Transition Sebastopol Elder Salon, I have learned a great deal about the values and actions for moving forward in our culture from environmental disaster to viable re-visioning. I have especially found it helpful to become part of a community of kindred spirits and minds about becoming an elder vs. just getting older.”

“For me, the Transitions approach answers the question, “How do I enable more change to occur? What path can I assist in paving that will ensure the human species will sustain itself AND improve it's quality of life. Many of our group members express they see various needs in the movement, relative to their personal passion and desire to take a piece of the puzzle to act upon, to be the change they want and they know is needed.”

“We are a fairly new initiative, so we have a small active group. I have seen among that group, a much stronger sense of belonging and interest in our community. One of our group has recently realized, after always planning to move somewhere else after her children had grown, that she is committed to this community and now plans to make this her permanent home.”

“It definitely is changing the way I feel in my greater neighborhood. There are people that I can count on in this group should an emergency arise. We are meeting each other for social time.”

“My fridge is full of produce and culls from my garden and the two permaculture gardens we participated in this year.”

How is Transition making a difference on a community level?
We asked survey respondents to share a brief story of how your Initiative is making a difference in the resilience/sustainability of their community. 145 people responded to this question. Again, the responses were heartwarming. Here are a few:

“Transition offers hope and solutions by bringing together people and groups who have not been coordinated in the past.”

“One of our members just spear-headed an amazing event called Transition Style. I was involve as an elder in a pairing of an elder and (40 yr.) younger person to co-develop outfits for ourselves and be in a fashion show for the entire community. The emphasis was on re-cycling rather than purchasing merchandise and creativity. The outcome was not only a celebration of those motivations, but the fun, beauty, and bonding across generations. I got a lot out of this event personally and still have a sweet relationship with the 9 year old girl I met from it.”

“We have allowed many people to learn many new skills that will help them adapt to a life using less energy. We believe resilience begins with the individual and can then bubble up into neighborhoods and community. Our focus has been on educating and energizing individuals.”

“During our film series, comments were: "This is difficult to hear, but we need to be more real about the present situation." Those who participated indicated that they were very grateful to be informed, to learn of positive measures which they could actually accomplish and of the emphasis on community, such as intentional groupings.”

“Folks making connections, especially the inter-generational, different-lifestyle kind. People learning how to garden. Folks finding that they have more in common than they imagined. Discovering local resources and expertise that they didn't know existed.”
Getting Support

We asked what sources of information have been most helpful in understanding and doing Transition. Some of the things that floated to the top of the list were:

1. The Transition Handbook (not surprisingly!)
2. Training for Transition (T4T)
3. Transition US website
4. Emails or talks with people in other Transition Initiatives
5. Transition Network Website
6. Transition US monthly e-newsletter
7. Talks on Transition

Which of the following sources of information have been most helpful in understanding and doing Transition?

![Bar chart showing the usage of various sources of information.](chart.png)
Resources

We asked in the survey, what kinds of services/support initiatives would find most useful, to help us focus resources and capacity as a national hub. While a few things stood out, including regional Transition gathering and networking opportunities and advanced skills workshops for Transition leaders, it is clear that the existing resources that we provide (webinars, toolkits/templates, monthly dialogues and e-Newsletter) should be publicized more widely and shared as on nearly all features, most people had not yet made use of them (or would possibly use them more). Interestingly, interest in a national conference was relatively low.
Inclusivity and getting the word out

We asked how initiatives were getting the word out about their events and projects. Email lists, word of month, website, local newspaper, flyers and Facebook were among the most widely used. Local TV, Twitter, calling and Ning sites being among the least used.

It was also interesting to note that some people reflected on the need to use more avenues to get the word out, and also that this ability is linked with having the capacity as a group to take on the tasks. Most thought this was an important piece of their work.

In the comments, people added other tools that weren’t listed (lots of creative ideas!), including:

- Posters in the community
- Displays in local stores, hospitals, schools, cultural centers
- Cross-promotion of events with other groups
- Biweekly news column, Radio program
- Partnering organizations’ email lists and newsletters
- Other events, our previous ones, or ones organized by other groups who may or may not be connected to transition
- Community calendars
- Local entertainment guide
- Campus info outlets
- Meetup/google groups
- Written invitation
- Blogs

What tools do/did you use to publicize your events?
Diversity

We also asked people to share a story of something that their Transition Initiative has done, is doing, or is thinking about doing to create space for people of different ages, races, economic means, political affiliations, faiths etc.

Event examples included film series, presentations, Great Unleashing, holding events in different neighborhoods, Reskilling fairs.

Many people responded that they had not yet made efforts to connect with other diverse groups, but that they had the intention to. Some people responded that they had not focused on “reaching out” yet as they were finding it challenging to meet even as a core group, and so this was their primary priority.

Another point raised was that there is sometimes the assumption that getting the word out via the web, local papers etc will reach the broader community, but this is not always the case, as for instance, some people are less connected via the web or the circulation of papers is limited. Having access to common space for holding meetings and events was another issue raised.

Here are some of the stories:

“The skills workshops I have done are free, if you come and work with us, you can take a quart jar of canned food home just for being here, and if you bring resources, then of course proportionately more. We are careful not to politicize our meetings.”

“We are doing regular potlucks and taking them to different venues in the community. We are inviting people who are already active in the community in a variety of organizations, keeping in mind that we need to reach into all sectors of the communities. We make it a policy to not associate our Transition initiative with a particular church organization or political party. We’re trying to be very discerning when we get requests to endorse others’ projects and initiative (for example, Occupy).”

“We held a series of 6 gatherings, in each of which we heard a story of personal/community life transitions from one long-time local elder and one relative newcomer. These two social groups represent a long-standing divide in our locale. The two have a great deal of segregation.”

“Our Community Garden is purposely FREE (individual plots or working in a Commons area) to encourage all kinds of people to work together on equal footing - in spite of the fact that our organization has to raise funds for rent, insurance, and water. Donations of manure and rotted hay which are very available in our area have drawn more people into the fold as have other donations such as fencing, gates, etc. In addition, our recycling group built a recycling building (utilizing baled cardboard for insulation) at the County Landfill with volunteer labor from many parts of the community. The Farmers Market which grew out of our efforts is a huge success and brings together many diverse people. This year we funded the ability of the Farmers Market to accept Food Stamps (without adequate publicity so is not yet utilized very much).”

Reaching out to landlords to help them make their rentals energy efficient and have other sustainable features like composting. This is to deal with frustrating split incentives issue where tenants cannot afford/do anything to their housing to make it more efficient and landlords don’t because they are not paying the utilities.

All of our events and activities are by donation only. We offer chances for people to participate as volunteers so that they can come for free or get food shares in trade for work hours instead of cash. Everything we do is family friendly and we provide areas for younger people to play nearby during meetings that might not interest them.
Exploring group dynamics and cultivating leadership

From the identified challenges and successes, leadership is an especially big theme of discussion from this survey. For some groups, the relationships between the core organizing group is one of the highlights of their experience, but for others finding cohesion and building capacity is a large stumbling block.

The majority of people (80-85%) involved in official Transition Initiatives responded favorably to statements "we get things done," "most of us generally leave meetings energized," "we have taken time to get to know each other better as people," and "we are good at appreciating each others’ work."

Following on some of the identified challenges from this survey, some of the statements that received the most disagreement (39-48%) were “new people easily pick up responsibility so the work is shared,” and “we spend time in meetings reviewing how our meetings work.”
Handling conflict

We were interested in how groups have worked with conflict or difficult dynamics because it can take a considerable amount of time and energy, and in some cases groups have ended or divided as a result.

From the survey, it was mentioned that initiatives whose core group consisted of people who had known each other for a long time (or known each other previously) tended to handle conflict more smoothly. On the other hand, some difficulties could arise if there was a past history between members who had worked together in the past and this would affect the group dynamic. In some groups, the concentration of responsibilities on one or two people in the group resulted in conflict, particularly if those in leadership positions moved away. In several cases, conflicts centered on specific individuals involved. An interest in more experience or training in facilitation, non-violent communication, and conflict resolution were expressed.

Accompanying comments included:

- “Always an ongoing process!”
- “Still in “honeymoon” stage”
- “We still struggle a little with people’s group dynamics but we have gotten through a few sticky spots”
- “So far, it seems we are able to use our early information, decisions and agreements to resolve confusions and difficulties. Having a clear meeting structure, agreements, and being willing to sort out feelings during (or even after) meetings, is very important. We all need to feel good about what we are doing.”

![Graph showing responses to conflict or difficult dynamics questions.]

Have you had any conflict or difficult dynamics in your group? If yes, please tell us a bit about it using the following statements and the box below.

- We got through it quite easily
- It took a lot of time and energy
- We got outside help - training or facilitation
- One or more people left because of this
- It made us stronger as a group
- The group ended as a result

Legend:
- Agree strongly
- Agree
- Disagree
- Disagree strongly
Thinking toward the future

We asked “What’s something amazing you’d like to see Transition US achieve in the next 3 - 5 years?”

Some representative answers include:

● “Lots of initiatives, more trainings and trainers, hitting a national “take off” phase, sharing the results of our experiments, lots more communities getting to EDAP and implementing it.”
● “Appear on the radar of general US populace”
● “Create suggestions for different approaches/different permutations of the model that can be used by different groups based on: 1) What kind of institutional support they have (e.g. an affiliated/sponsored 501c3, staff); 2) What size city they have. It would help groups to know what they might be more likely to be successful at, and what they might not be successful at (e.g. a group of 5 volunteers with not much time very likely wouldn't be able to successfully create a Energy Descent Action plan that makes an impact...)”
● “Achieving widespread recognition for the reality of “peak everything” and for the importance of devising other, more local ways to get daily needs met.”
● “Cultural shift in America, from the lingering hope that government will come through for us, to a calm acceptance of the need to relocalize our communities and economies from the grassroots.”
● “I’d like to see a big umbrella movement towards common sense solutions that are specific to the US.”
● “I’d love to see Transition US in the news/media as a REAL player and force behind positive change, with the backing of state and local governments.”

The movement as a whole

And then, we asked “How do you think the Transition Movement needs to evolve in the next 3 - 5 years to be most effective?”

Increasing visibility/awareness and engaging a wider more diverse audience were the two themes that stood out.

Some representative answers include:

● More media exposure and collaborating with other similar groups.
● The Transition Movement needs to extend the membership beyond the ‘true believers’ into the mainstream. EDAPs need to spring up that are actually used by city and county government to drive planning and budgets.
● More conferences, resources, mentoring, a much expanded trainers pool, avoiding monopolization of the regional work by just one person, but really unleash people's creativity for this work and foster more collaborations in regional-level organizing and hubs.
● Make the most of regional assets through networking and mapping.
● Transition needs to keep up with the times. Since I don't know what will happen during the next five years, I won't overreach here. BUT, I think Transition MUST build support networks through impoverished and undereducated communities. Transition TOTALLY fits in the 99% idea - there are problems that will affect ALL of us, and we all need to rethink our futures and modes of engagement. Transition oughtn't be a niche activity, since community processes can be transformative across the country. So, we need to see more minority trainers, cooperation across economic classes, recognition from policymakers, and vibrant education and training.
● “Work with social justice groups so that our message is more obviously relevant to groups like people of color, working class, poor.”
● “I can only think that at the local level we need to persevere, to grow our networks and facilitate the connections between them, to stay a movement (not an organization), to keep a sense of urgency without losing our sense of fun.”
● “Transition needs to become the alternative economy, offering a significant portion of the population an alternative way to make a living and connect as a community.”
In Summary

With this broad survey, we wanted to get a sense of how Transition is evolving in the US and what kind of support is needed.

In general, the majority of initiatives are reporting that things are going well, but at least half of the respondents had experienced challenges.

Food, communications/publicity, collaborations with other groups, skill sharing, and energy issues are among the top areas that Transition Initiatives are engaging in.

Ongoing challenges include balancing time and energy, engaging people on long term basis, communication and developing clear goals and actions.

Developing relationships within the community, finding common cause, organizing events and collaborating with other groups were among the successes. Coming together as a group and finding others who shared similar interests came up again and again as things that people valued most about being involved.

More regional gatherings and networking opportunities, along with advanced skills workshops for transition leaders, were identified as resources that people would definitely use.

Initiatives are using a wide range of tools and creative means for getting the word out, though most people thought their initiative needed to do more to be inclusive. Examples of ways that Transition Initiatives are exploring diversity were shared.

With regards to handling conflict, for some groups, the relationships between the core organizing group is one of the highlights of their experience, but for others finding cohesion and building capacity is a large stumbling block.

When asked about thinking toward the future for Transition US, many people stated the need to achieve more widespread awareness and recognition, engaging in a larger dialogue, and ultimately a working towards a “culture shift.” With regards to needs for the movement as a whole to be most effective in the next few years, more regional networking, engaging a broad and diverse network, and creating viable alternatives were common themes.

* * *
Thank you!

Huge thanks to the 274 people (individuals, “mullers” and initiatives alike) who contributed feedback to the survey. Your responses were integral to helping inform and shape the work of Transition US in supporting and catalyzing community resilience in the US. We hope that the feedback and insights gleaned from the responses, which we’ve done our best to accurately capture in this report, will also help inform the work that you are doing and the interests that you are exploring in your locale. If you have any questions about this report, please contact us at info@transitionus.org.

Members of the following Initiatives (over 150 in total) contributed their feedback and are represented in the survey results above: