

Citizen Engagement in Re-Defining Measures of Progress in Local Economies

This short essay provides an overview of a presentation given by Florence Scialom at the Groningen University conference, 'Citizenship Resilience in Times of Crisis'. Florence has recently completed her Masters in Cultural Anthropology at Leiden University. Her presentation was based on her Masters research, which looked at how far economic growth is being rejected as an indicator of progress, and how far localisation is being adopted as an alternative economic approach, in the town of Totnes in the United Kingdom.

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Economic growth has monopolised perceptions of how societal progress can be achieved and measured for decades. The dominating position growth has occupied in academic and public discourse has led some scholars to compare it to a religious belief system (Kallis 2011: 877); it can be seen as wrong – immoral even – to question faith in the benefits of growth (Latouche, 2004). However, given the environmental problems and the economic challenges currently facing those social systems favouring economic growth, an increasing number of academics are now taking the 'blasphemous' step of actively questioning the importance of growth, some even completely rejecting it as a signifier of societal progress (Latouche 2004, Fournier 2008, Kallis 2011). The argument often motivating this position is that economic systems need to fundamentally change due to the connection between growth and negative outcomes, such as overuse of non-renewable resources and growing inequalities in society. Since the "[global financial] crisis has opened up new terrain for thinking about the economy" (Hart et al, 2010: 4), there is now arguably more space for exploring and engaging with potential economic alternatives.

Thus, alternative modes of organising economies are increasingly relevant to contemporary academic debates. Some scholars who reject economic growth propose a move away from growth through a transition to localisation; smaller more local economies, requiring less production and consumption (Forunier, 2008: 538). Given the growing viability of considering economic alternatives, I would argue that it is crucial for more empirical data to be gathered on the practices of existing localisation alternatives. I recently completed my own research with this aim in mind, through a case study based on Totnes, in the United Kingdom, where there is a strong Transition Town community which is presently organising itself around localisation principles.

My research aimed to identify how far the values and practices of those in Totnes embody a rejection of the dominant growth paradigm, and how far economic localisation is being adopted as an alternative.

Rejecting Economic Growth

As mentioned, my fieldwork focused on Totnes, which is a small market town in the United Kingdom. This town is the founding home of ‘Transition Towns’, which has become a community activist movement which promotes practices of economic localisation and community resilience as routes towards lowering carbon emissions and creating more environmentally sustainable communities (Hopkins, 2011). Transition argues that ultimately focusing on economic growth is environmentally unsustainable (*ibid*: 2), and as an alternative the Transition movement promotes a form of environmentally informed economic localisation in order to build resilience at a local level and equip communities to be better able to deal with the risks of peak oil and climate change (Hopkins 2008, North 2010).

Throughout my research I found that many of those involved in Transition in Totnes specifically reject economic growth as an effective measure of progress. During interviews with those supporting or working directly with Transition in Totnes I heard many different passionate criticisms. Economic growth was characterised during some of these interviews as “an insane and twisted way of measuring progress”, which is “clearly dysfunctional”, “completely flawed” and “extremely dangerous”. One interview participant told me that economic growth is “the most disastrous thing that has happened, because we only look at one measure” which doesn’t take into account social and environmental costs. A negative perception of economic growth was shared by nearly all of those I spoke to who were involved in Transition in Totnes.

These negative views were held in spite of – and perhaps in large part because of – an acknowledgement that growth is still a widely accepted measure of progress in wider mainstream society in the United Kingdom. “Economic growth is a mantra, a predominant world view, an assumption signed up to without question” one Transitioner told me during an interview. There was an awareness directly acknowledged during many interviews that economic growth is still the measure used by those with political and economic power; as one person put it, “many business leaders and politicians are still wedded to economic growth”. Often people argued that the economic growth doctrine has maintained its strength through claiming that to live in a growing economy effectively supports people’s needs. However, belief that economic growth can continue to

meet people's needs on a finite planet was dismissed by one interview participant as "a fool's paradise", thus articulating a view which seemed to be shared by many involved in Transition in the town.

Localisation in practice

Many people involved in Transition in Totnes therefore seem to be re-conceptualizing the economy through adopting localisation practices which help them to acknowledge the economy as something more personal and more about connections in the local community. The localisation promoted by Transition in Totnes has become a visible alternative economic option for some of the local population, and the economic practices which result are more intentionally and overtly socially embedded. The Transition approach demonstrates that – in contrast to the neoliberal focus on the dominance of markets and the "idea of an economy based on narrow self-interest" – the economy is in fact always embedded in social relations and people's daily choices and practices (Hart et al, 2010: 2). It is through the practical embodiment of this localisation discourse that people are attempting to re-position the economy into the social realm, away from the Universalist and de-personalised boundaries which have come to be associated with neoliberal, globalised, growth-focused interpretations of the economy. Many of those people in Totnes who adopt this localisation discourse are seeking to use their ideas and actions to build bridges between monetary-based and community-based practices, and are actively reclaiming their identity as social beings within the economy.

However, I do not want to present the perceptions of localisation as completely homogenous across Totnes. There was lots of consideration, both within and outside of those involved in Transition in the town, about what the term really means and how far it could be taken. Localisation is "a relative term. It means different things to different people, and depends on context" (NEF in Woodin and Lucas, 2004: 69). The aim of localisation for Transition seems to be to lower the environmental impact of production and consumption, and therefore to focus on making materially intensive production processes more local. This does not necessarily mean completely closing off to all national and international trading. Those involved in Transition often caution against oversimplification of the term localisation in relation to their work, as a common (mis)perception is that Transition would like move all economic interaction to the local scale. To avoid confusion some have suggested "'localisation' should maybe be replaced with 'appropriate in scale'" (REconomy, 2012), to show acknowledgement that the most local is not always the most suitable option.

The view that localisation is not about moving every aspect of the economy to the local scale was re-iterated during some interviews I conducted with those involved in Transition. For example, one person working directly on the intersection of Transition and economics said “some parts of the economy, such as information services, may work better globally... localisation is not saying ‘it’s all got to be here’; it’s more about looking at the material intensity of things”. Another person working with Transition explained that “localisation is not the answer on its own; it needs to be set within a framework that acknowledges natural systems”. This argument was based on an understanding that if the cost of environmental destruction was adequately included in the cost of production and goods, then localisation would be the expected result. These interpretations map closely to how some academics have identified the true meaning of the term. For example, North (2010: 587) argues that “localisation does not mean everything being produced locally, nor does it mean an end to trade. It simply means creating a better balance between local, regional, and international markets”. So, when asking the very practical question of “how local is local?” to those involved in Transition in Totnes, the answer would most commonly be “as local as possible, depending on what kind of product or service you were referring to”. When adopting this nuanced understanding many people I spoke with in Totnes, especially those involved in Transition, perceived localisation to be a move towards a more positive form of economy.

Different views in Totnes

Yet broadly negative perceptions of economic growth and positive interpretations of localisation were not shared by all those I spoke with in Totnes. Transition’s more economically focused approach is successfully appealing to many people, but in spite of intentions to have accessible and open messages their localisation discourse does not appeal to everyone in the town. It is pertinent to note that some scholars have challenged the ethos of re-embedding an economy in social relations, which in some ways is what Transition is aiming to do in Totnes. For example, Maurer (2006: 19) asks “why is it seen as an unqualified good that money should be re-grounded in sociality [and] community?” Whilst Gudeman (2005: 97) highlights that “markets offer a space ... for enjoying freedom, exploration and serendipity” that is not offered in the same way through the community-embedded aspects of the economy. Similar types of reservations were evident amongst some people I spoke with in Totnes too, with some people disagreeing with Transition’s vision for a more socially embedded and localised future for the economy. Some local people I spoke with in the town said they wanted chain stores to be welcome in Totnes, and some did not want Totnes to become too local due to concerns this could threaten economic prosperity in the town. Thus, it is important to recognize that there are many

different interpretations and understandings of economic localisation and it is therefore by no means an uncontested or completely dominant discourse in Totnes

Engaging Wider Populations

The economic localisation position of the Transition movement is an increasingly strong aspect of their overall messaging, and this is an intentional decision made to re-align with wider public interests in the context of current economic challenges. As one person working for Transition explained “polls have shown that the public interest in climate change, in the kind of ‘Inconvenient Truth-polar bear’ version, has fallen off quite sharply as the economic situation gets worse and worse. So I think the way that Transition increasingly presents its case - in terms of being about community resilience and economic regeneration based on those values [of wider environmental awareness] - is a really important way forward actually, because that is where everybody is at.” Focusing on changes in the economy as a gateway to dealing with energy and climate related challenges is a re-articulation of the original aims of the Transition movement, which initially focused on climate change and peak oil as primary entry points to engage public interest.

Shifting to a more economically informed discourse is therefore important to encourage interest and enable wider engagement in transitioning society towards a more sustainable future. Although this vision has not proven to appeal to everyone, for many people in Totnes rejecting economic growth and adopting localisation is providing a more positive vision and framework for how we can progress beyond crisis point in the future.

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