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Rural Community Transition and Resilience: What Now for Social Work?

Jonathan Schersch
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Abstract. Rural communities, like all communities, face myriad social, economic and ecological challenges as they endeavor to resolve precarious dependencies on critical, energy-intensive and supply-chain extensive resource systems. With increasing impacts of climate change and related incidents of human and more-than-human displacements, including losses of life and habitat, rural communities have become beset with frequent, prolonged and persistent recovery and coping obligations. The progressive resolution of injustices will need to occur in the face of serious ecological stressors. Designing for and increasingly demonstrating social work practices that prioritize the multi-modal skills of sustainable living may well be the most effective means to realize and sustain environmental justice advancements. Practitioners, educators, researchers and students engaged in mobilizing social work's professional commitments to environmental justice causes would be well-served by acquiring the knowledge and skills needed to realize sustainable livelihoods. Permaculture design principles and methods are cited as means for social work professionals to begin with their own personal and professional practices. Considerations for social work practice, research and education are provided.

Keywords: social work, sustainability, Transition Towns, Permaculture Design

Social workers engaged in rural community practice contexts often live and work in the communities they serve (Pugh, 2007) and so observe, if not encounter, issues of social and environmental justice. All forms of social work practice endeavor to advance causes of justice whether directly or indirectly. According to Adamson, Evans, and Stein (2002), "environmental justice movements call attention to the ways disparate distribution of wealth and power often leads to correlative social upheaval and the unequal distribution of environmental degradation and/or toxicity" (p. 5). Examples may include issues of unsustainable agriculture methods (Shiva, 2005), civil rights or land claims of indigenous communities (Bullard, 1993), anti-nuclear power and weapons proliferation (Giugni, 2004), exposure to toxic emissions and legacy impacts of industries to human health and communities (Davies, 2013; Hofrichter, 1993), or equitable access to transportation resources to support sustainable community development (Holmes, 1997) – all of which involve various applications of international, national, state and local laws and regulations (Rechtschaffen & Gauna, 2002).

A voluminous body of literature now exists that examines the myriad underpinnings and implications of unresolved environmental justice issues, at least within the United States. Remaining professionally diligent to such causes is important given how persistent environmental injustices can manifest corollary social, economic and ecological issues. In many ways, such injustices are demonstrations of how we humans have lost sight of our context as ecological entities (Rees, 2002) and hold inadequate regard for our interdependencies with ecological systems reinforced by compromising ethical and moral commitments. As such, Miller and Westra (2002) assert that:

a comprehensive valuing of the Earth requires a compelling set of ideals, such as the Earth Charter, and reflection on the meanings, connections, and implications

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for practice of those ideals, drawing upon our cultural resources and being sensitive to the effects of unequally distributed social power. It also requires personal, collective, and mutual commitments to the ideals, the human community, and the community of life, bringing to bear whatever capabilities and leadership skills we may possess or acquire. (p. 7)

Changing our relationships with our resources, and with each other, so that the results are not manipulative and abusive with one another and the Earth, as Olson (2012) expects, can manifest healthy and empowering results. In a practical sense, the introduction of new patterns of relationships with our resources and therein demonstrating commitments to ecological integrity will likely cause many social, economic and environmental injustices to gradually subside. Indeed, the progressive resolution of injustices will need to occur expeditiously in the face of serious ecological stressors, including myriad impacts of reported global climate change (IPCC, 2013), requiring robust, creative and continuous action if sustainability goals are to be achieved with minimal hardship. Here then, Jackson (2010) observes that:

There are three possible kinds of minds at work as we contemplate the future of humanity on the only home we have had or likely will have: (1) those who accept the hypothesis as true that we cannot do better than nature; (2) those who believe we can do better; and (3) those who believe that sometimes we can and sometimes we cannot do better. And “cannot” gets back to civilization being dependent on the scaffolding made possible by five exhaustible and relatively nonrenewable carbon pools found in soil, trees, coal, oil and natural gas. (p.14)

The manipulation of these so-called *carbon pools* has afforded many social benefits as well as debilitating consequences. For example, large-scale agriculture activities involving fertilizer applications and large animal stocks have contributed to the erosion, silting and nutrient (primarily nitrogen and phosphorous) polluting of the United States’ Chesapeake Bay, compromising aquatic ecosystems and local economics for decades. Well-documented Amazonian deforestation in Brazil and resulting soil exposures have damaged, if not ruined, critical understory flora and fauna supporting local indigenous livelihoods and reduced sequestration of carbon dioxide of global origins. Recent events in Peruvian and Chinese coal mines, British Petroleum operations in the United States’ Gulf of Mexico, and natural gas *fracking* (hydrolic fracturing) in the State of Pennsylvania and elsewhere in the United States, reflect increasing difficulties that these extracting industries are facing as target stocks are becoming more complicated, costly and controversial to acquire.

Communities, Cultures, and Their Resource Relationships

Rural communities, like all communities, face many social, economic and ecological challenges as they endeavor to resolve precarious dependencies on critical, energy-intensive and supply-chain-extensive resource systems. These systems typically provide food, water and energy products, myriad consumer materials, technologies and services, and related specialized knowledge and skill sets deployed therein. Resulting modern mainstream lifestyles represent significant *ecological footprints* (Global Footprint Network, 2012), reflecting ecological system sources and sinks. On this point, Bane (2012) notes that:

Cultures are fashioned from resources, the technologies that can exploit them, the social and economic structures that mobilize work and wealth and the attitudes, beliefs and rituals that propagate these systems and lend them meaning. The culture that needs to evolve now across North America must be, for practical reasons, based in some familiar and accessible elements, but must also be much less dependent on fossil energy, distant resources and high levels of mobility. It must adapt to lower levels of energy and the wealth that has come from it. We can already see this process of change underway. (pp. 388-389)

As such, social workers know the adverse though often hidden whole-system impacts of contemporary resource consumption exacerbate established socio-environmental concerns (Hoff & McNutt, 1994) and complicate advancements toward sustainable development. For example, many consumed foods travel great distances and require resource-intensive handling, processing, storage and delivery infrastructure (Thistlethwaite, 2012). Also, non-renewable petroleum energy products (of various forms and quantities) often originate from distant locales and require intensive social, economic, political, and technological commitments to sustain them (Merkel, 2003).

Tverberg (2015) provides a timely perspective on how recent fluctuations of global petroleum markets, attributed to so-called peak oil contexts, remain relevant, serious and inadequately understood. Indeed, the dramatic reduction in world oil prices from \$100 to less than \$50 per barrel (at the time of this writing) is not, as she asserts, indicative of faulty peak oil theory. Rather, the present combination of stagnating wages, increasing debt-related investment constraints (i.e., replacement of aging infrastructure), declines in consumption, and increased extraction and production costs of lesser quality oil, reflect “increased inefficiencies” (p. 1) or diminishing returns which peak oil forecasters predicted, though occurring at higher pricing levels. Hence, Tverberg (2015) believes that:

. . . the way we reach this peak though is different from what most people imagined: low oil prices, rather than high oil prices. Low oil prices are brought about by low wages and the ability to add sufficient new debt to offset the low wages. Because the issue is one of affordability, nearly all commodities are likely to be affected, including fossil fuels other than oil. In some sense, the issue is that a financial crash is bringing down the financial system, and is bringing commodities of all kinds with it. (p. 5)

Here then, whether or not one believes in the existence of peak oil trends, resulting economic instabilities interactive with the fluctuations of global petroleum markets, warrants actuarial considerations and preparations for buffering communities from resulting economic hardships. Hence, social workers must proactively examine and understand such trends and implications if they are to be optimally helpful and relevant to impending social change conditions. Heinberg (2011) provides poignant corroboration on this resulting unsustainable economic context, noting that:

Our debt cannot be fully repaid: every dollar saved in the past is owed ever-multiplying returns in the future, yet the planet’s stores of resources are finite and shrinking. Claims just keep growing while resources keep depleting – and real prices of energy and commodities have begun rising. At some point, it will

become clear that this vast ocean of outstanding claims will never be honored, and the result could be a tidal wave of defaults and bankruptcies that would sweep away most of the economy. (p. 237)

Moreover, Heinberg (2011) asserts that four fundamental principles must be honored if contemporary economic theories are to have relevance in the future:

- Growth in population and consumption rates cannot be sustained;
- Renewable resources must be consumed at rates below those of natural replenishment;
- Non-renewable resources must be consumed at declining rates (with rates of decline at least equaling rates of depletion), and recycled wherever possible; and
- Wastes must be minimized, rendered non-toxic to humans and the environment, and made into “food” for natural systems or human production processes. (p. 247)

Heinberg’s (2011) principles seem to reflect a clarion call for honoring and taking proactive responsibility for the state of our collective relationships with each other and all else that rely on the integral sustenance of Earth. These principles seem compatible with social work education, practice and research priorities, especially in rural community contexts. Indeed, Peeters (2012), a Belgian social work academic, asserts that large-scale transformation of society is required and that environmental justice causes will continue to claim a critical space amid efforts by communities in adapting to and thriving amid circumstances that challenge the conventions of resource-intensive mainstream livelihoods.

Social Work with Rural Communities – New Practices of Permaculture Design

With increasing impacts of climate change and related incidents of human and more-than-human displacements, including losses of life and habitat, rural communities have become beset with frequent, prolonged and persistent recovery and coping obligations. Social workers have been involved in disaster preparedness and response efforts, providing direct and indirect support to at-risk individuals and communities therein (Zakour & Harrell, 2003). Walter and Phoenix (2009) recognize that clarifying the relationships among communities and their resource systems toward an ecological framework, especially local food systems, can reveal important sustainability insights for natural resources, economies and health:

Because an ecology of food links health, economy, environment, community, culture, and ethics, strategies based on it should (1) provide food security for all, (2) renew and sustain the natural resource base and the biodiversity of the environment to ensure future food security, (3) build viable agrifood systems that provide for decent rural livelihoods, and (4) promote democratic access to agrifood decision-making as a basis for just and equitable communities. (p. x)

Designing for and increasingly demonstrating direct social work practices that prioritize the multi-modal skills of sustainable living may well be the most effective means to realize and sustain environmental justice advancements. By way of visible commitments to live and work in ways that ambitiously resolve unsustainable ecological impacts, and by extension social,

economic and environmental injustices, social workers can collaboratively develop and advance best practices for sustainable living, emulating the examples of others when possible.

For example, acquiring the knowledge and skills to competently grow, harvest and preserve local food, or generate and use renewable energies, or nurture collaborative relationships among local residents to share and address common needs and interest, all reflect tangible, cogent areas of social work applications in support of sustainable living and personal empowerment efforts. In this sense, it would seem both reasonable and necessary for social workers to begin collaboratively learning and applying new interdisciplinary skills not commonly demonstrated by past practitioners, such as:

- Supporting local food production via designing and managing robust community and residential foodsheds via edible landscaping and multi-functional community orchards;
- Using low-impact building retrofit techniques and ecological design tactics featuring locally-sourced materials, to improve the sustainable performance and experience quality of home and workplace settings;
- Increasing self-reliance and reducing vulnerabilities to resource disruptions by using inexpensive, well-performing appropriate technologies for rainwater harvesting, active and passive solar heating and cooling, and/or creative uses for horizontal and vertical surfaces for buffering weather effects or hosting new wildlife habitats; and/or
- Developing community tool banks to support borrowing, safe-use and proper maintenance of various tools and materials to support individual and community projects.

Moreover, social workers and their respective client communities can manifest timely innovations for just, integral livelihoods in ways not unlike those that reflect the principled intentions of permaculture design. An internationally-acclaimed practice methodology affording robust benefits, Holmgren (2003) defines permaculture design as:

a consciously designed landscape which mimics the patterns and relationships found in nature, while yielding an abundance of food, fibre and energy for provision of local needs...the use of systems thinking and design principles that provide the organizing framework for implementing the above vision... Permaculture is not the landscape, or even the skills of organic gardening, sustainable farming, energy efficient building or eco-village development as such. But it can be used to design, establish, manage, and improve these and all other efforts made by individuals, households and communities towards a sustainable future. (p. xix)

The author has taught, written and demonstrated how permaculture design practices can be enlisted by social workers to advance sustainable community and economic development (Schersch, 2005). Whether at an individual, familial or community scale, social workers can practice and demonstrate efficient, low maintenance, and optimally productive sustainable

systems integrating trees, plants, animals, structures, appropriate technologies and human activities, all in complement to and likely amplifying the value of the traditional knowledge and skills that social workers possess.

For example, the author designed course curricula to introduce students, many of whom were social work students of urban and rural community origins, to four stages of applied permaculture design: (a) Observation and Mapping; (b) Site Assessment & Design; (c) Materials, Technology, and Construction; and (d) Care and Feeding of Applied Systems (Scherch, 2008). Interdisciplinary readings, discussions, field work and hands-on projects were offered to support their learning. Specific learning outcomes allowed students to become well-versed in methodologies and appropriate technology systems; interactive food, water, energy and soil systems; resource management and conservation practices; natural pattern recognition and related plant / animal synergies and guilds; low-impact construction and natural building methods; and corollary local community and economic development ideas. In short, a powerful learning experience occurred which positioned students to be active agents of environmental justice and sustainable change in their communities.

As a result, students worked together to address several key design and performance objectives:

- Resource abundance and appropriate technology use with demonstrably low-cost, high-performance expectations;
- Ecological systems integrity – no pollution, benign emissions, low-energy inputs;
- Robust collaborations and community cooperation;
- Economic vitality and quality-of-life improvements; and
- Educational linkages and integrative, whole-person learning opportunities. (p. 10)

Moreover, beyond classroom projects, students recognized that applications can engage single-family households (Seymour, 2009) or co-housing neighborhood commons (Covarrubias et al., 2010), working farmsteads (Shepard, 2013), or brownfield sites identified for restoration and alternative use (NADO, 2001). And such applications support teaching and learning on how to utilize low-impact appropriate technologies for energies, communications, and more (Fritsch & Gallimore, 2007; Scherch, 2011).

As a result, delightfully practical, diverse, measurable, educational and economically-viable applications were envisaged for sustainable, local empowerment – including their own – as they envisioned their career paths, including meaningful employment and payment of student loans among other aspirations, while making a sustainable difference in their communities. Consideration of such multi-modal social work methods of practice in response to serious and complex change scenarios seems in keeping with what Lovell and Johnson (1994) observed years ago:

the environmental crisis is affecting present day life, not only by bringing about economic changes, but also by causing new health and psychosocial stressors. Placing priority on the interaction between people and their physical works will

inform a truly ecological paradigm of practice. Creative responses to environmentally-related psychosocial risks will require an eclectic approach, which combines support, counseling, education, and empowerment toward the twin goals of personal and community change. (p. 203)

These authors went further to assert that social work values, beliefs and behaviors need to change to support sustainable lifestyles with respect to the natural world. Fortunately, today, people and communities are collaboratively adapting permaculture design methods to support whole-community resilience in keeping with the innovative and timely intentions of so-called *Transition Town* (TT) approaches.

Transition Towns – Prospective Venues for Social Work Innovation

Originally organized by Hopkins (2011) and community residents in Totnes, England in 2005, the TT movement has grown to include communities around the world that advance respective sustainable development. A common organizing theme is shared interest in and concerns about impacts of peak oil and energy descent, climate change, and related economic uncertainties. Moreover, participants collectively assert that:

- Climate change and peak oil require urgent action;
- Life with less energy is inevitable. It is better to plan for it than to be taken by surprise;
- Industrial society has lost the resilience to be able to cope with energy shocks;
- We have to act together, now;
- Infinite growth within a finite system (such as planet Earth) is impossible;
- We demonstrated great ingenuity and intelligence as we raced up the energy curve over the last 150 years. There's no reason why we can't use those qualities, and more, as we negotiate our way up from the depths back towards the sun and air; and
- If we plan and act early enough, and use our creativity and cooperation to unleash the genius within our local communities, we can build a future far more fulfilling and enriching, more connected to and more gentle on the Earth, than the life we have today. (Transition Towns, 2013)

Accordingly, numerous TT groups are presently advancing plans for realizing community skill capacity-building objectives for sustainable living, including foci on food, energy, transportation, health and wellness, social empowerment and change processes, alternative economic models, among others. These capacities, and the social relationships and networks they embody, are typically representative of applied permaculture design principles and methods. The Transition Network website (2013) reports that practical projects allow current and prospective participants to learn from each other about “topics of community supported agriculture, shared transport, local currencies, seed harvesting and swaps, tool libraries, energy saving clubs, urban orchards, reskilling classes...” and others.

Within many rural communities across the United States and elsewhere around the world, many TT groups have formed and are actively pursuing initiatives of sustainable community development and resilience. The following section briefly describes three TT organizations underway in the States of Washington, Tennessee and Vermont, with information derived from their respective websites.

Transition Whatcom -- Whatcom County, Washington

Located in northwest Washington State, Transition Whatcom aims to advance resilient and more self-reliant communities throughout Whatcom County. In doing so, the organization supports the development of robust collaborations to strengthen local food supplies, knowledge and use of sustainable energy sources, a vibrant local economy and overall community well-being. The mission of Transition Whatcom is four-fold:

- 1) To explore and then follow pathways of practical actions that will reduce our carbon emissions and dependence on fossil fuels;
- 2) To rebuild our community's resilience, that is, its ability to withstand shocks from the outside, through being more self-reliant in areas such as food, energy, health care, jobs and economics;
- 3) To inspire and support the communities and neighborhoods of Whatcom County as they establish Transition Initiatives at these local levels; and
- 4) To coordinate a county-wide, citizen led Energy Descent Action Pathway by creating a collective 20 year vision of Whatcom County. From there we will devise the paths on which we may achieve our objectives. (Transition Whatcom, 2015)

Moreover, Transition Whatcom describes its intentions via the Guideline Paper: *Balancing the Principle of Positive Visioning with the Principle of Inclusion and Openness*, including the following excerpts:

Transition Whatcom is open and inclusive to anyone, regardless of their beliefs and opinions. We recognize the need for an unprecedented coming together of the broad diversity of society. We dedicate ourselves to ensuring that our decision making processes and working groups embody principles of openness and inclusion. We endeavor to engage the diversity of individuals, community groups, the local business community, and local government officials. We believe that in the challenge of energy descent, it will take almost all of us working together to cope with the change required.

Transition Whatcom will use meeting structures and group processes that facilitate respectful conduct and promote free expression, safety, and allow creative wisdom to emerge. Examples of group processes we might employ that facilitate openness and inclusion and that are non-hierarchical include "Open Space" events, "World Cafe" events, and "Fishbowl" discussions.

We believe that each person has to follow their own heart and their clearest thinking to determine how and where they put their energies for the great changes we are undergoing. Since Transition Whatcom is open to anyone, we expect to have a wide spectrum of beliefs and strategies among our membership. There are many right answers, and it is not our job to judge others. We will focus on telling the closest version of the truth that we know, but our messages will strive to be non-directive, respecting each person's ability to make a response that is appropriate to their situation.

Transition Whatcom also supports the UN Declaration of Human Rights (General Assembly resolution 217 A [III] of 10 December 1948). Although all are welcome to participate in our programs, extreme political groups and individuals that have discrimination as a key value will not be allowed to participate in the decision-making bodies within Transition Whatcom. (2015)

Transition Hohenwald, Tennessee

With a population of approximately 4000, the community of Hohenwald, located within Lewis County, is organizing efforts to realize interests for an ecologically-restorative, safe and economically-viable county. In doing so, the Sonnenschein Green Initiative (SGI) was created to support related economic and community development strategies. In their own words, the following narrative describes the mission and intention of SGI:

We strive to support the following areas: local business owners, farmers, artisans and service providers; the creation of quality and long-term local employment; community networking opportunities and social events; creating an economy that has a total and sustainable economic return; and increasing our goods and services exported rather than imported. We also focus on 'green' development, as we see that creating a 'green' economy and 'greening up' our production and consumption will be the quickest and most effective way to achieve sustainable economic and community development. To SGI the word 'green' equals efficiency and less waste.

The growing trend toward localization of food, energy, goods & services, and entire economies, away from dependency on a teetering, global non-renewable energy based economy, exemplifies the transition culture's response to massive resource depletion, global energy crises, rising fuel and food prices, plummeting markets, and the threat of global climate change. Towns, organizations, and entire governments are finding that localization is a "win" for the economy, environment, community development, and for quality of life. The Transition Town Movement—one example of localization—was founded in 2005, in Kinsale, Ireland and Totnes, England; and has since spread throughout Europe and into the Americas. Towns across the world are asking questions related to energy descent planning and transitioning away from petroleum and other non-renewable energy based economies. Our community of Hohenwald, TN began similar conversations in 2006.

Being a rural community, we found that the best way to communicate with local residents about energy efficiency was to talk about economics. We're trying to invent or grow something locally that's positive and within the existing boundaries. People have enough problems already and this makes them sensitive to talking outside their boundaries. The unemployment rate of Lewis County is above 17% and our neighbor, Perry County has above 25%. With unemployment so high, people within our current cultural context don't want to talk about protecting ecosystems. They want to talk about jobs and saving money.

The most effective and energy efficient strategy or "right thing" for SGI's transition initiative has been to marry Permaculture with financial literacy. Permaculture design and system thinking is at the core of SGI's transition strategy. Our project development incorporates Permaculture design principles and ethics of earth care, people care and fair share. (Dauksha-English, 2015)

Transition Putney, Vermont

Similarly, the citizens of Putney, Vermont are taking steps to organize, clarify and prepare for transitions within and around their community. They have done so in the belief that a transition to living with less oil (petroleum) could introduce many enjoyable and beneficial attributes in comparison with contemporary oil-dependent lifestyles:

. . . by shifting our mind-set we can actually recognize the coming post-cheap oil era as an opportunity rather than a threat, and design the future low carbon age to be thriving, resilient and abundant — somewhere much better to live than our current alienated consumer culture based on greed, war and the myth of perpetual growth. (Transition Putney, 2015)

Moreover, they cite three driving conditions which inform their purpose and efforts:

- Climate change, brought on by deforestation and burning fossil fuels (causing high levels of CO₂), over population, factory farming, and so on;
- Peak Oil – brought on by pumping half of all known oil reserves in one century; and
- Economic instability caused by a broken monetary system that relies on false wealth and continued growth.

Hence, Transition Putney (2015) was formed with the following mission:

Transition Putney engages the creativity, expertise and skill-sets of our friends and neighbors in the design of a sustainable, resilient, socially just and mutually supportive community. We collaborate to embrace the extraordinary challenge and opportunity of climate change, peak oil and economic instability. Together we reinvent, rethink, rebuild and celebrate our community and the world around us. (Transition Putney, 2015)

As a result, Transition Putney is focusing on building local community capacities for food security, systems of health and healing to enhance the quality of life for all ages, and other foci of sustainable systems and practices including renewable energies, local economic development and currency, energy-efficient transportation systems, and transition art and culture.

These organizations and their intentions represent many common values and distinctive actions to advance efforts at strengthening community resilience. Heinberg (2011) regards these initiatives as a grassroots movement aimed at preparing citizens for challenges and strategic opportunities as they endeavor to reduce dependencies on fossil fuels and transform the unsustainable middle-class lifestyle:

. . . (It) should aim to build community resilience, taking account of local vulnerabilities and opportunities. Ideally, this movement should frame its vision of the future in positive, inviting terms. It should aim to build a cooperative spirit among people with differing background and interests. While this movement should be rooted in local communities, its effectiveness would increase if it were loosely coordinated through national hubs and a global information center. The work of local groups should include the sharing of practical skills such as food production and storage, home insulation, and the development and use of energy conserving technologies. The movement should be non-authoritarian but should hold efficient meetings, training participants in effective, inclusive decision-making methods. (p. 270)

Social workers can provide valuable perspective and practice demonstrations to support the effectiveness of TT initiatives. Bay (2013) recognizes that social work skills and knowledge in community work, group facilitation, and community consultation may be important for “the development of trusting relationships for local community resilience” and that “social workers can contribute to some of the large scale societal transformations required to address climate change challenges and peak oil” (p. 185). Indeed, social work educators, practitioners and researchers, spanning micro, mezzo and macro-practice domains, are well positioned to contribute to and learn by way of participation in TT initiatives. For example, social workers engaged in direct clinical and therapeutic practices could explore how and in what ways they could help their clients face and resolve adverse effects caused by stressors of transition. Social workers within social welfare organizations could increasingly leverage institutional resources and services to mobilize changes for sustainability. And, social workers involved in community advocacy could examine and encourage changes to public policies that highlight the interests of at-risk communities while encouraging innovations akin to objectives of Transition Town initiatives. Social work education and research can thus be oriented to guide and support practice coherence within and across these practice domains.

In view of optimizing rural social work practice, Riebschleger (2007) found that practice effectiveness demonstrated competencies at engaging complex community systems, often facing conditions of poverty and resource constraints, and reflecting unique cultural dynamics and relationships which effect pace of change especially when geographic distances inform experiences of social isolation or stigma. Social workers, with discerning cultural competency skills, can be well-equipped and positioned to participate in TT movements, especially as unexpected changes and disruptions to rural community lifestyles occur.

Next Steps for Social Work Practice, Research and Education

The social work profession and its mission continue to face a host of 21st century issues and contexts critical to the livelihoods of current and coming generations. Social workers must redouble their efforts to innovate and demonstrate – not simply teach and study – practical, replicable, economically-viable and inclusive methods of social, economic and ecological justice and sustainability at once. The principles, methodologies and practical examples of applied permaculture design can be leveraged immediately to reveal pathways for resolving the critical issues of our day.

On this point, McKinnon and Bay (2013) observe that environmental impacts have heretofore often been portrayed as relevant primarily to persons involved in particular occupations of environmental concern, such as farmers, fishers or politicians. However, the authors (2013) assert that:

the social justice issues associated with natural disasters and the impact of climate change are increasingly coming to the attention of the public, of governments, and of welfare services—and social workers, who want to know what contributions they can make professionally towards a more sustainable, just, and ecologically-sensitive world. (p. 155)

Moreover, Bay (2013) promotes the value in pursuing further research into social work practice roles in support of new social movements within large scale societal transformations. Hence, the following questions from Bay (2013) invite inquiry about how and in what ways social work education, research and modes of practice can be oriented to optimally support collective transition efforts:

- What difference do various types of leadership, group aims, governance structures, community relationships, and gender relations make to changes in the daily practices by community members in addressing climate change and peak oil?
- What difference can this kind of movement make to stimulating changes in people's collective actions to reduce carbon emissions?
- Are local changes around daily activities concerned with food production and consumption, energy efficiency, and renewable sources of fuel, and reskilling of people to consume less, reuse, recycle, and preserve going to be enough to reduce carbon emissions?
- Is some of the value of this movement in the skills and experiences gained by community groups in self-organising and in becoming locally self-reliant in the face of future potential climate change and peak oil challenges? (p. 184).

The willingness and ability of professional social work to adapt practice conventions, modify educational curricula, and expand research to account for best-practices for sustainability – spanning traditional practice modalities—could spell the difference between professional renaissance and obsolescence. At the least, in transition, health and ecological integrity may result.

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