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## **Festivals of Transition: *Greenlight Festival Leicester***

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The Brundtland Commission in its report *Our Common Future* (United Nations, 1987) is widely credited with setting down the first policy definition of sustainable development. In 2017 this report will be thirty years old yet it seems we are still a long way from living sustainably:

If, as of 2017, there is not a start of a major wave of new and clean investments, the door to 2 degrees [global temperature increase] will be closed. (Biol, 2011)

Green policies have been ‘adapted and adopted’ by mainstream parties across Europe, despite Green parties being a relatively small political force (Carter, 2013). The European Commission has become a worldwide driver of green policy (Judge, 1992) and market-based innovations such as the Emissions Trading System<sup>1</sup>, despite being celebrated and criticised in seemingly equal measure. Media coverage of ‘outsider’ party growth in the UK has swung towards the libertarian and anti-Europe UKIP recently, despite comparable and longer term growth in support for the Greens (Goodwin & Ford, 2013). Efforts have been made to disassociate Green voices from older clichés of self-deprivation:

The Green party has changed: partly the personalities within it, partly in response to the changing world outside it....At the same time, ideas that were mainly theoretical 25 years ago – solar and wind technology – have been demonstrably workable...The Greens have become the party of possibilities, not catastrophes. (Williams, 2014).

One attempt to imagine a sustainable future can be found in *The World We Made*, written by Johnathon Porritt from the perspective of a school teacher in the year 2050. The positives of huge renewable investments, progressive economic policies and a panoply of exciting new technologies are matched with equally plausible negatives of stubborn inequality, famines and riots. In the postscript, Porritt states: ‘If we can’t deliver the necessarily limited vision of a better world mapped out in *The World We Made*, then the hard truth is that no other vision will be available to us anyway, on any terms.’ (Porritt, 2013: 276)

This sentiment captures the outlook of many contemporary Green voices. There will be a shift away from a carbon-driven economy, and it is one we can meet with shock and collapse or with prescience and resilience. This chapter aims to discuss how a proactive approach to sustainability is reflected in the UK's festivals sector and in the views of the Transition Network in Leicester and its *Greenlight Festival* of which the author is a founder member. The eponymous 'transition' refers to a world not only without cheap access to fossil fuels and the avoidance of (further) catastrophic climate change; but also to wider socio-economic changes culminating in a more equitable, enjoyable and even enlightened future.

Nationally, the Transition Network was formed in late 2006<sup>2</sup>. At the time of writing, the Transition website lists 475 officially registered Transition Initiatives (Transition Network, 2014a) while the Draft Transition Network Strategy gives a figure of 1,120 across 43 countries. (Transition Network, 2014b) A further estimate of local, community-based groups focusing on climate action in 13 EU countries gave a total of 1999, of which 841 were identified as Transition Initiatives, 367 being based in the UK (O'Hara, 2013). Transition Initiatives are characterised by their community-led approach to organisation. These voluntary initiatives are set up by individuals, with information and advice from the larger network, and commonly span geographic areas such as towns, cities, neighbourhoods and national hubs. The implications of this emergent, small scale yet direct approach embodied by Transition are summarized on their website:

We're not saying that national governments are irrelevant or that institutions like businesses aren't important...What we are saying is that for most people, their own local community is where they can have the quickest and greatest impact...when governments see what communities can do...it'll be easier for them to make decisions that support this work. (Transition Network, 2014c).

Transition Leicester, the 45th official Transition initiative, was set up in 2008 and to date has acted as an umbrella organisation, or launching pad, for a number of sustainability projects. Practical projects include community supported agriculture (providing around 30 co-op members with a weekly organic veg-box) community owned renewable energy schemes (with £550,000 in shares invested) and a 'swap shop' offering clothes, books and communally owned tools and bicycles. Educational projects include accredited Permaculture design courses, 'Footpaths' group meetings and a number of informal skill sharing sessions. While here we have divided these projects into 'practical' and 'educational', the reality is that the majority of activities retain a strong social learning and community building focus. What role do festivals take in this scenario?

Festivals are commonly defined as periodic events that have as their core function, the embodiment of a defined community's identity and its historical continuity (Falassi, 1987: 1-7); this does not have to be explicitly stated as an aim or desired outcome. A festival can also more directly act as a platform for promotion, experimentation, recruitment, networking, trade and leisure. The community-building dimensions of festivals are clearly appealing to Transition groups. We could even suggest that more formal Transition events such as workshops, annual general meetings commonly exhibit certain festival characteristics; a blend of entertainment, information, participatory activities, frequently free of charge and open in some way to the general public. We are not suggesting that festivals are unique in this respect, but we may consider what particular relevance they have in the wider discourse of culture and sustainability.

Sustainability has been addressed by cultural festivals and the wider events sector principally as an environmental issue and it cannot be denied that these temporary cities, commonly fuelled by diesel generators on the one hand and hedonism on the other, have substantial direct and indirect impacts on the natural environment. Non-profit organisations targeting environmental impacts such as Julie's Bicycle and A Greener Festival have emerged in the UK in the late 2000s, though we may assume longer established festivals and networks will have considered environmental issues prior to this. In Europe, Yourope and GO Events perform a similar role. These groups promote self-regulation and best practice via conferences, online resources and various award schemes; we may identify personal vindications and good PR value as key drivers alongside financial savings. The increasing costs related to energy and/or fuel, waste management (particularly landfill) is a trend likely to continue.

Harder regulations affecting festivals vary across local authority boundaries, although authorities may also see the balance of benefits outweighing the costs; the benefits principally being economic, media coverage and loosely defined social dimensions of cohesion or civic pride and the costs principally being environmental, also social (crime, congestion) and potentially economic whether the authority is invested directly or only via the indirect costs of licensing, policing and other essential services. The development of British Standard BS8901, since replaced by International Standard ISO20121, for Event Sustainability Management, has raised awareness at a corporate level but it is predicted that its impact may increase if it is included as a 'hard' criterion for applications for an event licence or public funding. There are currently no cases to the author's knowledge where this has actually been enforced, however large-scale event organisers agree that certification