

James Samuel's Transition Towns 25 May 2009

At the end of May, physical activity and nutrition experts from all over the country, as well as overseas experts, gathered at the Agencies for Nutrition Action conference in Wellington.

The focus of the conference was on promoting nutrition and physical activity in sustainable ways. It also highlighted that many sectors – such as conservation, education, transport, recreation, social development and local government – are well placed to influence nutrition and physical activity.

Another focus was on how communities have the power to influence their own futures. This was demonstrated by James Samuel's presentation on 'transition towns'.

James Samuel is New Zealand's transition towns national coordinator. He says transition towns is a pioneering concept that, in the space of just a year and a half, has gained enormous traction – with the number of transition towns in New Zealand growing from zero to fifty.

"There are two driving factors forcing society to change – climate change and peak oil. Peak oil will occur when the rate of global oil production reaches a maximum, after which it will begin its bumpy decline. Since we started using oil 150 years ago, we've built a society that is extraordinarily dependent upon it. We've already consumed half the oil on the planet – at present we're burning a swimming pool full of oil every 20 seconds.

To reverse the effects of climate change, and survive without oil, Mr Samuel said we're being obliged to design a future society that thrives in a low energy world.

"Things are looking bleak right now but re-localisation is a light at the end of the tunnel. Localisation works towards meeting our essential needs in the community around us. Instead of importing fruit and veg from halfway across the world via ships and planes, we make sure they're grown here at home. Not only will it make our communities more sustainable, but far healthier too."

The idea of transition towns started in 2001 in Ireland. It is based around bringing people together to explore how communities can respond to the twin challenges of climate change and peak oil. Each transition group networks with their local community on a coordinated range of projects designed to transition from high energy to low energy lifestyles.

"The aim is to re-localise our communities, making them connected, resilient and truly sustainable. Each transition group starts by raising awareness in their local community. They then make an action plan and work together on a range of projects to make communities more sustainable. These can include forming food groups, planting trees, reducing waste and countless other strategies."

Transition Town initiatives are forming all across New Zealand, even in the city centres and suburbs surrounding NZ's major centres.

"The more people who come together, the stronger and healthier our future will be. Collective wisdom, movement and action will eventually influence governments to make the changes needed. My vision for the future includes local democracy and governance and a natural acceptance of the Permaculture principles of earth-care, people-care and fair-share.

"We're not powerless to change things, and I wouldn't be alive at any other time. We could cook this planet – or we could have an awakening of consciousness and turn it all around."