

## **SUSTAINABLE LIVING GUIDE: 66. SUPPORT GROUPS FOR HARD TIMES<sup>1</sup>**

**Chuck Collins<sup>©</sup>**

“It is hard to imagine facing the future without my gang of neighbors,” said Laura Dudley, a member of a common security club in the Detroit area. “The whole media culture is telling us to keep borrowing and consuming, that climate change is still under debate, and that the experts are back in control of the economy. They’re tell us: Don’t worry about a thing. Go back to sleep!” The good news is a lot of people are refusing to go back to sleep. We know that the next 20 years will be very different than the last 20 years. But to sustain our spirits and activism, we need small groups of allies—affinity groups—to support one another and build real security.

An encouraging undercurrent of the current political moment is the hundreds of local groups that have formed to proactively face economic and ecological change. These include community-wide planning efforts like Transition Towns and small group approaches, such as Common Security Clubs—which are sometimes called “resilience groups” or “economic security circles.” In the process of social change, these are necessary and complementary strategies. Common security clubs are typically founded by people concerned about their economic security. These small groups of 10-25 adults are consciously breaking down the isolation and fear triggered by the 2008 economic meltdown. Clubs have strengthened communities and enabled participants to learn together, engage in mutual aid, and take social action.

Clubs act as ongoing study/action groups. They also provide concrete help to one another through support groups for the unemployed or “anxiously employed,” as well as food sharing, and time banks—which promote bartering and skill exchanges. Transition Towns are often convened by people with an acute awareness of both climate change and peak oil. Organizers recognize the importance of proactive planning for the decline in fossil fuels and the need to re-skill, engage in local food production, and create and support the businesses of the new economy.

Transition Towns and common security clubs share the common goal of helping participants recognize and respond to the realities of economic instability and ecological peril. They prepare participants to live in new economic and ecological realities and support one another to be agents of change, rather than passively waiting for others to fix the problem.

### **Importance of Small Affinity Groups**

Sustained consciousness groups—or affinity groups—are essential tools for making social change last. There are inspiring lessons to be learned from the 1970s women’s movement about the vital role of consciousness raising and support groups. And many environmental groups have discovered the value of “low carbon diet” support groups and coaching to help people make consumption changes.

In Rob Hopkins's book, *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience*, he describes the importance of “Home Groups” in forming Transition Towns. Home Groups are defined as “small, close groups in which people get to know each other well, with a shared

---

<sup>1</sup> Yes! Magazine, October 05, 2010

intention, to offer a degree of support and mutual reinforcement which environmentalists rarely feel. These groups will allow people to share their excitement, their skills and resources and their energy for making practical change.”

In essence, common security clubs are a form of Home Groups. The Common Security Club network has a new six-session curriculum for start-up clubs for participants to learn about economic and ecological change. The key takeaway is that our society cannot sustain the model of economic growth we’ve known our entire lives—based on reckless consumption, borrowing, financial speculation, and cheap, easy to get fossil fuels. In the group, members practice mutual aid and reciprocity, building strength to face future economic or ecological shocks together.

Religious congregations have taken the lead in encouraging the formation of these groups. In November, the Maine Council of Churches is sponsoring a workshop on “Building Resilient Congregations & Communities,” to encourage the spread of common security clubs in the state. In the Jamaica Plain neighborhood of Boston, a number of common security clubs have played a critical role in launching the Jamaica Plain New Economy Transition group, including a series of educational events.

People are joining these movements with different initial motivations. Some show up to increase their economic security, while others are primarily concerned about responding to ecological realities. But both of these motivations lead through the same door—toward a more vibrant and sustainable new economy.

“I couldn’t face these changes alone,” said Dudley. “I need encouragement, reinforcement and the knowledge that someone is watching my back. With my gang, instead of fearing the future—I feel like we’re on an adventure together.”