

# world news

# The Spanish Spring

by Stephan Balsel and Juan del Río (Barcelona)

The Spanish economy is locked in a vicious downward spiral. Forget the meaningless concept of growth, which anyway has been negative in Spain over the last five years. Look at the reality.

Unemployment has increased from 8% to more than 25%, with more than half of all 18-25 year olds now without work. The income gap between the rich and poor has grown more in Spain than anywhere else in the European Union, according to a 2012 report by the Catholic organisation, Caritas. UNICEF defines one in every four Spanish children as poor.

Education and health budgets have been slashed and public services have been privatised, while taxes at every level of household income have increased to some of the highest rates in Europe. Since 2008 there have been 400,000 evictions despite the fact that, according to a survey for *El País* newspaper, there are more than 5 million empty housing units.

In the words of British political scientist Susan George, quoted in the Spanish newspaper *Levante*: "It's as if the Spanish are being used as laboratory rats to see what level of punishment and suffering they can endure before they rebel."

Amid the grim statistics, and the stories of despair and unhappiness, there are some hopeful signs. As people realise that the government is not able, or is unwilling, to

do something, innovative alternatives have emerged, pointing, perhaps, to a new social and economic model.

One of the first big responses to the crisis was the 15M Movement. Starting on the 15th of May 2011, hundreds of squares in Spain were peacefully occupied as a massive, decentralised and connected demonstration. The aim was to recover public space as an Ancient Greek-style "agora", where people organised themselves to work on the development of alternative economic and social models. A few months later the Occupy movement spread to the Anglo-Saxon world.

Small groups from 15M then went into the neighbourhoods to organise and spread the word. Different projects grew up, like

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the Affected by Mortgages group, which has stopped over 300 evictions around Spain. This was a response to laws dating from 1909, which protects banks not householders, and which has been described as "abusive" by the European Court of Justice.

Another successful experiment spreading through the country is 'Integral Cooperatives', a mix of consumer, producer, work and housing co-operatives that have emerged as horizontal, non-capitalist organisations. Aurea Social in Barcelona offers health and education services



A peaceful protester offers flowers in Barcelona in May 2011. Photo by Ramon Serra/Fotomovimiento

in return for whatever citizens can offer – as long as it's not euros!

In the Catalan town of Tarragona the organisers of the local currency, the Eco, asked not just local shops but also the producers of goods available for sale to accept 50-100% of their product price in Ecos. Another local currency, the Turuta in Vilanova, which was started by a Transition initiative, has made waves by using their local currency to finance local projects – without charging interest on the loans!

If local systems of exchange can be seen as a barometer of the rise of alternative economics, then Spain is a world leader. There are 117 Spanish complementary currencies registered on the international Community

Exchange System ([www.ces.org.za](http://www.ces.org.za)). That's 50% more than the US in second place and more than three times as many as the next European country, Finland.

Spain is now crossing a threshold of change, and every change produces pain. However, as the crisis deepens more people wake up and realise that we will never go back. When that happens we start to step towards a new paradigm. This crisis may turn out to be an incredible opportunity to take our future into our own hands and to move from the realm of ideas to action.

Juan del Río and Stephan Balsel are members of *Barcelona en Transició*, one of 30 Transition initiatives in Spain.

## So this is what a revolution looks like

Naresh Giangrande and Sophy Banks delivered the first Transition Training course in Athens last year, and found seeds of positive change amidst the deepening crisis. Naresh reports.

It's so easy to continue to believe in the Way It Has Always Been. Then one day it's no longer there and we all want to believe in the 'new normal', which then becomes the familiar, until it too is replaced by something else. For a while the two realities sit side by side, and appear to coexist, until one day they don't.

And so it goes in Greece. Something feels different, and then one day it's clear for all to see. What is bewildering is that in the midst of relentless change normalcy hangs on like the drunk who won't go home even though the party is over.

The Transition trainers stayed near Exarthia Square, a maze of lively cafes and tavernas, with nightly gatherings of a different

character altogether. All around the square are a backdrop of revolutionary slogans and posters. An anarchist collective is apparently at war with the drug dealers, as well as the State.

Most people attending the Transition training - held in a repurposed 1960's concrete industrial building, now housing a community arts project - were still in work. We asked in one of our 'mappings' at the beginning who had lost jobs or income, or who knew someone who had. At least half stepped forward.

In another mapping we asked whether most people in their communities saw the present crisis as primarily financial, or did it have wider implications? More than half indicated that ordinary people felt it was a crisis of culture and a deeply flawed economic system, as well as an ecological crisis.

Another exercise was even more surprising. We asked people to name the reasons why we needed to engage in transition, and place them in a certain pattern, drawing the

connections between energy and resources, equality, the financial system and ecology. A deeply thought-through and fundamental understanding emerged. The present situation has made many people think long and hard and come to some deep realisations of the depth of the crisis facing all of us.

And although we heard many stories of Greeks leaving Greece for more favourable countries, we met several Greeks who had been born or moved abroad and are now returning. And there are apparently many more who see the crisis as an opportunity.

As the old system breaks down, new ways of living and working become available. On the course there was a wide mix of people: a Permaculture teacher who was working on an agricultural project, another in a 'Citizens Alert' group (network of people, creating grassroots political engagement), who told us that he had to 'make something change or go crazy'. We heard about several centres

of environmental education being set up, teaching everything from straw bale building to non-violent communication techniques, and about many abandoned villages in the mountains being resettled by young people wanting land, as well as others returning to the Greek islands.

So in a state of crisis that intensifies each day there are already tender new shoots of new ways of living and working, and it is hoped that Transition initiatives will become established and contribute to the repurposing of this ancient culture. Many changes have convulsed this small country: world wars, the civil wars that followed, the military junta, and now the Euro crisis. You can feel resilience in the sinews of this place, culture built upon culture, as life goes on. Somehow.

Naresh Giangrande is the co-founder of Transition Town Totnes, and runs Transition Training, which has delivered courses in 30 countries since 2006.