

## Maintaining Momentum in Bristol Community Energy

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### A review of Community Energy in the UK – drawing on the literature

#### ***Rhetoric or Empowerment?***

Most analyses of the UK's sustainable energy agenda coalesce around two broad themes, reflecting a disconnect within the government's dual-facing policy approach. The first theme, predominate particularly during the 1990s, is informed by the theory of 'ecological modernisation' (EM). Advocates of this approach emphasise the role of private-sector led eco-technological innovation as the driving force behind an expansive 'green economy'. The influential Stern Review, commissioned by the British Government in 2006, epitomises the logic of EM, according to which economy and ecology may be reconciled by the development of new markets for environmentally harmful processes, such as the global trade in carbon emissions. Promoting renewables by incentivising large-scale private investment in renewable energy generation is another example of this modernisation approach. Policy prescriptions based on this logic view climate change and energy security as primarily technical problems to be addressed by top-down managerial approaches to policy making.

Enduring criticism of economic reasoning as a 'one size fits all' approach to sustainability has led to an emerging discourse which highlights the social and cultural aspects of environmental issues and energy use. In particular, and partially in response to the growth of civil society activity across the UK, policy discourse has focused increasingly on community involvement in both supply- and demand-side sustainable energy initiatives. The accompanying academic emphasis on community empowerment and localism reflects a broader shift towards socio-cultural interpretations of climate change which posit people's attitudes, values, cognitions, behaviours and lifestyles as appropriate terrains for mitigatory policy interventions.

Several specific policy initiatives have sought to catalyse community energy activities, including the Rural Community Renewable Energy Fund (DEFRA 2012), the Local Energy Assessment Fund (Energy Saving Trust 2011), the Low Carbon Buildings Programme (BRE 2011) and the Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC)'s Community Energy Online information portal (<http://ceo.decc.gov.uk>) and Low Carbon Communities Challenge project (DECC 2009). Despite the flurry of policy interventions, Seyfang *et al.* (2012) warn that the extent to which this represents evidence-based policy-making is unclear. Their report *Community Energy in the UK* presents the findings of the first national-scale survey conducted by an independent body which specifically targets community energy groups, collating empirical evidence regarding their objectives, activities and networking as a sector, their strengths and weaknesses, and the opportunities and threats presented by wider contexts. From the extensive detail contained within the report, which makes for valuable reading, the authors draw the following main conclusions:

1) *Community energy is not reducible to a single entity*

Some groups have ambitions to expand and grow in the way that policy-makers might hope, whilst others do not. This diversity has several ramifications for effective governance, including a need for joined-up thinking among government departments and a requirement that performance measurement and project evaluation can acknowledge multiple sets of objectives (Seyfang *et al.* 2012: 21).

2) *The civil society basis of the sector is fundamental*

The voluntary nature of most groups is fundamental to their character and to their success at engaging local communities, and distinguishes them from many of the organisations which groups aim to work alongside. Vulnerabilities and tensions emerge from this disjuncture: the growth potential of voluntary groups is uncertain, whilst the drawbacks of becoming more business-like and commercial loom large (Seyfang *et al.* 2012: 21-22).

Following this second conclusion, the authors distinguish internal from external success factors and stress that regardless of the strength of particular groups, external sources of support are required for their continued success: 'this indicates the strong need for consistent policy support, *as well as intermediary networks*, to ensure community energy projects have the resources they need to progress and achieve their objectives' (Seyfang *et al.* 2012: 22, emphasis added). This recommendation is of direct relevance to the Bristol context, with BEN an established intermediary network capable of bridging the thorny divide between its member groups' foundations in civil society and the formal demands of an increasingly business-modelled and revenue-based policy regime.

The growing prevalence of 'community' within energy policy discourse has attracted both optimism and concern from researchers. As part of the ESRC's Sustainable Technologies Programme, Walker *et al.* (2007) examine government-led energy programs which specifically target a role for community groups. They conclude that while there is much to be positive about regarding national support and funding programs for community energy, some initiatives have done little to realize any form of real participation, empowerment or wider civic outcome, using the labels of 'local' and 'community' to frame pre-standing instrumental policy needs and objectives (Walker *et al.* 2007: 77). To avert long-term dissipation of grass-roots energies, these authors also urge careful consideration amongst community participants regarding how to address the key issue of evaluation. If the primary evaluative lens is a project's direct contribution to emissions reduction then, given vast discrepancies of scale between domestic targets and the carbon impacts of specific projects, public funds may be judged to have been poorly spent. Instead, the authors suggest that a more holistic evaluative frame is required, capable of strategically demonstrating the subtle and accumulative cultural impacts that a multiplicity of small projects can help realise. This would require 'extended, sensitive and in-depth' project-scale evaluation – 'qualities that are rarely observed in standard tick-box approaches to program monitoring that fit into short-term budgetary timescales' (Walker *et al.* 2007: 79).

### **Social Change: Which Theory?**

Making sense of the range of activities which comprise 'community energy' requires the adoption of a specific theoretical approach to social change. There are distinctions in the literature between those adopting a systems/structure perspective and those adopting a behaviour/agency-based position, with others adopting a meso-level perspective based on social 'practices'. Each level of analysis has its own advantages and drawbacks and produces quite distinct recommendations for action:

*Strategic Niche Management / Multi-level perspective/Systems theory* (e.g. Elzen *et al.* 2004, Grin *et al.* 2010, Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012, Seyfang *et al.* 2010)

- Focuses on the system-wide transformation required to realise a low carbon future. Innovative practices will be of limited effectiveness if they are unable to diffuse beyond the 'niche'.
- Emphasises strategies which promote mechanisms for networking, aggregation and shared learning, technology diffusion and collective communications.
- Favours an action-oriented approach to social learning.

*Behavioural Theory* (e.g. DEFRA 2008)

- Focuses on the importance of individual behaviour and lifestyle changes. Macro-level interventions which ignore the psychological determinants of individual decision-making will be ineffective.
- Emphasises strategies which 'go with the grain' of our often less-than-rational behaviour.
- Favours an individual/psychological approach to social change.

*Social Practice Theory* (e.g. Shove *et al.* 2012, Shove & Pantzar 2005, Hargreaves *et al.* 2011)

- Focuses on the social context of human action and decision-making. System-wide shifts cannot occur without redressing the dynamics of our normal, everyday practices.
- Emphasises strategies which promote uptake of low-energy/sustainable practices.
- Favours an integrated, relational approach to social change.

An emerging body of research explores potential roles for community groups within broadly conceived *sustainability transitions* (see Grin *et al.* 2010; Seyfang *et al.* 2010; Hielscher *et al.* 2011; Hargreaves *et al.* 2011; Seyfang & Haxeltine 2012). The notion of transition encompasses the system-wide transformation in sociotechnical systems of provision required by the move to a low-carbon economy. Researchers show how historic transitions have been triggered by a concentration of projects in 'niche' spaces where new radical innovations are tested and developed (examples include the shift from horse-drawn carts to cars, or from cesspools to sewer systems). These niches act as protective spaces which acknowledge uncertainty regarding the best form such a system-wide transition should take; tolerant of poor returns, niche experimental projects acknowledge the inevitable 'trial and error' nature of proposed solutions to complex problems. The notion of transition has been popularised in recent years by the rapid growth of the Transition Towns (TT) movement, which Seyfang & Haxeltine (2012) conceive of as a grass-roots niche of sociotechnical

innovation. The authors apply strategic niche management theory in their assessment of TT groups' attempts to diffuse beyond the spaces in which they operate, offering the following practical recommendations for enhancing influence:

- 1) *Foster deeper engagement with resourceful actors*
- 2) *Manage participants' expectations realistically by delivering tangible opportunities for action*
- 3) *Embrace an action-oriented model of social learning, as opposed to a cognitive theory of behaviour change*

(Seyfang & Haxeltine 2012: 395)

Hielscher *et al.* (2011) concur that transforming complex, interdependent systems of energy provision clearly requires more than mere efficiency improvements. The highly centralised electricity regime, for example, has co-evolved with markets, technical infrastructures, regulatory institutions and socio-cultural consumption practices; this regime constitutes a form of 'structural power' which hinders the diffusion of new practices like those associated with TT (Hielscher *et al.* 2011). The authors propose three key processes to help community groups diffuse their principles beyond the niche:

- 1) *Networking and 'aggregation activities'*

Such as conferences, workshops, technical journals, proceedings, newsletters, blogs. Examples include the 'Green Communities' programme run by the Energy Saving Trust, the Centre for Sustainable Energy's 'PlanLoCal' resource and the 2011 conference 'Communities and Climate Action'.

- 2) *Promotion of a shared vision*

The authors note that disagreement at the recent Communities and Climate Change conference regarding the merits of one common voice versus a diversity of agendas does not bode well for the diffusion of sustainable energy practices beyond the niche.

- 3) *Consolidation of systemic shared learning processes and resources*

Site visits, networking activities and shared best-practice reports have enabled a degree of cross-project learning, but much of this remains at a superficial level. The key problem is that most projects do not have the capacity to build consolidated learning resources. Proposing to fulfil this function, DECC's Community Energy Online website relies instead on energy projects themselves supplying information.

While Hargreaves *et al.* (2011) acknowledge the important conceptual contribution of the systems perspective of transition, they argue that its emphases on single regimes and on novelty rather than normality make it incapable of capturing the range or scope of civil society action. Instead, they advocate interpreting such activity from the perspective of Social Practice Theory (SPT), which emphasises transitions in the *practices* of socially embedded individuals, as opposed to the structural relations of abstract regimes or systems. The predominant focus within SPT is on the 'doing' of everyday practices – such as showering or washing clothes – and the various

interconnected elements which make up such routinized types of behaviour. Shove & Pantzar (2005) distinguish three groups of such elements: Images (meanings, symbols), Skills (know-how, competence) and Materials (artefacts, technologies). The key to understanding our everyday practices (and thus how to modify them) is to focus on the links or relations between the elements which comprise them. Repeated integration of certain elements (like the association of cleanliness with detergent, or laundry skill with a washing machine) results in the stability and reproduction of social practices, whereas innovation derives from the making and breaking of links between such elements. Applying this theory to community energy, the authors suggest that civil society activity can be interpreted as attempts to intervene in the dynamics of practice (Hargreaves *et al.* 2011: 9). By focusing on components of the normal and everyday, SPT emphasises the personal and horizontal nature of these dynamics, rendering the prospect for intervention and innovation more feasible than with approaches which focus on systemic regime-change.

In contrast to the meta-level of analysis adopted by systems theories and the meso-level approach favoured by SPT, behavioural theories posit the decision-making processes of individuals as the primary driver of social change. Drawing insights from behavioural economics and the cognitive sciences, a behaviour change agenda has been popularised in recent years by the notion of ‘nudging’ individuals to make better lifestyle choices (Thaler & Sunstein 2008). DEFRA’s (2008) *Framework for Environmental Behaviours* represents one of a slew of recent reports and white papers adopting this perspective. Since taking power in 2010 the Coalition has pursued this agenda with significant vigour, creating a Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) within the Cabinet office with a remit to infuse policy-making across government with broad behavioural insights. The BIT’s (2011) publication *Behaviour Change and Energy Use* reports results of field trials designed to improve incentive mechanisms to encourage Green Deal uptake, as well as the effect of re-designed Energy Performance Certificates on reducing households’ energy use. While this approach is championed by policy-makers for its ability to generate evidence of ‘what works’, it has been criticised for overstating small effects and for adopting an overly narrow view of social change (Shove 2010). A policy focus on individual psychologies as opposed to communities and wider civic groups is concerning for activists and theorists alike, who understand the scale of action required to bring about meaningful social change.

### ***Social Justice and Equity***

Park (2012) examines how issues of equity and justice are embedded in the capacities of diverse communities to engage with sustainable energy generation and consumption. This study highlights a strong but under-emphasised discrepancy between rhetoric and political action in a series of policies and grant funding programmes designed to facilitate community involvement. The concentration of funding for the same type of groups, to the detriment of more informal and financially vulnerable communities, indicates a need for all stakeholders to take equity issues more seriously. The author urges that equity issues should be considered primary when shaping community energy policy and practice. Not only is this a moral imperative, but it would also help to prevent the diffusion of an image of community energy as ‘a special interest which exists only for better equipped and capable communities’ (Park 2012: 404).

Catney *et al.* (2012) adopt a broader critical perspective regarding what they call 'Big Society Localism', arguing that while rhetorical emphasis on 'community' and 'doing things locally' speaks the language of empowerment, it neglects crucial social and distributional justice considerations. They contend that many communities are poorly positioned to take advantage of competitive funding schemes and that some approaches actively detach moral responsibility for areas they term 'localism's wastelands' (Catney *et al.* 2012: 2). Their comparative study examines community networks in two areas of the West Midlands: two relatively affluent wards in Shrewsbury and two relatively deprived wards in Newcastle-under-Lyme. The two wards in Newcastle are predominately white, working-class communities with relatively high socio-economic disadvantage, following a history of coal mining and related de-industrialisation. In contrast to Shrewsbury, which boasts several environmentally-focused civil society organisations, interest in environmental issues and energy literacy are lacking. Owing to a low level of associational activity, people in these wards have been unable to take advantage of schemes like 'Big Society Capital', the Coalition's cornerstone social investment programme, or the community-based elements of the Green Deal. With solar thermal and PV installation projects led by under-funded local authorities and housing associations, few households and no community groups have started their own schemes. The authors conclude that by relying purely on market mechanisms and incentive schemes, the localist agenda risks alienating an 'energy underclass' and thus further entrenching already deep-rooted socio-economic inequalities.

Bulkeley & Fuller's (2012) review of *Low Carbon Communities and Social Justice* draws an interesting distinction between the equity credentials of government-led programmes and those provided by private and civil society actors. While often proving challenging in practice, engaging 'hard-to-reach' groups was at least one of the key stated aims of most government-led programmes under review. In contrast, most programmes initiated by private or civil society actors did not consider the distributional aspects of their programmes in explicit terms. Furthermore, the review found no evidence that the costs of these programmes were considered at all; focusing purely on the environmental benefits of achieving low carbon communities, the social inequalities which underwrite this issue were left largely absent from view. The review also found that the most frequent way in which equity issues were addressed was through a focus on 'fuel poverty', a concept which goes some way to illuminating the structural inequalities behind energy use. The reviewers express concern, however, that this remains a 'circumscribed concept' and that 'wider issues of vulnerability and inequality may pass unnoticed' as a result of its overuse. The discursive popularity of this 'catch-all' concept itself indicates the difficulties we face when trying to communicate the complexities of social injustice, particularly in the context of climate change.

The recent expansion of community energy research is testament to the perceived importance of the voluntary sector by community practitioners and policy-makers alike. As part of the UK Research Council (RCUK)'s Energy Research Programme, which is currently investing over £530 million in research and skills to pioneer a low carbon future, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) have invested £4 million in seven new Energy and Communities projects (ESRC 2012). The success of these projects will depend on the extent to which participants can learn from the experiences of predecessors. Researchers and participants should heed caution that the recent policy 'buzz' around community is matched by substantive and demonstrable civic outcomes. They should experiment with various theoretical frames to understand what community energy could be and which kinds of practices are most worth

pursuing. Above all, they must foreground issues of equity and social justice at all stages of planning and implementation, if 'community' involvement in energy issues is to diffuse beyond the spaces of dedicated but privileged minorities.

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