Sustaining trajectories towards Sustainability: Dynamics and diversity in UK communal growing activities

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ABSTRACT

Civil society is a critical arena both for exploring Sustainability itself and for sustaining trajectories towards it through innovation, experimentation and debate. Innovations can be mould breaking and can challenge local institutions. Concurrently, initiatives may be fragile due to the development of new working relationships, reliance on voluntary labour and goodwill, and dependence on grant funding. Here we examine different aspects of what it takes to sustain grassroots trajectories for 'communal growing', given the pressures that groups and intermediary organisations practicing and supporting this activity experience, and the consequential need to build qualities like 'resilience'. Attending carefully to the definition of this otherwise slippery concept, a particular focus is given to how contrasting aspects of temporality and agency lead to divergent constructions of 'resilience' and strategies for sustaining growing. We draw on fieldwork that explores the practice and support of communal growing in East Sussex, England, and directly associated activities at a national level.

We find important interdependencies between communal growing projects and the intermediary organisations supporting them. Additionally there is huge diversity within and between both projects and the organisations that support them, including with respect to the ends to which growing is seen as a means. These ends link growing initiatives – both antagonistically and synergistically – to food, education and health systems. This diversity can be seen positively as: a source of innovation; facilitating the open and bottom up nature of growing; and, enabling the securing of greater financial support for the endeavour. What is less clear is how this plays into framing and configuring communal growing specifically in relation to achieving a more Sustainable and localised food system. We discuss the conceptual and methodological implications of these empirically derived observations with regards future research on grassroots innovations.

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1. Introduction

Community gardens are found throughout North America and Europe (Holland, 2004; Lawson, 2005; Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens, 2012), and increasingly world-wide (Irvine et al., 1999). While the main activity in the UK is growing food, much else is grown in the process – including community, confidence, welfare and skills. These spaces are typically open to the public, but distinct from parks in that stewardship is undertaken by groups of local people rather than by Local Authorities; in place of lawns and climbing frames, can be found vegetable beds, orchards and communal cooking areas. Community gardens, while sometimes found on allotment plots, are also not like traditional allotments which are designated to individuals

or families since the space is collectively worked and the produce shared.

A second increasing form of communal engagement with food is Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). CSA is defined as, 'any food, fuel or fibre producing initiative where the community shares the risks and rewards of production, whether through ownership, investment, sharing the costs of production, or provision of labour' (Saltmarsh et al., 2011). Albeit arguably on a continuum, CSA is distinct from community gardens in that food is produced on a larger scale, and as such, CSA is more commonly peri-urban or rural. It also often involves more strongly delineated roles between growers and members and usually an exchange relationship whereby members pay an agreed price in advance irrespective of the volume produced, the risks of growing are therefore more equally shared than is the case in a typical producer–consumer relationship. While we do not see community gardens and CSA as the only means through which food can be communally grown, it is on these two forms of 'grassroots innovation' for communal food growing, that this paper focuses.

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Grassroots innovations are described by Seyfang and Smith (2007, p. 585) as activities undertaken by 'networks of activists and organisations generating novel bottom-up solutions for sustainable development; solutions that respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved'. These innovations do things differently to the 'mainstream' way of doing things. The particular innovations underlying community gardens and community supported agriculture are the local and communal stewardship of land through jointly growing food, investing in and managing space, and the redistribution of risk between growers and consumers. These involve collective forms of decision making, cooperation and group work to develop a plot, produce food and share risk – representing moves towards more distributed and locally-responsive forms of control over land-use. Furthermore, communal growing offers to address economic, social and environmental pillars of Sustainability (a capital 'S' in Sustainability denotes the normative version of the word as defined by Brundtland (1987, p. 43). A small case 's' in sustainability denotes the temporal property of whether or not something is being sustained). It often uses organic or low-input methods, and growing is recognised to have the potential for therapeutic benefits for those involved (Twiss et al., 2003; Natural England, 2009; Food Matters, 2011). It can also enable people to access fresh, healthy produce relatively cheaply where they have more time but less money. Learning to work collectively also develops key social skills (Stocker and Barnett, 1998).

Seyfang and Smith (2007) argue that the activities and networks that produce, support and diffuse grassroots innovations (GIs) have not been given due attention and value in either academic or policy debate about Sustainable innovation. If communal growing activities are to contribute meaningfully to broader shifts towards Sustainability, then the projects and the organisations that support them must survive, evolve and thrive. Yet, as innovations are by definition new in their form or (through diffusion) in context, they are often unstable configurations – at least to start with – and so subject to demanding forms of evolution and learning over time (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). Furthermore, they can challenge existing legal (such as planning), regulatory (such as land ownership) and institutional (such as local authority) elements of their operating contexts, presenting the potential for adaptation in these wider networks also.

In this paper we explore the natures of the pressures and responses experienced both by communal growing projects and the intermediary organisations that support them – and through this build an understanding of how they seek to sustain the activity of communal growing. 'Intermediary organisations' do not undertake growing themselves, but support it as an activity through providing advice, training, networking services, representation and advocacy. We collectively term projects and intermediaries the communal growing 'niche', understanding this analytical concept to describe a hypothetical space in which innovations can be tried out and developed, at least initially away from the selective pressures of mainstream systems of provisioning (Schot and Geels, 2007). As such, a 'niche' is not objectively empirically fixed in any given setting, but depends heuristically on the purpose and level of analysis. In general however, as patterns of adaptation and wider evolution unfold, survival of any given niche necessarily entails change. What kinds of change this means, has implications for the nature of pathways to Sustainability. Studies of 'conventionalisation' – occurring as innovative activities diffuse, spread and in the process become less challenging to mainstream forms of provisioning, and/or are co-opted by them (Guthman, 2004; Hess, 2005; Smith, 2006) – are one example of why it is crucial to understand these dynamics of pressures and responses in the niche. Furthermore, studies of the particular pressures acting on civil society organisations (Commission of Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland, 2010; Vickers, 2010), highlight distinctive vulnerabilities to various kinds of 'capture' and 'mission drift'.

We explore the development of the communal growing niche by first focusing on what it means in general (under contrasting perspectives and contexts) to "sustain" any activity. For this purpose, we use a conceptual framework that builds systematically on the two basic dimensions already implicated in this focus: first, the notion of 'temporality' (that necessarily informs any apprehension of 'change'), for example the development of a pressure; and second 'action' (of a kind that is necessarily required to sustain any kind of activity), for example in dealing with a pressure. Having been developed (Dawson et al., 2010; Leach et al., 2010; Stirling, in press) for application to technological development pathways, the framework (described below) is applied here to an activity enacted through civil society. Empirical fieldwork results are analysed so helping to illuminate otherwise obscured variation in the practices and politics of sustaining communal growing. We conclude by reflecting on the implications for general understandings of grassroots innovations.

The paper begins with a discussion of how sustainability is addressed in different ways in 'grassroots innovations' and 'transition theory' approaches. The conceptual framework is then presented, which we use to structure the research. The fieldwork underpinning this study is outlined in the methods section. The results section illustrates the ways in which projects and related intermediary organisations seek to sustain the activity of communal growing, with particular focus on funding and land access. The discussion reflects on what this approach can bring to our understanding of grassroots innovations and the conclusion airs more general implications.

2. Conceptual framework

Grassroots innovations are a topic of research interest because of their potential to inform more Sustainable ways of living. This is so, whether by: acting as exemplary alternatives; highlighting the unSustainability of current systems; solving local problems in new ways; or experimenting in ways that might inform or integrate with mainstream ways of providing us with the goods and services that we need (hitherto 'provisioning'). Such roles for innovations in 'societal transitions' are conceptualised in change models like the multi-level perspective (MLP) (Geels, 2002). Here processes of 'strategic niche management' (SNM) (Schot and Geels, 2008) and proactive niche protection (Smith and Raven, 2012) are highlighted as strategies for ensuring a niche survives and develops to influence the mainstream form of provisioning, otherwise termed the 'regime'. Whether niches are conceptualised as developing within a regime, or as being external to it, they tend nevertheless equally to be viewed in relation to a single regime which they may influence.

However, understandings of SNM and proactive protection have generally been informed by studies of evolving technological innovations in firms, which operate in markets, or in orchestrated experimental settings. The relatively explicit, codified natures of technologies, firms, markets and 'experiments' all serve to emphasise structured processes in SNM of vision building, experimentation, and expectation development, which in turn direct learning processes, aggregation of results and diffusion of the innovation (Kemp et al., 1998; Hoogma et al., 2002). The present focus on contrasting – and less structured – organisational innovations and civil society settings, however, raises questions about how, in the absence of these structuring elements and potentially the presence of others, these conventionally recognised processes are negotiated, if at all.