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# ‘We are a community [but] that takes a certain amount of energy’: Exploring shared visions, social action, and resilience in place-based community-led energy initiatives

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 17 May 2014

Received in revised form

28 April 2015

Accepted 15 May 2015

Available online 28 May 2015

### Keywords:

Community energy

Sustainable places

Social capital

Civic engagement

Social resilience

## ABSTRACT

In UK energy policy, community-led energy initiatives are increasingly being imbued with transformative power to facilitate low carbon transitions. The ways that such expectations for communities are manifesting in practice remains, however, relatively poorly understood. In particular, key conceptual developments in unpacking what constitutes ‘community’ that highlight the significance of ‘place’ along with important characteristics, such as shared visions, collective social action, and resilience, have yet to be comprehensively explored in the context of community-led energy initiatives. This paper uses an interpretive stance to engage with these conceptual ideas about community and provides insights into the nature of community and its meaning for developing energy-related initiatives and realising the wider goals of energy policy. The paper draws on data from in-depth qualitative, longitudinal interviews undertaken in two residential communities and one purely workplace-based community, which are engaged in community energy initiatives. We argue that there are difficulties and ambiguities in creating shared visions, achieving social action, and developing resilience that are related to the specificities of community in place, but that all three characteristics are likely to be important for the making of sustainable places.

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## 1. Introduction

The UK has clear policy aims to transition to a low-carbon energy system by 2050 (Department of Energy and Climate Change [DECC], 2011). Such transitions will be enacted within

particular places and, as such, pose fundamental questions about the possibilities for sustainable place-making. Whilst numerous visions of energy transitions exist (e.g. Skea et al., 2011), these are often abstract and placeless, obfuscating the inherently geographical processes that underpin such transformations (Bridge et al., 2013), failing to take into account how

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2015.05.014>

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transitions will manifest differentially in place and how the intricacies of place may impact such transformations. Despite this lack of attention to place, questions about the role of community-based initiatives in the development of low-carbon transitions are gaining increasing prominence. Indeed, it has been suggested that community-led engagement processes and ownership of energy developments might stimulate increased public acceptability for transitions (e.g. DECC, 2014), and thus encourage the development and uptake of ‘innovative niches with the potential for wider societal transformation’ (Seyfang, 2010: 7625). Community-led energy initiatives, then, are being imbued with a great deal of potential transformative power.

Community energy has, in the past, been heavily associated with (part) ownership of renewable energy developments, but there is growing recognition that it could have a much broader remit. Indeed, UK policy envisions that communities could become involved in four main energy activities: generating energy, reducing energy demand, managing energy supply and demand, and purchasing or switching suppliers as collective groups (DECC, 2014). This shift to a more pluralistic conception of the ways communities can be engaged in energy activities echoes calls for recognition that community energy is not (nor should be) tantamount to renewable energy production (Seyfang et al., 2013). There is also a burgeoning recognition that energy demand interventions would be more successful if targeted at communities and neighbourhoods rather than just individuals (Seyfang et al., 2013; Butler et al., 2013). In this regard, processes of ‘norming’ and the opportunities to build on existing relationships of trust have been pointed to as key aspects of what community-level interventions can offer (Butler et al., 2014). Additionally, the importance of examining differences between community contexts has been highlighted as an important issue in whether or not action enables or inhibits energy transitions more widely (e.g. Miller and Bentley, 2012).

Increasing interest in community-based energy and sustainable transitions coincides with continual conceptual refinement of what is meant by the term ‘community’. In human geography it is a fundamental principle that society and place are deeply intertwined and mutually constituted. Space and place are no longer seen as containers for society but as actively contributing to societal development and the identity of individuals and communities within their ‘boundaries’. In their work on sustainable community development, Dale et al. (2008: 278) found that ‘the sense of place [that] emerges within a community is shaped and informed by the geographical space that the community occupies’. As such, we recognise that the *where-ness* of community is integral to our understandings of how communities develop and can contribute to low-carbon energy transitions. However, we also recognise that ‘community’ can and does go beyond its territorial origins and specific relationship with locality (Seyfang and Smith, 2007) and the home. Importantly, to date research on community energy has tended to focus on residential, rather than other types of geographical communities including work-based communities of place (although there is a growing literature looking at energy practices in the workplace, for example, Hargreaves, 2008; Whittle, forthcoming). However, analysis has pointed to the significance of

workplace-based communities as ‘communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 98). Focusing on such non-residential communities could offer further insights into the making of sustainable places.

A workplace-based community is not necessarily ‘some primordial culture-sharing entity’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 98). Nor does the use of community imply ‘co-presence, a well-defined identifiable group, or socially visible boundaries’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 98). However, what it does imply is ‘participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991: 98). Within our research design we incorporated a workplace-based geographical community as a basis for exploring the extent to which this community form was important in low-carbon energy transitions. By exploring this work-based geographical community and two other residential geographical communities, which are all highly distinctive, we develop an analysis of the role of communities in delivering low-carbon energy transitions and, more broadly, in facilitating the making of sustainable places.

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## 2. Key concepts for thinking about ‘community’

There are a number of key concepts that are relevant to understanding community. For present purposes, we focus on shared values and visions, social action, and social resilience. Rae and Bradley (2012: 6498) note that ‘a community (or a sense/feeling of community) tends to arise from the . . . shared values of those who populate it’. A shared vision may be grounded in ‘common needs and goals, a sense of the common good, shared lives, culture and views of the world, and collective action’ (Silk, 1999: 6). As such, a shared vision may imbue a community with capacity, endurance, commonality and mutually agreed goals, or may be experienced as constraining, creating tension between individual and group objectives (Miller and Bentley, 2012).

A further connected notion, in this regard, is that of collective or social action. Horvath (1999: 221) defines social action as ‘participation in social issues to influence their outcome for the benefit of people and the community’. Social action can, under favourable circumstances, produce empowerment, impact, or social change, and in many contexts, group and community-level actions can be more effective than individual acts. The concept of empowerment is relevant for social action and Horvath draws a distinction between grassroots and top-down varieties. Ewart (1991) suggests that empowerment is at once an individual and a social construct, referring to both a sense of personal control and power to effect change, and to a group’s ability to control community resources, engage in collective decision-making and achieve shared goals. Subsequently, collective empowerment can also help develop individual empowerment.

Finally, there has been significant debate about how to characterise and understand ‘community resilience’ as a distinctive concept that builds on the basic concept of resilience in social-ecological systems (Holling and Gunderson, 2002). Wickes et al. (2010: 2) define community resilience

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