

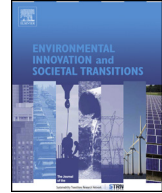


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# Learning from success—Toward evidence-informed sustainability transitions in communities



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### ABSTRACT

Driven by concerns over the long-term viability and integrity of their communities people around the world initiate transitions toward sustainability on various levels of society. A particular segment of these initiatives are in small, place-based communities. Each initiative presents learning opportunities to build robust transitions that may contribute to progress toward a sustainable society in general. Little empirical research has been conducted on how the transition context and process lead to particular outcomes. This article presents an analytical-evaluative framework for appraising the sustainability of transition outcomes and reconstructing transition pathways in order to identify critical success factors. Ashton Hayes in the U.K. serves as an illustrative case study. The framework may be used for planning and design of transitions, as well as for conducting cross-case comparisons on how transitions work. The ultimate goal is to derive, accumulated over many studies, evidence-informed guidelines to improve the effectiveness of transitions.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last decade, sustainability transitions have been initiated in places around the world in response to wicked problems such as climate change, ecological degradation, economic decline, and

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public health issues. In the absence of adequate action at national and global levels, communities of various shapes and sizes, from regions to cities to neighborhoods and villages, in rural and urban settings, are responding with their own action plans and implementation initiatives (Bailey et al., 2010; Conroy and Beatley, 2007; Dawson, 2006; Desai, 2008; Hodson and Marvin, 2010; Roorda et al., 2011). A particular type of sustainability transition is driven by civil society in the form of community-based, grassroots style initiatives. These community initiatives may play an important role in the pursuit of a sustainable society in general due to their ability to engage and empower local people in a way that top-down efforts often fail (Beatley and Collins, 2002; Brangwyn and Hopkins, 2009, pp. 6–7; Charnock, 2007; Dawson, 2006, p. 12; McIntosh, 2008; Seyfang and Smith, 2007). Yet, little is known about the processes within these initiatives and how effective they are. If small-scale community initiatives are indeed a critical part of sustainability transition then greater understanding is essential to improve, transfer, and accelerate their implementation.

While numerous studies from various disciplines provide wide ranging insights into community sustainability initiatives they generally produce little practical knowledge that might provide guidance to practitioners and directly advance the effectiveness of initiatives. The diversity of these studies produces fragmented knowledge that limits understanding of the processes involved and the effect on outcomes. Notwithstanding a handful of exceptions (Middlemiss, 2011; Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012), few studies identify what makes initiatives or the projects they implement successful or make practical suggestions for improvement. Furthermore, although again with exceptions (Seyfang, 2010; Graugaard, 2012), few studies even consider if initiatives are actually successful, if success means progress toward a sustainable community. In order to develop practical guidelines that are based on evidence, many more studies are needed to build an empirical knowledge-base. We suggest, therefore, there is need for (a) a relatively large number of analytical-evaluative case studies identifying critical factors that make initiatives more or less successful with respect to progress toward sustainability; and (b) a somewhat standardized approach to these studies to facilitate accumulation and synthesis of knowledge. In these respects we broadly follow the empirical research approach of Ostrom (2009) and Duflo (2011) in the fields of community-based resource management and development economics respectively, in which analytical-evaluative frameworks are used to guide studies and synthesize findings from large numbers of case studies.

In this article we present preliminary research toward the approach outlined above. We present an analytical-evaluative framework for the purpose of guiding case studies toward producing evidence from which practical guidelines for transitions can be derived. The framework consists of three components: (i) descriptive analysis of outcomes; (ii) sustainability appraisal of outcomes; and (iii) identification of critical factors through transition path reconstruction. The framework may also be useful to researchers and practitioners for within-case transition development. The framework has been developed through and applied to a number of small-scale community transitions in the U.K. (Forrest, 2011; Forrest and Wiek, 2014). The article has two main purposes: (1) to describe the structure and steps of the framework to convey its purpose and allow similar application and further development by others; and (2) to present one of the case studies to illustrate application of the framework. The article proceeds over four main sections as follows. Firstly, we present some background on small-scale community sustainability transitions. Secondly, the framework is described. Thirdly, we illustrate use of the framework through a case study on Ashton Hayes, a small English Village aiming to become carbon neutral. Finally, we discuss the framework's usefulness.

## 2. Small-scale community sustainability transition initiatives

The term 'transition' has taken on both specific and popular meaning in recent years (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012). Specifically, it frequently refers to "far-reaching change" in socio-technical systems such as water, energy, and transport with *sustainability transition* being a *purposive* (i.e. managed and directed) "fundamental transformation toward more sustainable modes of production and consumption" (Markard et al., 2012). More broadly, the idea of sustainability transition is a comprehensive one, aiming for system-wide societal change (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012). Theoretical framings such as strategic niche management and transition management that conceptualize the socio-technical systems transition process and how it might be guided toward long-term goals (Markard et al., 2012)

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