Failing better: The stochastic art of evaluating community-led environmental action programs

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ABSTRACT

This article provides insights into the evaluation of a government-funded action for climate change program. The UK-based program aimed to reduce CO_2 emissions and encourage behavioral change through community-led environmental projects. It, thus, employed six community development facilitators, with expertise in environmental issues. These facilitators supported and learnt from 18 community groups over an 18-month period. The paper explores the narratives of the six professional facilitators. These facilitators discuss their experiences of supporting community groups. They also explain their contribution to the wider evaluation of the community-led projects. This paper reflects on the facilitator experience of the program's outcome-led evaluation process. In turn, it also explores how the groups they supported experienced the process. The facilitator's narratives reveal that often community-group objectives did not align with predefined outcomes established through theory of change or logic model methodologies, which had been devised in attempt to align to program funder aims. Assisting community action emerges in this inquiry as a stochastic art that requires funder and facilitator willingness to experiment and openness to the possibilities of learning from failure. Drawing on in-depth accounts, the article illustrates that a reflexive, interpretive evaluation approach can enhance learning opportunities and provides funders with more trustworthy representations of community-led initiatives. Yet, it also addresses why such an approach remains marginal within policy circles.

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1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed an intensification of community action on environmental challenges (Forrest & Wiek, 2014; Seyfang & Smith, 2007). Such civic projects include the establishment of community land trusts, local currencies, co-housing schemes and the well-known transition town movement. A localist discourse in the UK validates these schemes and leads successive governments to champion the potential of community-led initiatives (Catney et al., 2014). Furthermore, as governments strive to meet targets for carbon emission reduction, the amount of state-led (Peters, Fudge and Sinclair, 2010) and state-community partnerships encouraging action on climate change have increased (Reeves, Lemon and Cook, 2014). Civic participation in sustainable development is a neglected and arguably underexploited field (Seyfang & Smith, 2007). Nevertheless, there has been extensive debate about the role that such initiatives can or should contribute to transitions towards sustainable development (Aiken, 2014; Catney et al., 2014; Middlemiss 2011; Reeves et al., 2014).

This paper focuses upon an evaluation of a UK-based government-funded program that aimed to nurture local action for climate change through partnership with community groups. These groups initiated projects that focused upon matters including energy, local food growing, bicycling and tree planting. Increasingly, communities are called upon to authenticate their efforts, by providing evidence of effectiveness (Adams & Dickinson, 2010; Bakken, Núñez, and Couture, 2014; Benjamin, 2008). However, very little consideration has been given to how groups cope with the demands for evidence placed upon them (Carman, 2007). Moreover, little is known about how project assessments contribute to tackling wider social and environmental issues. Specifically, questions remain concerning how findings are transferable to other contexts and how they improve decision-

making at a local level, as well as their effect on policy and practice (Sridharan & De Silva, 2010).There is, thus, considerable scope for studies that offer insights into evaluation processes for community-led environmental action.

This progressive qualitative research study provides in-depth insights into the experiences of facilitators, employed through a community action for climate change initiative. This article responds to current knowledge gaps regarding how communities experience the evaluation of participatory environmental projects. It does so by exploring how facilitators and the groups they interacted with negotiate such processes. Insights into how facilitators and groups perceive evaluation praxis also make this study relevant to the broader field of monitoring and evaluation. The paper begins with a brief background to program evaluation, which contextualizes the study. It then presents the results of interviews with six facilitators, who acted as intermediaries and action researchers during the program. The narratives of four of these individuals are presented to provide 'thick descriptions' (Geertz 1973) of their experiences. The study critically reviews the training of community facilitators in evaluation techniques, as well as the consequences of misalignment between program level and community goals. The article concludes with implications for evaluators and planners, as well as for policy makers and academics interested in community-led sustainability initiatives. Specifically, the paper seeks to be relevant to policy makers, by highlighting the significance of thinking through what appropriate evaluation methods for programs might be.

2. Literature review and conceptual framework

Evaluation approaches for community-led environmental projects typically do not differ from those employed within broader community development programs. Most often, they include theory-driven evaluation, which requires the construction of a logic model or a theory of change (Nicholls, Lawlor, Neitzert, Goodspeed, & Cupitt, 2012), as well as more recently, more constructivist approaches to evaluation. The latter section of this literature review briefly introduces these concepts to provide a framework for exploring an evaluation of a community action program.

The evaluation of community action on sustainability problems is an under theorized field, populated by few empirical studies (Forrest & Wiek, 2014; Pollock & Whitelaw, 2005). Community-led environmental schemes often incorporate elements of social innovation (Scott-Cato & Hillier, 2010). Such social innovations are characterized by uncertainty and unpredictability. Consequently, their effects can be ephemeral and difficult to trace (Rey, Tremblay, & Brousselle, 2013). Determining meaningful project outcomes is also challenging given that there is no clear route towards environmental sustainability (Stables, 2004).

Currently little evidence supports claims that community-led initiatives lead to benefits such as widespread behavior change. For example, Moloney, Horne and Fien (2010) use this observation as a starting point for arguing that more evaluations of community-led sustainability programs are needed in order to address their effects. Their paper analyses a database of 100 Australian behavior change programs for energy efficiency. They question the current nature of behavior change initiatives, drawing attention to issues including, how behavior and social practices are framed; barriers and constraints to change and approaches that are deemed to empower participants. Furthermore, Middlemiss (2011) argues that there is little evidence to support the argument that such programs, in their current state, lead to the adoption of more sustainable lifestyles. Middlemiss (2011) employed a technique known as 'realistic evaluation', developed by Pawson and Tilley (1997). It is a technique that is appreciative of intervention context

and community mechanisms in processes of social change. Using this technique, she conducted five case studies of community-based programs, constructed through interviews with community practitioners and participants. More broadly, several authors have critiqued the notion of community as a mode of transition (Aiken, 2014), while Burch (2010) has noted the barriers to local-level action on climate change. Further, Creamer (2014) and Peters et al. (2010) have questioned whether State and local government programs effectively engage diverse populations to enable widespread action on climate change. Catney et al. (2014) have also expressed concerns that a shift towards a localist discourse represents "staking environmental policy success on the ability of local civil society to fill the gap left after state retrenchment [which] runs the risk of no activity at all" (p. 715).

There has been longstanding assessment of community initiatives in academic fields including health sciences, education and applied psychology. Sustainability programs, such as that explored here, often draw upon these fields, for theoretical frameworks for conducting evaluations. Literature within the field of program evaluation has grown exponentially since the 1950s (Zanakis, Mandakovic, Gupta, Sahay, & Hong, 1995). A post-positivist paradigm currently dominates the field, where for example, organizations are encouraged to construct a logic model or a theory of change for evaluating their projects (Blamey & Mackenzie, 2007; Brousselle & Champagne, 2011; McLaughlin & Jordan, 1999; Weiss, 2000). Theory-driven evaluation has played a significant role in moving the field beyond being steered by methods alone (Chen, 1994) and from an early stage, stakeholder involvement in this process has been widely endorsed (Taut, 2008).

Recently, the field of evaluation has evolved towards a fourth generation by adopting a constructivist approach, the aim of which is consensus through dialogue, rather than attempting to reach discoverable truths (Fishman, 1992; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This has led to a greater focus on nurturing learning cultures amongst community agencies (Botcheva et al., 2002Botcheva, White, & Huffman, 2002), as well as to the potentials of narrative analysis (Costantino & Greene, 2003). In a similar vein, evaluators have begun to discuss systems thinking (Cabrera, Colosi and Libdell, 2008) in a steer away from "managing complexity and uncertainty" in evaluation (Kapsali, 2011; p. 396). Systems thinking can be thought of not as an evaluation approach, but as a perspective that can transform any evaluation approach (Cabrera et al., 2008). Cabrera et al. (2008) propose that it is possible to apply four roles to 'existing evaluative knowledge with transformative results' (p. 299). They further their proposition of the usefulness of systems thinking by suggesting that reframing perceived problems, via this approach, may lead to solutions previously unthought-of. They suggest that 'evaluating any program would include: defining what the program is and is not; identifying the components (parts) of the program; and recognition of the relationships among the parts and between each part and the program as a whole' (p. 302).

This turn occurs at the same moment when authors in the field of community-led action for sustainability increasingly consider social learning as a significant program outcome (Bradbury & Middlemiss, 2014; Forrest & Weik, 2014). Bradbury (2001) states that "organizational development-oriented action research can contribute to the fostering of sustainable development by facilitating dialogue in spaces that allow for a multiplicity of perspectives" (p. 312). Further, according to Cabrera et al. (2008) participatory methods, such as participatory action research "recognize both the importance of taking multiple perspectives to better inform the evaluation design". They also argue that participatory action research can help to ensure that evaluators have a "comprehensive understanding" (p. 302) of a program and its participants. The positions "participatory, collaborative, cooperative, or empowerment" are increasingly aspired to within