



Original Research Paper

## The role of community leadership in the development of grassroots innovations



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 9 November 2015  
 Received in revised form 8 April 2016  
 Accepted 12 May 2016  
 Available online 26 May 2016

#### Keywords:

Community leadership  
 Grassroots innovations  
 Nurturing  
 Intermediaries  
 Community energy

### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the role of community leadership in the development of grassroots innovations. It asks: When community leaders initiate energy projects, what types of skills and knowledge practices do they utilise to nurture grassroots innovations? Grassroots innovations are usually driven by social and sustainability motives, and developed by civil society groups. Based on a mixed methods approach including research interviews and site visits, the article draws on previous literature on community leadership, grassroots innovations and niche literature. Community leadership is analysed via two in-depth community energy cases in the UK. Research findings show that community leadership can aid the development of grassroots innovations, which operate in niches and require nurturing. Community leadership benefits from being embedded into social networks, shared vision and decision making, but pre-existing skills and tacit knowledge also play a role. Community leaders can also assist niche building by working closely with intermediary actors.

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### 1. Introduction

New technological and social innovations have emerged to deal with society's problems, especially regarding the sustainability of electricity, transport, and other related systems. Civil society organisations such as community groups, voluntary organisations, charities and community co-operatives, are taking energy action to produce services that have traditionally been provided by incumbent organisations. These civil society initiatives, which take a sustainability approach to addressing every day services in the area of energy (as well as food and transport) have been conceptualised as grassroots innovations (Seyfang and Smith, 2007).

Grassroots innovations are “*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*” (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; p. 585). Grassroots innovations differ from technology or market innovations in a sense that they usually have motives for creating social good rather than pure monetary profits (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). This in turn can give an opportunity to the development of new social experiments that would not have been developed or implemented in a purely profit-driven context (Verheul and Vergragt, 1995).

Grassroots innovations have been studied in relation to empirical topics such as community currencies (Seyfang and Longhurst, 2013), community gardens and food networks (Seyfang, 2007; White and Stirling, 2013) and community energy

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(Seyfang et al., 2014). Factors such as local traditions, pre-existing practices, voluntary effort, interpersonal networks and community cohesion are important for the success of grassroots innovations (see for example Ornetzeder and Rohrer, 2013; Seyfang et al., 2014; Seyfang and Longhurst, 2015; Seyfang et al., 2013), though there has been limited focus on community leadership. This article builds on that literature and analyses the development of grassroots innovations in the context of community energy.

Community energy initiatives in the UK context have included a range of technologies and set ups, such as solar PV clubs, renewable energy switching schemes and energy saving networks (Seyfang et al., 2013). The development of community energy projects often involves innovative practice or activity (Seyfang et al., 2014) and groups can have varying motivations ranging from environmental, to economic, social, political and infrastructural (Seyfang et al., 2013). There is no one typical community energy project, in fact the common denominator for the sector seems to be that ‘one size does not fit all’. Furthermore, those who benefit and how they benefit from a community energy project becomes relevant for each project’s definition and boundaries (Walker and Devine-Wright, 2008). Community energy within the remit of this research article is defined as projects initiated and developed by civil society groups which involve innovative practice or activity in the area of sustainable energy.

There has been a surge of interest in community energy in the UK in recent years from citizens, academics and politicians alike. This interest culminated in the publication of the UK’s first Community Energy Strategy in 2014 (DECC, 2014) and the gas and electricity market regulator Ofgem consulting in 2015 on the potential impacts of Non-traditional Business Models, such as community energy, entering the UK energy system (Ofgem, 2015). Previous research has covered a breadth of issues on community energy in the UK context, such as the conceptualisation of ‘community’ within community energy groups (Parkhill et al., 2015), communities as spaces that build capacity for pro-environmental behaviour (Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010), the origins, motives, development and diversity of such groups (Seyfang et al., 2013), processes linked to community energy development (Walker and Devine-Wright, 2008), the diffusion of community energy projects (Hargreaves et al., 2013; Seyfang et al., 2014), impact of community-led energy initiatives on consumers (Gupta et al., 2014) and community energy in relation to policy measures (Saunders et al., 2012). However, there has been limited focus in previous research on the role of community leadership in community energy projects (Hoppe et al., 2015; Rogers et al., 2012; van der Schoor and Scholtens, 2015). While van der Schoor and Scholtens (2015) for instance recognise that local leadership is important in community energy projects, they do not provide further analysis of why that is the case. Hoppe et al. (2015) studied leadership in relation to the development of local energy initiatives but focused on public leaderships (e.g. public officials in local authorities) rather than on leadership within community groups themselves.

Drawing on both literature on community leadership (e.g. Uhl-Bien et al., 2007) and sustainability transitions, especially niche literature (e.g. Geels and Deuten, 2006; Raven et al., 2008; Schot and Geels, 2008; Smith and Raven, 2012; Verhees et al., 2015), as well as original data collection including interviews and site visits, this article asks: *When community leaders initiate energy projects, what types of skills and knowledge practices do they utilise to nurture grassroots innovations?* This article makes a contribution to previous literature by highlighting that community leadership has a part to play in the development of grassroots innovations such as community energy initiatives.

This research was conducted during the period of 2010–2014 as part of PhD research and used a mixture of techniques including document analysis, semi-structured interviews, attendance of community energy events and in-depth analysis of community energy case studies. This article is organised as follows. Section 2 explains the conceptual framework, which draws on niche literature, grassroots innovations and community leadership. Section 3 explains the research methodology and case study design. Section 4 discusses key findings and what the role of community leadership is in the development of grassroots innovations in relation to the processes of voicing expectations, learning and networking. Section 5 discusses the research findings and makes recommendations for further research.

## 2. Conceptual framework: community leadership and the nurturing of grassroots innovations

### 2.1. Community leadership

The notion of community is important for the concept of community leadership (as well as community energy), and it can be defined by locality as well as interest. McMillan and Chavis (1986) define community by four dimensions: *membership, influence, reinforcement* and *shared emotional connection*. People feel like they belong to a group (membership) and they are, or at least feel like they are, able to make a difference within that group (influence) (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Community can meet their members’ needs (reinforcement), while shared emotional connection is built through shared places and experiences, such as joint history and time spent together (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Community is not only linked to a physical entity, but communities can also be based on shared interests such as culture and politics (Walker, 2008). Communities can be seen as complex systems which are not only defined by boundaries such as geographical location but are open to different participants despite their location (Onyx and Leonard, 2011). Furthermore, people can be members of multiple communities and can “transfer, translate, and transform experiences from one community to another” (Dahlander and Frederiksen, 2012, p.990).

Community leadership is different from the classical notion of leadership being “about ‘leaders’ asking, persuading and influencing ‘followers’” (Sullivan, 2007; p. 142). Community leadership in turn is usually less hierarchical (Onyx and Leonard, 2011) and often based on volunteer action (Zanbar and Itzhaky, 2013), involving the creation of social capital (Riley, 2012)

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