



Intermediaries' perspectives on the public's role in the energy transitions needed to deliver UK climate change policy goals

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ABSTRACT

There is now a large body of research into public understanding of climate change and energy challenges. There is however little empirical examination of how actors from politics, government, civil society and non-governmental organisations regard the role of public engagement in climate and energy policy. Research is lacking as to their views on the desirability of active citizen participation or indeed whether they draw on the findings from social science research in forming strategies and policy. This paper presents an analysis of interviews with policy experts and deliberative seminars held with non-governmental stakeholders acting in an intermediary capacity between climate policy and the public. A comparison of four policy scenarios was used to explore intermediaries' beliefs about the role of the public in delivering the UK's Climate Change Act targets. The results reveal a general antipathy to policies that seek to 'engage' the public and a lack of knowledge amongst seminar participants about how insights from the social sciences can be used to build and sustain public engagement. This research exposes the need to assess the means by which public engagement can better be understood, integrated and most effectively utilised for sustainable progression towards climate targets.

1. Introduction

The fourth budget of the UK Climate Change Act requires 50% CO₂ emissions reduction by 2025, in line with a longer-term target of 80% reductions by 2050 (UK Committee on Climate Change, 2008). This equates to a 3% reduction in emissions every year from 2014 to 2030 (UK Committee on Climate Change, 2015). To meet these targets the UK faces 'an urgent need for completely new energy policy across a range of areas' (UK Committee on Climate Change, 2016). It is thought by many that a reliance upon individual-level voluntary behavioural responses by the wider public can only make a limited contribution to meeting those targets (Capstick et al., 2014, 2015; Shove, 2010; Chamberlin et al., 2015). At the same time there has, to date, been political reluctance in the UK to introduce more radical top-down policies to structure emissions reduction, such as carbon taxation or personal carbon trading (Chamberlin et al., 2015; Lorenzoni et al., 2008).

The impasse in climate and energy policy which prevents more radical emissions reductions has been termed the 'governance trap': a situation in which people are concerned about climate change, but feel it is for policy makers to take the lead on implementing the required changes; while, in turn, policy makers expect individuals to act, and are

unwilling to implement potentially unpopular measures (Pidgeon, 2012). In this context, an understanding of how the public is viewed by policy makers and intermediaries (for example, stakeholders from civil society), together with the capacity of government and policy to actively engage the public, is central to overcoming the governance trap. By translating scientific knowledge and their own perspectives into popular discourse, as well as by amplifying risk claims (Carvalho and Burgess, 2005) non-governmental and civil society actors are critical to shaping public opinion on climate change and energy topics, and in the setting of assumptions about the nature of public engagement on these issues (Ockwell et al., 2009; Carter and Ockwell, 2007; Brulle et al., 2012).

The active shaping of both public and policy opinion is particularly important given the continued focus on climate change 'scepticism' amongst the public and in media reporting, which has, over time, contributed to the impression that civil society is disinterested or even hostile to climate protection (Howarth and Sharman, 2015). Fluctuations in public opinion, particularly declines in key indicators of risk perception in the late 2000's across Western nations, has led some observers to conclude that climate change has become an issue of secondary importance to many (Kerr, 2011). In addition, the political

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consensus in the UK about the importance of climate change has waned following the banking crisis of 2008 (Carter and Clements, 2015). Nonetheless, in nationally representative social surveys, climate change consistently emerges as a matter of concern to majorities across Europe (European Commission, 2014; Steentjes et al., 2017). In the UK, around three-quarters of the public are in favour of national reductions in energy use, and of decreased reliance on fossil fuels (Butler et al., 2015) as well as greater use of renewable energy such as onshore wind (10:10, 2016). A range of research studies likewise suggests that there is a stronger mandate for government intervention than politicians have tended to assume (Pidgeon, 2012; Rickards et al., 2014).

Policy intermediaries play a potentially important role in interpreting and using these data in order to provide realistic narratives within which policy makers have the licence to act on climate change and the public have the capacity to engage. These narratives are likely to be complex in nature - although members of the public generally endorse a national response to climate change, the level of popular support for specific carbon reduction policies is highly variable, and contingent upon design features. There is only weak public support for policies such as personal carbon trading or carbon taxation in their generic form; however, their acceptability can be substantially increased when, for example, schemes emphasise equity considerations and the re-investment of revenues. Regard for fairness and social justice are similarly found to be important for public appraisals of energy transitions, alongside concerns for affordability, environmental protection and energy security (Butler et al., 2015). So, whilst the research indicates there is some appetite amongst the UK public for strong policy leadership on climate change, there is a lack of understanding about what policy options, commensurate with 80% reductions, intermediaries would be willing to promote, and if, and how, their choices are related to their beliefs about public perceptions and engagement. In short, we know a lot about how the public perceive policy and policy-makers with respect to climate change, but next to nothing about how the intermediaries between the public and policy-makers perceive the public's role.

1.1. What is the role of public engagement in delivering climate change policy?

The feasibility of implementing ambitious policy is typically assumed to be contingent on the extent to which there is felt to be public engagement on, and concern about, energy and climate change (Carter and Jacobs, 2014). Drawing on principles from psychology and science communication we define public engagement as having three key components (Hilgard, 1980): cognitive (understanding/ knowledge), affective (emotion, interest and concern), and conative/behavioural (motivation for action). This implies that “it is not enough for people to know about climate change in order to be engaged; they also need to care about it, be motivated and able to take action” (Lorenzoni et al., 2007: 446).

There are several reasons why public engagement on climate change could be viewed as essential to meeting climate change targets. Firstly, high levels of public concern about climate change and awareness of national energy needs provide both the social licence for policy makers to act and imply the public accepts policy decisions which have already been taken (Whitmarsh et al., 2011; Shaw, 2015). Secondly, in line with aspirations for a healthier democracy, engagement with the policy-making process also helps to enhance the work of current institutions and social relations in the context of energy and environmental concerns, by ensuring that the knowledge and policy created by these institutions is seen to be ‘credible, salient and legitimate’ (Cash et al., 2003: 8086). Third, strengthened public engagement can motivate participation in the structural and behavioural changes required as a result of those policies (Carvalho and Peterson, 2012; Machin, 2013; Thorpe and Gregory, 2010; Shaw, 2014). Fourth, it has been argued that citizen engagement with climate politics is indispensable to finding

effective responses (Castell, 2010) on the basis that the inclusion of alternative problem definitions and forms of knowledge have the potential to generate new thinking about policy (Oppenheimer, 2005; Hampton, 2009; Rayner, 1987; Ravetz, 2006). Fifth, living in a democracy means people have the right to be given a say in the important climate policy decisions facing a country (Carvalho and Peterson, 2012). Hence, participation is not only necessary in order to solve critical policy problems like climate change but becomes the normative means by which a more democratically accountable, and thereby better society can be built (Carvalho and Peterson, 2012). Finally, Article 12 of the UNFCCC Paris Agreement explicitly commits parties to enhance public participation in order to improve delivery of the actions detailed by the Agreement (UNFCCC, 2015).

Despite these strong and diverse grounds for public involvement, there appears to be little research as to whether public engagement is a key part of the strategy bringing about changes to climate and energy policy (Gough, 2013; Warren, 2014; Capstick et al., 2015). One of the reasons for this may be implicitly or explicitly held views that public engagement is not, in fact, seen as a desirable, or indeed, necessary part of national transitions. Although the requirement for public engagement is therefore recognised theoretically, to our knowledge there has been no assessment of whether those acting as intermediaries between the policy making process and the public consider citizen involvement a central objective of climate policy, how they view trade-offs between public engagement and other goals of climate policy, and what forms of knowledge are employed in determining those choices. This we argue is a critical oversight: unless those working actively to develop policy themselves view public participation as important, it will gain minimal traction, and social science research on this topic may be disregarded.

2. Using knowledge exchange to develop research questions

This paper provides insights into intermediaries' perceptions of public engagement on climate change, based on collaborative research arising from a previous Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) knowledge exchange (KE) project, - the *Climate Crunch* (Newell et al., 2015) - the aim of which was to promote dialogue between researchers and research users.

The *Climate Crunch* programme identified key barriers to public engagement and effective action. These were: a) the ‘governance trap’ - whereby governments place responsibility on citizens, organisations and markets for action on climate change, while these in turn place responsibility back onto governments; b) governments' failure to address the ways high-carbon lifestyles are shaped and reproduced; c) limited stakeholder participation in climate policy deliberations, including those establishing the priorities and trade-offs that should govern transitions to a lower carbon society. Two of the solutions proposed in response to these barriers related to the role of public participation in climate policy, namely: 1) developing a more inclusive and democratic process of deliberation regarding the trade-offs between economic growth and harm from climate change and 2) ensuring decision making is transparent and procedural rights - rights to information, consultation and democratic inclusion in the decision-making process - are recognised and upheld (Newell et al., 2015).

2.1. Building grassroots engagement with climate change: A knowledge exchange partnership with the Fleming Policy Centre

This KE project sought to develop the *Climate Crunch* findings through engagement with a KE partner active in the area of climate policy where public participation was a core focus of the approach taken. The Fleming Policy Centre was chosen in this respect. This organisation was set up in 1996 to refine and promote a version of personal carbon trading known as Tradable Energy Quotas (TEQs). This scheme is based on harnessing wide scale public innovation and participation in developing low carbon lifestyles, within a strong emissions

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