



Mobilizing community energy

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HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Explains how/why community energy groups mobilize and the political dynamics surrounding it.
- ▶ Draws on original qualitative research of 100 community energy groups in Scotland.
- ▶ Identifies two particular sets of resources (structural and symbolic) and their importance.
- ▶ Explains how these resources shape community energy mobilization in Scotland.
- ▶ Provides an original application of resource mobilization theory to the field of energy studies.

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ABSTRACT

What explains the galvanising of communities to participate actively in energy projects? How do groups mobilize to overcome the often formidable barriers highlighted in the existing literature? Drawing on original qualitative research of 100 community energy groups in Scotland, including six in-depth case studies, we explain how effective mobilization occurs and the political dynamics surrounding such mobilization. To capture these dynamics, we adapt theories offered by literature on social movements, with a particular focus on resource mobilization theories. Applying our adapted framework, we identify two particular sets of resources shaping community energy mobilization: (i) *structural resources*, which refer to the broad political context structuring and constraining opportunities for community energy mobilization; and (ii) *symbolic resources*—less tangible resources used to galvanise participants. We investigate to what extent our case study groups were able to draw upon and exploit these resources. We find that *structural* resources can either facilitate or hinder mobilization; what matters is how state resources are exploited and constraints mitigated. The use of *symbolic* resources was highly effective in aiding mobilization. Each of the groups examined – despite their considerable variation – effectively exploited symbolic resources such as shared identity or desire for strong, self reliant communities.

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1. Introduction

Community action on energy has increased significantly in the last decade, spurred on not least by concerns about climate change and rising energy costs. Action takes several forms: local campaigns to reduce energy use, neighbourhood solar installation schemes, community-owned wind turbines, the creation and networking of transition towns. As community energy action has increased, so too has the academic study of its key features and development. For instance, extensive work by Gordon Walker

and colleagues on community energy in the UK (especially in England and Wales) has tracked the growing role of community initiatives in sustainable energy technologies (Walker et al., 2007; 2010; see also Walker and Devine-Wright, 2008). Other analysts studying community action in the UK and abroad have sought to identify the key factors driving community energy initiatives forward. Of these, monetary and environmental incentives for action have received considerable attention (Middlemass and Parrish, 2010; Walker, 2008b). Others have focused on the key barriers to community initiatives on energy, emphasising the many behavioural, financial and technological barriers to action, as well as the opposition many renewables projects face within the community (see Bell et al., 2005; Toke et al., 2008; Warren and Birnie, 2009). Several studies have sought to evaluate different community endeavours and assess their ‘success’ as measured

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in energy production, carbon reduction, norm diffusion or other criteria (see Roberts et al., 2012; Seyfang, 2010).

We seek to complement this literature but our remit is distinct. First, our focus is not on the 'outputs' of these groups, but on the mobilization that precedes and sustains them. What explains the galvanising of communities to participate actively in energy projects? What resources are most important in facilitating mobilization? How do groups mobilize to overcome the often formidable barriers highlighted in the existing literature? Our focus on mobilization compels us to look not just at financial and technological incentives or costs, but at the wider political context shaping community action. To capture the political dynamics linked to mobilization, we adapt theories offered by literature on social movements, with a particular focus on resource mobilization theories. This focus allows us to explore explanations largely neglected in existing studies of community energy.

Second, we aim to fill an empirical gap by using Scotland as a case study. The UK literature has focused overwhelmingly on community energy action in English regions and Wales (Mander, 2008; Smith, 2007; Toke, 2005; Walker et al., 2007). Far less attention has been paid to Scotland despite its distinctive political system and the level of support the Scottish government has given to community energy and renewable energy in general. For instance, the Scottish government has set a preliminary target of achieving 500 MW of community or locally-owned renewable electricity generation as part of its ambitious 2020 targets, which include meeting 100% of Scotland's demand for electricity from renewable sources. It has encouraged community mobilization through grants and loans scheme and has also sought to play a leadership role in renewables and low carbon technologies from the local to the global stage (see McEwen and Bomberg, 2012).

The article proceeds as follows. We first introduce the key concept of mobilization. We present a modified 'resource mobilization framework' to capture some of the dynamics neglected in current literature. Section 3 introduces our methodology and background on six case studies of effective mobilization. Section 4 presents our analysis of mobilization based on our case study material. Applying our adapted framework, we identify two sets of resources shaping mobilization: (i) *structural resources*, which refer to the broader political context structuring and constraining opportunities for community energy mobilization; and (ii) *symbolic resources*, which are those less tangible resources used to galvanise participants. We argue that two symbolic resources – collective community identity and the quest for autonomy – have been highly conducive to mobilization around energy action, especially related to renewables. No single set of factors – or resources – can explain community energy mobilization, but we argue here that political resource dynamics can play an important – and still understudied – role in facilitating or stymieing energy action at the grassroots level.

2. Understanding mobilization

2.1. Mobilization: Concepts and literature

Political mobilization refers to the process of facilitating, motivating and galvanising individuals to actively participate in political or social endeavours (Klandermans, 1988, 1997; see also McCarthy and Zald, 1977). The subject gained particular attention in the 1970s as scholars sought to explain the growth and development of a wide range of protest groups mobilizing (especially in western industrialised democracies) around issues concerning the environment, peace and women's rights. A broad literature on 'social movement' theory emerged to explain why

and how these protest movements emerged (see Della Porta and Diani, 2006; Dalton, 1994). The literature had many strands, but all sought to counter traditional theories of protest which tended to explain collective action as a direct response to deprivation, class conflict or economic crisis (Gurr, 1971). Social movement theories adopted a more nuanced view of mobilization, arguing that the mobilization of groups and movements was a complex political process resulting from values, goals and strategies adopted by actors within a multifaceted and often conflictual political context (Canel, 1997).

More recently the study of mobilization has expanded to explain not just protest movements, but mobilization of citizens around a wide set of issues including temperance (McCammon and Campbell, 2002), pensions (Amenta et al., 2010), climate change (Bomberg, 2012), and community sustainability (Middlemass and Parrish, 2010). In the specific area of **community energy**, mobilization refers to galvanising communities to support and actively take part in initiatives linked to energy reduction or producing energy from renewable or low carbon sources. Effective mobilization is a precursor to the energy action discussed in many existing studies of community energy. Such mobilization also helps to sustain that action, often in the face of formidable barriers.

These barriers may be psychological, including individual attitudes and perceptions. Thus, individual inaction may result from a lack of accurate information and knowledge (Attari et al., 2010), or a feeling that individual action will not make a difference (Jackson, 2005; Burch, 2010). Beyond the individual level, community action must confront collective action problems: the incentive for citizens to participate in energy reduction schemes or microgeneration projects is low because the benefits of action – lower emissions, safer planet, sustainable supply – accrue to everyone not just to direct participants. Individual actors may thus be tempted to free-ride on the efforts of others and behavioural change is needed to overcome such inertia (Büchs et al., 2011; Burch, 2010; Heiskanen et al., 2010). Community energy action can also be inhibited by *technical* barriers, including a lack of equipment, technical knowledge and expertise (Walker, 2008b). The most widely identified barrier is the suite of *financial* constraints holding back community action. Of course, the promise of financial gain – either directly or indirectly through lower fuel bills – can be a powerful mobilizer (Allena et al., 2012; Walker, 2008a), but community groups engaging in community-scale renewables face difficulties raising sufficient capital, especially for the early high-risk costs at the pre-planning stage (see Middlemass and Parrish, 2010; Margolis and Zuboy, 2006; Walker 2008b; Jaffe and Stavins, 1995). Government grants and social investment funds can offset some of the costs and risks, but financial challenges remain, especially when government rules and promises are uncertain or inconsistent (Warren and Birnie, 2009).

Yet, in spite of the many barriers groups face, communities have been spurred into action in pursuit of energy goals, and many remain mobilized to overcome these barriers. To explain this mobilization, we draw upon insights from the social movement literature, focusing in particular on theories of resource mobilization. Resource mobilization theorists pay particular attention to the dynamics of mobilization and the resources that underpin it. Rather than focusing on class distinctions, ideology or deprivation as the main drivers motivating protest group members, they borrowed from rational choice approaches to argue that what matters is how groups mobilize resources in pursuit of their cause. According to this framework, mobilization depends less on political grievances or ideology, and more on the presence of resources and expertise to create and sustain the group (Dalton, 1994: 6; see also McCarthy and Zald, 1977).

For resource mobilization theorists, the key questions concern how groups identify and exploit material resources (money, skills,

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