(Dis)connected communities and sustainable place-making

Franklin, A. and Marsden, T.

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Alex Franklin and Terry Marsden

Abstract

Why, despite a recent surge in the UK in "sustainable communities" policy discourse, do so many community-led sustainability initiatives remain fragmented, marginal and disconnected from local government strategies? How can community- and government-led sustainability initiatives be better integrated such that they add significantly to a denser matrix and cluster of sustainable places? These questions, we argue, lie at the heart of current sustainable place-making debates. With particular reference to two spatial scales of analysis and action, the small town of Stroud, England and the city of Cardiff, Wales, we explore the twin processes of disconnection and connection between community sustainability activists and local state actors. We conclude that whilst there will always remain a need for community groups to protect the freedom which comes from acting independently, for community activists and policy-makers alike, there are nevertheless a series of mutual benefits to be had from co-production. However, in setting out these benefits we also emphasise the dual need for local government to play a much more nuanced, integrative and facilitatory role, in addition to, but separate from, its more traditional regulatory role.

Introduction

Recent literatures on low-carbon living and sustainable communities have put a renewed emphasis upon the need to further problematise relationships between community activists and local government in bringing together ecological, economic and social forms of sustainability (ODPM 2003; see also Larner and Craig 2005, Raco 2005). Despite a plethora of both government-led and community-led sustainability initiatives now operating in most UK cities and towns, actual examples of a coordinated matrix of public and third-sector initiatives – where there is a coming together or dynamic mobilisation *in place*, of different groups of stakeholders, consumption and production sectors, and spaces of practice – remain few and far between. Of particular relevance here is the "peculiar" nature of many community-led sustainability initiatives in the sense that they are constituted around highly embedded forms of social practice.

We frame community-led sustainability initiatives in this paper as involving groups of individuals who come together, in and through place, around a shared sustainability interest or ambition, often with the aim of bringing about practical change in the local environment Franklin and Morgan (2014). Collectively, these place-based initiatives cover a range of production and consumption spheres – housing, energy, waste, transport, water, food, domestic goods and green building design – and can be orientated towards a wide spectrum of spaces and places (including domestic and work-based; public and private; built environment and brownfield land; green space, agricultural and forest land, etc.). Examples of community-led initiatives which contribute to sustainable place-making abound (see, for example, Tukker *et al*. 2006, Marsden 2008, Middlemiss 2008, 2011, Newton *et al*. 2009). However, it is their inherent embeddedness which makes individual community-led initiatives resistant to generic and aggregated progression either empirically or conceptually. It seems to the authors of this paper that we must celebrate the peculiarities of community-led sustainability, at the same time as critically engaging with them. This is important if we are to progress the construction of sustainable place-making strategies as a major transcending force in post-carbon societies, and in doing so create more sustainable economies based upon more equitable and just systems of resource exploitation and development.

Taking as our focus here, the notions of connectivity and disconnectivity in the process of sustainable place-making, we ask: what are the impediments to developing a more fully fledged, place-based and denser matrix of public and third-sector sustainability initiatives? In restricting our focus to studying examples of (dis)connectivity between (and by) government and community sustainability activists, it is worth emphasising that it is by no means our intention to imply that the role of private sector actors should be discounted. Rather, our aim is that this paper will serve to complement existing and future research which engages with notions of connectivity and disconnectivity from the starting point of the private sector.

Approaching sustainable place-making as an ongoing and emergent process (Franklin *et al*. 2011a) and drawing on empirical examples, our aim in this paper then is to increase understanding of the relational politics, processes and practices of "building sustainable communities" (ODPM 2003) between community and government. We review the challenges and opportunities for achieving greater connectivity between the sustainability practices and visions of community activists and government actors; we also consider occasions when a degree of disconnectivity may prove equally productive. We illustrate this by looking at the actions and interactions, connections and disconnections of these two sets of stakeholders in two UK settlements of contrasting size: the market town of Stroud, England; and the city of Cardiff, Wales. Although this paper concentrates primarily on sustainable place-making at the local level, attention is also given to how more integrated forms of sustainability practice might be enacted at a wider spatial scale. This especially focuses upon the need for developing new organisational and socio-spatial interfaces between community initiatives and the local state.

2. "Building sustainable communities": a review of (dis)connectivity

In conceptualising "connectivity", a central point of reference here is the social capital informed theory of "linking" capital (Szreter and Woolcock 2004). "Linking" capital can be understood as a development and refinement of "bridging" capital. A more recent addition to the social capital school of thought, it is commonly used in parallel to, rather than in replacement of, "bridging" and "bonding" capital (Putnam 2000). Whilst "bonding" capital refers to the social ties connecting together individuals of a shared social identity or group affiliation (in this context, for example, a group of community activists), "bridging" capital is used in reference to the external ties which connect together "clusters of tightly bonded individuals" (Dale and Newman 2006) with differing social identities (for example, multiple groups of community activists). By contrast, the concept of "linking" capital has been introduced into the literature as a way of distinguishing between horizontal ("bridging") and vertical network connections. Accordingly, "linking" capital refers to the ties which form between people "across explicit 'vertical' power differentials" (Szreter and Woolcock 2004, p. 655) (for example, between community groups and local government). It is this vertical type of linkage which forms the focus of this paper; specifically explored here in the context of local-level sustainability initiatives which require – or create an opportunity for – collaboration between government actors and community sustainability activists.

In setting the scene for exploring community–government connectivity as it is currently played-out within the two case study locations, we begin with a wider background review of relevant policy for England and Wales. What becomes apparent from this review is the long-running political emphasis on stimulating increased participation, collaboration and engagement in policy decision-making as a way of better "connecting" the work of public sector officials with civil society and their everyday lives (Abram and Cowell 2004); but simultaneously, the reasons as to why this has also contributed to further "disconnectivity".

Support for increased civic engagement has been a subject afforded high-profile attention by consecutive UK Government administrations, with "Localism" and "Big Society" serving as widely known (if also widely controversial) political keywords of the current coalition government (Featherstone *et al.* 2012). The influence of this political agenda on sustainable development policy is evident in the regular promotion of, and calls for, increased collaborative between governmental and non-governmental stakeholders within this field (Rogerson *et al.* 2010). Ultimately, in line with more decentralised modes of governance, all stakeholders regardless of sector, size or scale of operation, are portrayed as having a role and responsibility in achieving sustainable place-making. Two recent illustrations of where this has been formalised in England and Wales with respect to community and individual citizen-level engagement are the statutory requirements that every local authority prepares a "Sustainable Community Strategy" (Local Government Act 2000); and that every

local authority engages in "participatory planning". Consultation and engagement with a range of local stakeholders are fixed requirements in both cases.

As has been extensively discussed elsewhere (see, for example, Abram and Cowell 2004, Forester 2012, Healey 2012), there are a number of reasons why a participatory working relationship between state and non-state actors can prove difficult to establish or maintain. Far too often when participation is adhered to by local government because it is a mandatory requirement placed upon them, it occurs in the form of consultation. Such an approach adheres to the minimum standards of socially inclusive decision-making, and although it does not prevent public participation, neither does it actively promote it (Healey 2007, 2012). Participatory approaches which are based merely on consultation do little to encourage psychological ownership of the proposed plan, or strategy, by members of the public (Selman 2008). This can be particularly significant in the context of attempts at engaging local sustainability activists in sustainability policy-writing initiatives. Given their limited time and resources, if community activists do not perceive a policy strategy or visioning exercise as being likely to bring about actual change of the ground, they will channel their participation elsewhere (Abram and Cowell 2004).

Another notable difficulty in encouraging widespread participation is how prepared the professionals initially are for the challenges that it may bring (Petts and Brooks 2006). Many local authority professionals lack experience in anything beyond what Petts and Brooks (2006) describe as passive participatory processes (including public meetings). This reflects the fact that traditionally, the planning process has been supported by a "linear message model" whereby expertise is "as a set of statements uttered by experts, rather than an ongoing learning process resulting from interactions between people in a decision-making context" (Petts and Brooks 2006, p. 1046). Professionals commonly perceive their role as one of acting on behalf of the public, rather than with them. From this starting point, attempts to increase the integration of lay knowledge in the decision-making process tend to be regarded by experts as unnecessary and unwarranted, and in some cases, as a direct challenge to their own authority. There is little room in this context to accommodate the fact that visions of a sustainable future will be differently constructed dependent upon the dominant ideologies and sources of knowledge upon which individuals draw (Larner and Craig 2005).

Arguably, the linear nature of knowledge flow which is seen to characterise participatory planning reflects a more fundamental limitation in the extent to which this type of practice facilitates increased social connectivity. At the centre of participatory planning and sustainable communities strategies are the role, actions and plans of government. There remains a general absence within the UK, of any accompanying or equivalent set of government initiatives which are designed to be responsive to, rather than directive of, community-led sustainability initiatives. Arguably, this considerably curtails the extent to which political acknowledgement of the need for increased connectivity between government and civil society will ever

result in actual practical achievements on the ground. To relate this to the work of social capital theorists, an implicit objective of political "connectivity" initiatives such as participatory planning and sustainable communities strategies is seemingly to create a supportive context for building and strengthening "linking ties" (Szreter and Woolcock 2004) between government and community. What these current policy approaches illustrate, however, is the inherent difficulty of securing anything more than narrow or superficial social ties without there first being a mutually agreed approach to doing so, or at least, equal opportunity for shaping the activities which the ties support (Putnam 1993).

Also of relevance here is the fact that many of the low-carbon initiatives which contribute to sustainable place-making at the local level are currently established without the direct involvement of government players. Moreover, for many community sustainability activists, this disconnection is intentional. An absence of linking ties and any associated norms of mutual reciprocity supports an ongoing freedom for community groups to pursue and promote alternative forms of sustainable living. In the case of many community-led sustainability projects, seldom are government bodies even represented on project steering groups. Furthermore, where direct contact occurs between community groups and government bodies this is commonly due to a necessity – for example, an application for planning permission – and represents a single, function-specific, set of interactions at an isolated point within the lifetime of the initiative. Assuming that prior or subsequent actions of a community group remain compliant with government regulations, they are unlikely to be given formal attention by government. Thus, whilst the activities of local government and community activists may have the potential to be brought together into an integrated sustainable communities strategy, in practice it appears to be more common that they merely operate in parallel.

Researching sustainability: a note on method

The growing range, scale, intensity and also communication of community-led sustainability initiatives is worthy of much celebration (with the international Transition Towns network being a case in point). Case study examples provide valuable insights and roadmaps into the ways in which individual principles of sustainable living can and are being incorporated into everyday practices of production and consumption on the ground (see Franklin *et al*. 2011a). And, as these examples have spread and become known, the sustainability principles on which they are based have acquired increased legitimacy and acceptance (Baker 2006). Despite the explosion of individual initiatives, however, when reviewed in the wider socio-spatial setting in which they take place, the extent to which these initiatives signal a widespread shift towards joined-up sustainable place-making becomes less clear. Arguably, the picture becomes more akin to a fragmented mosaic of activities, often skewed towards particular sectors, particular spaces and particular (more empowered)

social groups within the community (Born and Purcell 2006, Franklin *et al.* 2011b). Within the UK, this is true even within locations (e.g. Stroud and Totnes) which are widely regarded as being at the forefront of sustainable living and early pioneers in the widespread exchange of knowledge practice on community-led sustainability. As Barr and Devine-Wright (2012, p. 531) observe: "for the majority of people in those communities with Transition movements, the everyday practices of consumption continue. Resilience is still therefore the concern of the few … ". This socio-spatial unevenness suggests the need to cast a more critical eye as to the development of local sustainability initiatives *in place,* in a number of respects. Clearly, we need to problematise the partial, arrested and often fragmentary nature of these sustainable community constructions, and explore the reasons for their impeded development in some cases. We do so here by reviewing the (dis)connectivity of a number of individual community sustainability initiatives situated within the case study locations of Stroud (England) and Cardiff (Wales). We begin with a note on research methodology and a summary description of each study location.

Research methods and study contexts

The authors have been involved in an ongoing programme of empirical research in Stroud since the summer of 2008. A semi-rural, small industrial town located in the local authority of Gloucestershire, Stroud has a population of approximately 12,000. It has a strong industrial and manufacturing heritage in textiles and cloth, and displays socio-economic features characteristic of other "typical" English semi-rural communities. However, with a long history of "alternative" politics, a strong Green Party presence, and a multiplicity of community-led sustainability initiatives, Stroud also has a reputation for being at the forefront of green and sustainable living in England (Marsden *et al.* 2010).

The Stroud research programme began with a joint UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Academy for Sustainable Communities (now part of the Homes and Communities Agency of the UK Government) funded project on skills and knowledge for sustainable communities. Data collection during this initial project – the majority of which was undertaken by our colleague Julie Newton – included a total of 16 semi-structured interviews and 2 focus group meetings with founding members of community-led sustainability initiatives and representatives from local government; and participant observation, which included working alongside community members in various sustainability initiatives (for an extended discussion of the research methodology, see Newton *et al.* 2011). Following the completion of this first project, the Stroud research was continued in connection with the wider research agenda of the ESRC Centre for Business Relations, Accountability, Sustainability and Society. This latter phase has primarily been centred on the work of Stroudco Community Food Hub and its ambition to broaden the cross section of Stroud residents consuming locally produced sustainable food. Research methods used to support this second phase of research have included participant observation at Stroudco trading days and monthly meetings, a series of unstructured conversational

style-interviews with members of the core group, a telephone survey of Stroudco consumers, analysis of Stroudco trading data and a focus group with residents of a local housing development, (the original target-audience of Stroud consumers). As part of the process of collecting these data, the research team have also kept themselves up to date with other ongoing and newly emerging sustainability initiatives in Stroud.

Running in parallel, since January 2011, to the Stroud research has been a second programme of work centred around place-based approaches to sustainability in the south-east Wales city region. Located in this city region, Cardiff is also the capital city of Wales. Whilst the total population of Cardiff is approximately 330,000, the wider city region has a population of approximately 1.4 million. Each of the local authorities in this city region (10 in total) shows wide variation in the ways in which internal responsibility for sustainability policy is divided-up and administered.

In contrast to the focus of the Stroud research, much of the data collection for the Cardiff programme has been orientated towards the initiatives and policies of local and national (Wales) government. This has included: playing the role of "critical friend" to the Cardiff Council Sustainability Unit (2012) during their development of the sustainability strategy for the city; serving on the advisory board of the Welsh Government "Pathfinders" programme (see below); undertaking a semi-structured research interview with a member of the Sustainability Unit (December 2011); conducting documentary analysis of recent Cardiff Council sustainability publications (Cardiff Council 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2012) and reviewing the ongoing (Welsh Government-led) development of a south-east Wales city region strategy. In addition, participatory observation has also been undertaken at a series of policy/practitioner events held in Cardiff (including most recently the Welsh Government-led "Cynefin" workshop (September 2013), focused around developing "place-based" solutions to community sustainability within three wards of the city).

(Dis)connectivity as operating context: community-led sustainability

Amongst the range of local-level sustainability initiatives which are currently being pursued in both Stroud and Cardiff, varying degrees and dimensions of both connection and disconnection can be found between community and government. Drawing firstly on two individual illustrations of community-led sustainability, we look at the effects and consequences of developing sustainability initiatives within an operating context of disconnectivity. We begin with what can in many ways be considered as a flagship example of a community-led approach to "building sustainable communities": the case of Springhill co-housing in Stroud.

Around the world land-use planning systems are all too often perceived to be contributing to urban development problems, rather than functioning as tools of environmental improvement (UNHabitat 2009). In the case of Springhill co-housing,

by seeking planning permission for a whole neighbourhood all-at-once, this created an opportunity for a greater spatial scale of divergence from more standard approaches to the design and layout of residential dwellings. The project first began to take form in 2000 when a group of community members purchased a small site of land close to the centre of the town. Having appointed architects and secured planning permission, the group then project-managed the residential development of the land. The construction of Springhill, which includes some 34 units, accommodating 75 people in a range of 1–5 bedrooms houses, was completed in 2005.

The sustainability credentials of Springhill encompass a wide range of social, economic and environmental features. Each housing unit uses high-specification energy-efficient building technology and is equipped, as standard, with photo-voltaic tiles. There is also a sustainable urban drainage system in operation. All houses within the Springhill development are leaseholds, with the land remaining the property of a public liability limited company, of which all householders are also shareholders. The site includes a central community (hub) building which is used for a range of communal activities, including (optional) shared meals three times per week. The presence of a hub building, along with such other factors as the proximity of the houses to one another, the pedestrian layout, and the active encouragement of regular social interaction reportedly makes Springhill an extremely safe and crime-free neighbourhood with a strong community ethos.[1] A sense of "community" is further supported by the requirement that residents undertake up to 20 hours community work on the site per year.

In addition to the high emphasis placed on stimulating social connectivity within Springhill, there is widespread awareness amongst the residents as to the environmental and economic features which support this form of sustainable community living. These factors, combined with the land tenure shareholder model which protects housing affordability, have led to Springhill winning numerous awards. This includes being formally recognised in 2005 for its outstanding contribution towards sustainable communities, by the UK Deputy Prime Minister Award (ODPM 2004). A review of commentary made by the judging panel in connection with this award also raises questions, however, of the compatibility of the wider UK sustainable communities policy agenda with the current system of land-use planning. In publicising the award, the panel openly and somewhat evocatively acknowledges the disconnection between the community-planned residential area of Springhill, and the government-led reality elsewhere:

> … the efforts to make consensus decisions are clearly tiring, yet the commitment remains because the residents know the alternative – distant bureaucracy, poor services, individual powerlessness and social isolation. (ODPM 2004, p. 10)

In the case of Springhill then, we see some of the contradictions being expressed between connections and disconnections with regard to the goals of the main

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[1] For further information on Springhill Co-Housing, see www.cohousing.org.uk/springhill-cohousing

(community) actors and their wider institutional and governance environment. Disconnection from the latter gives an action space in which to re-connect in the former. However, in so doing, this also arguably limits the everyday exposure of inhabitants in other parts of the town to Springhill's principles and practices of sustainable design and low-carbon living; potentially resulting in new forms of place-making which are socially exclusive. Thus, although being a prize-winning example of a sustainable community, there are also aspects of Springhill's physical design (i.e. layout and fencing-off) which could allow it to be conceptualised as a "gated community" model of sustainability. Indeed, it was precisely the perceived need for increased control of the local environment (Blakely and Snyder 1995) which stimulated the original decision to create Springhill.

The perverse overlap between the disconnection of a gated community (Webster *et al*. 2002, Pow 2009) and the "sustainable communities" policy discourse is picked up on more generally by Rogerson *et al*. (2010, p. 516) in their critique of the (previous) UK Government's Sustainable Communities Strategy (ODPM 2003). Citing the work of Atkinson *et al*. (2005), they note how "these potentially contradictory planning ideals" have been reflected in much of the national sustainable communities guidance provided to local planning authorities in recent years. It suggests that disconnecting with standard approaches to urban planning and design can become a necessary dimension of realising a (award winning) "sustainable community" such as Springhill. Also of direct relevance here, is the concern voiced by Featherstone *et al*. (2012, p. 178) that the current Coalition Government's localism agenda and "Big Society" rhetoric will result in a situation whereby: "the default actors who are empowered by emerging forms of localism are likely to be those with the resources, expertise and social capital to become involved in the provision of services and facilities". Amongst many of the other community-led initiatives in Stroud, however, the potential productivity of building a stronger connection with the wider community is equally apparent. Also apparent, though, is a seeming lack of engagement by local government with this community-led ambition of broadening the social base of local sustainability initiatives; the case of Stroudco serves as a good illustration here.

Community food hubs act to coordinate the sourcing, supply and marketing of food on behalf of local producers and consumers. Commonly run as not-for-profit organisations, they enable the creation of alternative food markets which can deliver a range of social, economic and environmental benefits to the local community. Stroudco food hub began trading in 2009 with the specific aim of broadening the cross section of people consuming local food in Stroud. As well as offering sustainable food for purchase at a reduced market price, Stroudco attempts to bring together producer and consumer members to share and exchange knowledge between their respective rural and urban communities. Practical measures originally put in place to support the overarching aim included offering produce at a rate slightly below normal retail price and trading out of a primary school located in the heart of Parliament Estate – a relatively deprived residential area which was intended to be the target consumer audience.

It was the social equality dimension of Stroudco's focus which proved central to it securing support from the UK "Big Lottery Fund" charity to finance the start-up period and first few years of trading. By originally locating the hub trading point in the grounds of a primary school on the Parliament estate a physical and social distance was intentionally created from other communities in Stroud where sustainability initiatives already find strong support. In practice, however, ongoing difficulties of creating a cultural connection (or "bridging" ties) with the Parliament estate residents meant that this location, away from the centre of town, in turn created an obstacle for attracting a sufficient number of core consumer members:

> The reality is now that almost everybody who shops in Stroudco drives from the centre of the town up to the school and back again and that's one of the big obstacles to people is that they don't want to have to do that drive. (Stroudco core group member, March 2012)

Because of the commitment to generating membership from within Parliament Estate, and to a lesser extent, because investments had been made in the form of physical infrastructure (a secure food storage unit) on the site, for a number of years the core group remained resistant to relocating the food hub. Their time and energy was instead invested in attempts at marketing the food hub within the target community, including incentivising shopping (with offers including free membership, free delivery, flexible payment, etc.), and securing the support of key institutions within the town, including local government. As a core group member later explained, there were a number of ways in which support from local government could increase the options open to Stroudco to securing new members:

> I might be wrong but I can't think of anything they [local government] have done to help and I think they could have been incredibly helpful. I think we could have had a drop-off point in the Council offices for a start … the District Council employs thousands of people. We could have had a drop-off point there. We could have had publicity linked in with a lot of the Stroud District Council stuff. The Stroud District Council run lots of the venues around Stroud so I have tried to put posters up in the leisure centre and we have not been allowed to because the Council have to approve. (Stroudco core group member, March 2012)

A similar experience was also reported in earlier attempts by Stroudco to secure letters of support from Gloucestershire Local Authority employees for the original Big Lottery funding application:

> … I said 'well is there any chance you could write us a letter of support'? 'Oh yes of course I will, of course I will'. I waited and waited, chased him up, left messages – he didn't send me a letter. (Stroudco core group member, March 2012)

This suggests that rather than being based on any clear decision to not become involved, or remain neutral, the disconnect experienced here was as much due to an inertia on the part of the Council official to act supportively. Seemingly the subtleness of this disconnect means that it is also capable of being overcome by Stroudco. Significantly, though, in both of these examples the activities for which Council support was sought are part of a community-led initiative. As discussed earlier, despite the emphasis currently placed on engaging the active support of local residents for government-led development Sustainable Community Strategies, in the case of Stroudco the same principle has seemingly yet to be mainstreamed when the situation is reversed; that is, when it is a community group seeking the active support of local government for a community-led initiative.

Securing local government support for community-led initiatives requires considerable commitment of the part of the community group, but also time, energy and social skill. This commitment is not always something that community members feel able to make. As the Stroudco core group member reflected, with regard to pursuing stronger connections with local government organisations in Stroud:

> I'm not personally … I am not very good at dealing with bureaucracy and if it doesn't … if I make an approach and it's not picked up on given that I have got a list this long of things that I know will make a difference I'm not going to make … I'm not going to spend, put a lot of my focus into something that doesn't seem to be going anywhere. (Stroudco core group member, March 2012)

As is evidenced in this and the above series of quotations by the Stroudco core group member, the disconnect being experienced is not due to a lack of awareness of the potential benefits that could be accrued from securing (selective) stronger working connections with local government. Of greater relevance is the fact that the majority of work undertaken by this community activist is on a voluntarily basis, often having to be balanced around a range of other work and family commitments. In concentrating on doing "things that they know will make a difference", the decision by this individual to give low priority to "dealing with the bureaucracy" of local government is unsurprising.

Reframing the operating context: establishing pathways of connectivity

In the previous section, we considered the consequences of ongoing community–government disconnection. In this section, we look more closely at the potential for overcoming this disconnection. Although this discussion is centred around the case study location of Cardiff, we also revisit the case of Stroud. We look at how, despite a growing abundance of community-led sustainability initiatives in both locations, the respective local governments continue to struggle to realise increased levels of connectivity.

Acting as both a cause and a consequence of ongoing disconnection between community groups and local government in both case study locations appears to be the separation of community and professional networks. This is so both in terms of community members knowing whom they should contact for advice or support within government, and in terms of local government members knowing what groups exist within the local area and where their actions are concentrated. For example, as one local government respondent acknowledged in the case of Stroud:

> [Currently] they have actually got to come to us … and I daresay that there are probably 100 community groups out there that I have never even come across before … (Respondent, Stroud District Council)

It seems then that a starting point for local government to achieving a wider (two-way) portfolio of community engagement is learning about what is already happening on the ground. However, as the above local government respondent from Stroud also noted: " … but if I was to help 100 different community groups I would never be able to help anyone because I would be stretched too thin … ". Thus, just as overcoming the disconnect with local government can prove a considerable challenge to community groups, so too does adopting a much more locally aware and community-engaged approach place considerable pressures on the time and resources of local authority staff members (Rydin 2006). Where a higher degree of connectivity is in evidence, this is often because of additional external resource support. A good example of this is the case of Cardiff Council and the additional support that was recently provided to the Sustainability Unit through the Welsh Government Pathfinder programme.

The organisational structure of Cardiff Council includes a dedicated Council Sustainability Unit. Containing five full-time members of staff, the Unit has a remit to work corporately across all 15 Council "service areas". This is primarily achieved through members of the Unit working with a network of advocates. The advocates, each of whom acts as a "sustainability champion" for their service area, are in turn supported by an assistant and a "green team". Whilst this arrangement places Cardiff in advance of most other Councils within Wales, some of which (at the time of writing) contain neither sustainability units, nor even full-time sustainability officers, the Council continues to struggle in increasing connectivity between community-led and government-led sustainability initiatives. Despite their recognition of the need for collaborative working with private and third-sector stakeholders, on an everyday basis the capacity of the sustainability unit is all but fully absorbed with working to improve the incorporation and monitoring of sustainability practice within the Council. As was acknowledged during a research interview with a respondent from the unit (December 2011), Council staff struggle to maintain knowledge of the various community-led sustainability initiatives which are operating within the city at any one time. However, it was also an awareness of this knowledge gap which acted, in 2011, as a motivation for the Unit agreeing to host a Welsh Government "Pathfinder" officer.

Launched in 2011, and running through until spring 2013, the all-Wales Pathfinder programme was a participatory initiative aimed at supporting community action on climate change. Funded by the Welsh Government, the programme accorded with the commitment of the devolved administration, the National Assembly for Wales, to inclusive decision-making (as formally recorded in the Government of Wales Act 1998). In the years immediately following devolution, this was primarily achieved through a partnership-based approach (Derkzen *et al*. 2008). More recently, the Pathfinder programme suggests a shift of emphasis towards the identification of key intermediaries who are able to communicate the views of community members to policy professionals, whilst at the same time improving awareness at the grass-roots level of both national and local government policies and funding initiatives. The remit of the Pathfinder programme included: identifying ongoing and potential climate action and sustainable development work carried out by communities, so that their work could be shared with others in Wales; supporting and encouraging community groups to take action on climate change – to be done through advice, sign-posting and help in sharing ideas and good practice and gathering evidence of what works when communities lead on climate action (Welsh Government 2011). Actions supporting the remit were delivered by six "Pathfinder officers", each responsible for a different region of Wales. The Pathfinder officers were employed to act as intermediaries, operating "in-between" community groups, civil servants and government institutions (Moss *et al*. 2009).

A notable difference in the approach taken by the officers of the Pathfinder programme to that of other government-led sustainability initiatives was that much of the practical focus of the Pathfinders' work was directly determined by the actions of community groups. As was also implicit in the naming of the programme, the starting point informing the officers' approach was an acceptance that community-led sustainability likely followed multiple pathways, many of which may be place-specific (Rydin *et al*. 2013). In practice, this involved each of the officers working closely with two community initiatives for an extended period (approximately 12 months), with their approach directly informed by principles of participatory action research. In the case of Cardiff, the hosting of one of the Pathfinder officers within the Council's sustainability unit, in turn, also increased the unit staff's awareness of what community-led sustainability initiatives were currently operating within the City. In addition to informal updates, through the Pathfinder officer the unit staff had access to an up-to-date database of community groups and third-sector-led organisations currently engaged in climate change-related initiatives.

It was through the daily performance of his intermediary role that the Cardiff-based Pathfinder officer was able to make progress in becoming accepted by *both* community activists and government actors alike. Notable here appears to have been the officer's adherence to an approach which supported, rather than challenged, the lead role of the community activists. By adopting this type of approach, the Pathfinder seemed able to maintain a balance between being fully engaged with a number of different stakeholder groups – community activists, Cardiff Council, the Welsh

Government – whilst at the same time retaining a degree of neutrality. That they were not perceived by community groups as being personally aligned with, or merely representative of government interests is significant here; so too though, was it important that they were not perceived by government as too closely aligned with community interests. Effectively, by consistently maintaining their position of "in-betweenness" (Moss *et al*. 2009) they took on the status and performed the role of "credible intermediary" (Franklin 2013). The neutrality of the Pathfinder officer in turn also protected the ability of the participating stakeholder groups to retain a status of independency throughout the programme.

The need for a credible intermediary, able to retain sufficient neutrality between government and community, is also in evidence in the comments of a local government research respondent for Stroud. On this occasion, the response was offered as part of a broader discussion of managing the interface between the political positioning of the Council and the green identities (Horton 2003) of some of the more alternative community sustainability activists:

> … there is only so far that a bunch of mainstream politicians will go at any one time … It is about what are these organisations … what are they trying to achieve … How does that fit with the priorities of the Council? Will the personalities work? Will the egos work? … In practical terms how do we bring people together to talk knowing that we have got a good chance of some common ground and the ability to move something forward? (Respondent, Stroud District Council)

The problems of disconnection, both at the city level in Cardiff and in the small town context of Stroud, have a similarity and consistency which is independent of the scale and diversity of sustainability initiatives. On the side of community activists, it partly rests with perceived or real impressions of local government being both traditionally regulatory and bureaucratic in their understanding of progressive and community-based sustainability initiatives. On the side of government, as is reflected in the above quotation, is the challenge of negotiating with everyday "embodied performances of green identity" which are intentionally directed towards creating a "green distinction" (Horton 2003, p. 64). Underlying this, for both sets of actors, is the current disconnect between the alternative green politics, economics and socio-environmental ambitions of community sustainability activists, and the priority given to mainstream capitalist growth by government (Scott-Cato 2009). At the same time, given the increasing constraints on local authority resources, particularly in terms of human resources, it is likely that those groups who appear not to want to work with the local government will be left alone – a sort of mutuality of disconnection.

In the case of Cardiff, the work of the Pathfinder officer appears to have helped halt the development of a mutuality of disconnection between the Council and some of the community sustainability groups. Given, however, that the Pathfinder programme was only funded by the Welsh Government for two years (ending spring 2013), this increased connectivity may yet prove to have been merely temporary. If the

connectivity between the two stakeholder groups is to be maintained, a more direct link will need to be established, thereby in turn reducing the reliance on the presence of an external intermediary. Doing so, though, will require a willingness from both sides, to re-visit and openly question how they position themselves and their practices. In an operating context of the coexistence of multiple visions of sustainability pathways (Rydin *et al.* 2013), the flexibility with which these two groups of stakeholders position themselves may determine whether a more direct and permanent space of intermediation can be opened up (Fischler and Guy 2009). It will also depend on there being sufficient room in the relationship for alternating periods of both connectivity and disconnectivity to coexist. A good illustration of where the latter has been possible elsewhere in the UK is found in the work of Batterbury (2003).

Batterbury (2003) uses the case of a London cycling campaign group to show how the potential for "breaking down citizen-expert divides" is starting to be realised in the UK. As he also explains, however, not only does this require the existence of more progressive planning departments, but it also requires local groups who are prepared to work in cooperation with the local state, rather than merely setting themselves up in opposition to it. Batterbury (2003) provides a detailed account of the opportunities that opened up in the case of this cycling campaign group as a result of a carefully orchestrated working model in which it was possible for the citizen group to engage in active collaboration with the local authority in parallel to acts of resistance:

> Aggressive complaining against new road schemes that ignored cyclists was combined with blatant flattery [of council officials] when such schemes were successfully revised. (p. 161)

As he also acknowledges, however, this required considerable investment of time and a range of both social and technical skills on the part of the citizen group. Strategies used included establishing personal contacts with key officials, demonstrating their competence in report writing, conducting street surveys and regularly attending (government organised) public events. The research undertaken by Batterbury (2003) gives a clear account of the time, commitment and skill required on the part of community groups to reduce the levels of disconnect with local government. However, it also illustrates how much greater the challenge on a community group's "green distinction" (Horton 2003) can be to manage when the relationship between the two sets of actors is not mediated by a credible intermediary. Ten years on, examples of sustainability strategies and initiatives which are co-produced by community and local government remain slow to take root.

Both in the city of Cardiff and the small town context of Stroud we see similar difficulties regarding the need for social and organisational innovations at the policy interfaces between local government and sustainable community initiatives. Whilst Cardiff holds the scale and the resources to establish a more institutionally led approach across the Council, the danger is that this leads to internalisation of concerns especially about achieving aggregated environmental targets. This detracts attention from a more externalised place-based, connected approach. At the same time, in an

operating context – be it a market town, or a city scale – where a vibrant web of sustainable community initiatives have created their own level of independence and autonomy from the local state, we see that disconnection can be as powerful a tool as connection in sustainable place-making. It is yet to be seen whether the local state can add value to such initiatives; indeed, in England particularly, it is now very much in line with UK Government policy to give more energy to "Big Society" (Cabinet Office 2010) community activities which are partly driven by the distance they create from the local state rather than their interconnection with it.

Conclusions: interfaces and skills for connected sustainable place-making

At the start of this paper, we asked what the impediments are to developing a more fully fledged, place-based and denser matrix of public and third-sector sustainability initiatives. In the discussion that followed, we have focused on the extent to which there is a need for a much more interactive and collaborative approach by local government and community groups in progressing sustainable place-making. Our conclusion is that whilst there will always remain a need for community groups to protect the freedom which comes from acting independently, for community activists and policy-makers alike, there are nevertheless a series of mutual benefits to be had from the co-production of sustainable place-making. One is the access it gives to different types and forms of local knowledge, as well as the social networks through which these knowledges and practices are shared and exchanged. Another benefit of more innovative strategies of community engagement is in providing government bodies with a way of entry into better understanding the complexity of place; this includes developing an awareness of the socio-spatial geographies of disconnection as well as those of connection.

In this paper, the challenges of skills and knowledge, capacity and time, and even lingering difficulty amongst many professionals to see for themselves the value of engaging "lay" members of the community, have all been highlighted. So too has the legacy of such conditions, whereby, even where there is willingness by local government members to acknowledge and collaborate with community-led initiatives, their support is not always welcome. In the cases of Stroud and Cardiff, we have also shown for some community activists how disconnection can at times pose as much of an opportunity as it can a threat; it produces a recognised alterity which can be essential to at least the initial creative process of sustainable place-making. What the presence of this disconnection also shows though, is the need for local government to play a much more nuanced integrative and facilitative role, in addition to, but separate from, its more traditional regulatory role. This requires that local governments first address their own disconnections, and spatial skill deficiencies, both in locating sustainability policies in their internal operations and in the ways in which they engage with local communities of interest as well as communities of place. Enabling the creation of connected communities in this way could in turn support the scaling up

(vertically) and scaling out (horizontally) of individual initiatives, contributing to a much more coherent process of sustainable place-making.

In this analysis, we have begun to recognise the need for a more empirical in-depth approach to exploring and analysing the complexity and matrix of public and third-sector initiatives in different places. Thus far, this has not included the role of private sector business involvement and development. Both of these have been beyond the scope and scale of this paper. But its results here point to this strong empirical and comparative need in future sustainable communities research. There are also a series of concluding points which this analysis suggests for understanding the broader progress of more connected sustainable place-making; and in providing pointers towards mainstreaming of community-led sustainable development at different spatial scales.

First, initial analysis of the role of community-led collective action at both spatial scales explored here has created a situation in which their contributions often remain separated out and necessarily distinctive from that of more formal government-led approaches. The consequences of this only really become apparent, however, where reporting of sustainability practice is moved beyond single initiatives to joined-up sustainable place-making. Here, we have illustrated this through reference to the examples of Stroud and Cardiff. Scaling up and interconnecting a range of initiatives in Stroud would suggest the need for local government involvement; but currently the ways and means of stimulating a mutual and sustained interest on the part of *both* community and government, in establishing these "linking" ties, are not clear (Szreter and Woolcock 2004). A similar conclusion can be drawn from the study of Cardiff. If sustainable place-making is ever to be effectively scaled-up to a city-wide level or beyond, it first needs to be much more effectively scaled-down and (vertically) rooted so as to incorporate the value of community-level practice, with more effective links being made between the community actors and local government officers. Increasingly, local government has a core mediating role to play in the scaling up of sustainable production and consumption practice to the city. This can be seen in Cardiff, but so far is only partially successful due to the lack of a longer term strategy for integration between the various initiatives. Hence, any process of scaling up must also involve a process of "rooting down".

Second, exploring how different groups of public and voluntary (and private sector) actors come to work together on sustainable place-making strategies and with what affect, requires further research. The need to work together is already a standard procedure when drawing up Sustainable Community Strategies (Communities and Local Government 2008), but to what extent does it occur in the context of everyday practices of community-led sustainability practice? For instance, what are the challenges experienced by government departments in working with community groups on decentralising energy supply networks, developing a renewable energy resource, or co-ordinating the supply logistics of local food initiatives? And what are the challenges experienced by the community groups in doing the same (Blay-Palmer

2011)? Can participatory forms of planning and decision-making be used to better support collective rather than individual engagement – that is engagement of whole community groups? Similarly, what are the opportunities and barriers for the involvement of the private sector in community initiatives, or the involvement of community groups in private sector ventures, and how are these overcome? There is also a need for further research exploring not merely the presence of initiatives which contribute to sustainable place-making, but rather the diversity of practices, approaches and trajectories which can be found within individual city regions (Williams *et al*. 2010) and the consequences of this (both positive and negative) for sustainable place-making.

Third, the challenge of sustainable place-making is to apply principles of sustainability, in a joined-up manner, with and in particular places. This requires an understanding of not only how the different dimensions of sustainability can be brought together, but also, the complex interrelations between people and place. So far we see that at an institutional level, sustainable place-making has been thwarted by over bureaucratic conceptions of sustainable progress, mixed with still rather traditional standard land use and built form regulatory systems. As Evans and Marvin (2006) argue, these problems of disconnection in sustainable place-making are partly a problem of a disconnection of expertise:

> … contemporary social and environmental problems demand a community of all the experts, in which "expert" is defined increasingly broadly, and in which the different experiences, knowledges, and politics are all included in an integrated, holistic approach to a complex problem or set of problems. (p1012)

If towns and city administrations are ever to achieve the ambitious and aggregated environmental targets they are now increasingly aspiring to, across the full range of sustainability and climate change criteria and resource sectors, they will need to give much more serious consideration of up-skilling and inter-skilling their staff with those of local community innovators. This could lead to real mobilisation in community adaptive change, moving the interstitial into the mainstream and the disconnected towards the connected.

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