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Power, roles and adding value: reflecting on the challenges of bridging across research and action on an international community networking project

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Abstract: The three year EU-funded MAZI research project (www.mazizone.eu) brought together universities, civil society organizations, and neighbourhood groups to design, develop and trial a digital toolkit for supporting local sustainability in four European countries. Funder constraints, partner ambitions and community needs had to be balanced to both adhere to academic research protocols while making a difference in the neighbourhoods where research and action took place. These sometimes conflicting ambitions caused partners to continuously question whose agendas were best being served by the project activities. They had to confront asymmetries of power, capacity, and credibility both within the consortium and within the community settings. Local circumstances changed; partners had to negotiate new, unfamiliar, and changing roles; and guises had to be adopted to progress sometimes conflicting ambitions.

In this paper, we report on the challenges encountered in two of the pilot locations, Berlin and London. These two pilots were similar as they consisted at the outset of a university partner previously unconnected to the locality, working with a civil society partner that was deeply embedded in the setting though long-term engagement. In both cases, the pairings sought to work closely together both on the ground and in research tasks. Finding acceptable compromises stimulated considerable self-reflection and required ongoing negotiation. We offer insights on the potentials and pitfalls of civil society activists and academic researchers collaborating within a research framework from the perspectives of both, with the goal of building a bridge of understanding between these two viewpoints.

Keywords: Agency, guises, transdisciplinarity, collective learning, politics-in-practice

Introduction

The three-year EU-funded MAZI research project[1] brought together universities, civil society initiatives, and neighbourhood groups to design, develop and trial a digital toolkit for supporting local/community sustainability in four European countries from 2016 to 2018. The toolkit was intended as a combination of low-cost portable networking hardware (Raspberry Pi computers), a software platform with easy to use tools, and surrounding guidelines for practice. The goal was to design the system to work at a grassroots level, independent of the internet, to encourage autonomous action by local communities when engaging with digital tools, facilitating the resolution of neighbourhood challenges and catalysing discussions around digital sovereignty. To achieve this goal, all project members had to grapple in reflective debate around partners' own agency within the consortium. The European Commission, the MAZI project funder, had explicitly sought to diversify partnerships in

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[1] www.mazizone.eu

societal challenge research projects. The CAPSSI ('Collective Awareness Platforms for Sustainability and Social Innovation') call that awarded the MAZI consortium funding, aimed for "leverage on fresh grassroots ideas and civil society participation" and had sought to engage "NGOs, local communities, social enterprises, non-profit organisations, students and hackers"[2]. Funder constraints, partner ambitions and community needs had to be balanced to enable adherence to academic and funders' research protocols while making a difference in the neighbourhoods where the action took place. These sometimes conflicting ambitions caused partners to continuously question whose agendas were best being served by the project objectives and activities.

The MAZI consortium had recognised that a shared understanding of purpose would need to be achieved. The project was structured to encourage partners to exchange experiences, explicitly reflecting on processes that could facilitate interactions beyond members' accustomed approaches (e.g. Apostol et al. 2017). Tasks included an ongoing work action to develop an interdisciplinary framework, derived through capture and analysis of partners' self-reflections, concepts, vocabulary and methods used in the experimental research. The consortium worked together from these observations and interactions to identify and utilise a set of 'strategies' and 'tactics' to better enable fulfillment of the research objectives while remaining true to the interests and ambitions of the communities in which the digital toolkit was co-developed and trialled.

MAZI action on the ground was enacted through four pilots, each driven by two partners, with these supported by a further partner fulfilling technical development and project coordination. The pilot pairings were characterised as an 'academic partner' bringing research methods and EU project experience, with a 'community partner' bringing practitioner wisdom from engaging in community settings along with familiarity of a specific context, local experiences and a social network, to affect change. Over the course of three years, these pairings had to confront asymmetries of power, capacity, and credibility both across the consortium and within the community settings during the project. Partners had to negotiate new, unfamiliar, and changing roles, and adopt guises (tactical implementations of roles to suit local situations) to progress sometimes conflicting ambitions, expectations and requirements as they sought to work closely together both on the ground and in research tasks.

In this paper, we report on the challenges encountered by two of the pilots, 'Berlin' and 'London', and their responses. These were selected as in each case they consisted of a university (the 'academic partner') previously unconnected to the site of action, working with a small-scale civil society organisation (the 'community partner') long-term and deeply embedded in the neighbourhood setting that was the focus for the pilot. Specifically, the community partner in both cases had long-standing engagements with precarious communities, where trust, built up over a long time, was vital for the project but also affected how the research agendas were negotiated. The community partner had a priority not to rupture carefully nurtured relationships and networks. In both these cases, the context was an urban neighbourhood experiencing rapid gentrification with the population consequently experiencing immediate existential challenges.

Background

MAZI was conceived as an interdisciplinary as well as a collaborative project from its beginning (Antoniadis 2016). Written into the project contract were a set of actions to enable cross-fertilisation of ideas and enable partners to move from their own disciplines and domains to integrating knowledge and methods from each others' approaches

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[2] http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/portal/desktop/en/opportunities/h2020/topics/ict-11-2017.html

(interdisciplinarity). The project aimed towards 'transdisciplinarity' (Unteidig et al. 2018a): seeking a new unity of intellectual frameworks (Jensensius 2012), going beyond the structures of academic disciplines and synthesising different perspectives (Constanza et al. 1991).

Transdisciplinarity responds to the concern that research projects structured through traditional academic disciplines are limited in their capacity to build knowledge that can address complex societal challenges (e.g. Funtowicz and Ravetz 1993). Working across and beyond academic disciplines and including societal actors with their own expertise in exploring research challenges is increasingly seen as not only ensuring adequate knowledge and experience, but also addressing a democratic concern of reflecting on who has the right to participate, and legitimacy concerns. The credibility of developed 'solutions' are strengthened by including civic actors in partnerships (Felt et al. 2016). Transdisciplinarity discourses align closely with community informatics approaches, where importance is placed on ensuring that the voices of a wider range of stakeholders are heard during participatory or community-based research processes (e.g. Stillman 2005). However, such "heterogeneous assemblages" of ideologies, institutional beliefs, practices and people, are often in contention (Felt et al. 2016, p.737), and create challenges as well as dissolving barriers.

The MAZI consortium identified that "[t]he very framing of a process or an interdisciplinary project is an exercise of power" (Apostol et al. 2017, p.27). Power has been defined as being present "where an actor effects *[sic]* the way of being of another" (Arnold and Stillman 2013, referring to Latour 1992). Collaborative social innovation projects (such as MAZI) require partners to work collaboratively and be willing to negotiate so that tense and conflicting power dynamics can be managed, and the barriers to collaborative action can be avoided (Brown, 2008, Chueri and Araujo 2018). Arnold and Stillman (2013) draw together propositions of power in the social domain and suggest that the key characteristics are resources, coercion, structure, legitimacy, and agency (see Figure 1).
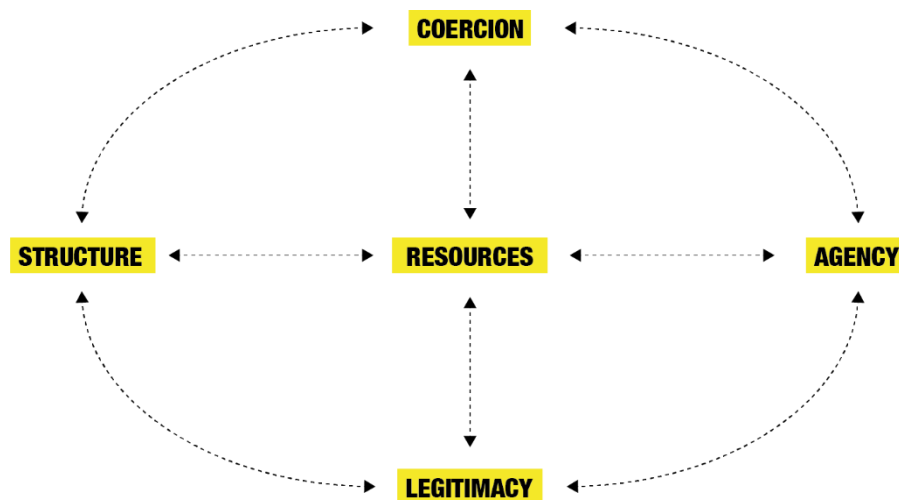

Figure 1: Propositions of power in social research (adapted from Arnold and Stillman, 2013)

In a collaborative consortium, partners must negotiate goals with others, and these are achieved through a range of methods drawing on these aspects of power. Project contracts declare how resources are to be allocated, and structures and reporting that must be adhered to in order to satisfy funders (Felt et al. 2016). A schedule of agreed activities must be interpreted and negotiated, and partners encouraged or coerced to fulfil perceived requirements.

De Certau (1984) identifies that dominant actors engaging with power may employ 'strategies': using structuring frameworks or "semi-institutionalized constraints or boundaries" (Unteidig et al. 2018a, p.16), to achieve their objectives, mechanisms that are abstracted from specific context or place. These are practically managed, responded to, or

subverted in everyday practices by recipients using 'tactics': "short-cuts, work-arounds, unforeseen solutions, compromises" (ibid.) to take advantage of opportunities as they present themselves and progress goals, dependent on the specific time and context (de Certau 1984). de Certau identifies that power has a temporality, that it is shifting and dynamic. Within research work, power is asymmetric, "resid[ing] differentially in the various practices (e.g. different data elicitation techniques) and phases of research (e.g. consent to participation, topic introduction, data analysis)" (Kadianaki 2014, p.360). Power relations are inherent to research practice (Plesner 2011, p.472), and recognising this means that project consortia can treat research as a "site of negotiation"; allowing different participants to debate and reflect in order to understand and overcome asymmetries.

This exploration for the resolution of barriers can be supported through a suitable research design. Brown (2010) argues that a transdisciplinary, collaborative (or collective) research inquiry can benefit from a research design that brings together different knowledges (individual, community, specialised, organisational and holistic) at periodic stages of a collective learning cycle; similar to Kolb's (1984) model of learning cycles or Reason and Brandbury's practitioner inquiry cycle (2001). Brown's 2008 model (see Figure 2) outlines a process for conducting collective social learning to solve 'wicked problems' (Rittel and Webber, 1973) in society settings, beginning by asking 'what should be?' emphasising bringing together multiple worldviews in equal consideration for negotiation without seeking "one right answer, consensus or the highest priority" (Brown 2010, p.77). Processes for learning together and learning about 'the other' are required to ensure an open exchange and negotiating shared understandings (Sclavi 2008). Institutionalising the collective deliberation of 'what should be?' is thus regarded as necessary to complement interdisciplinary collaboration into analysis ('what is?'), projection ('what could be?') and synthesis ('what can be?') (Jonas 2007).
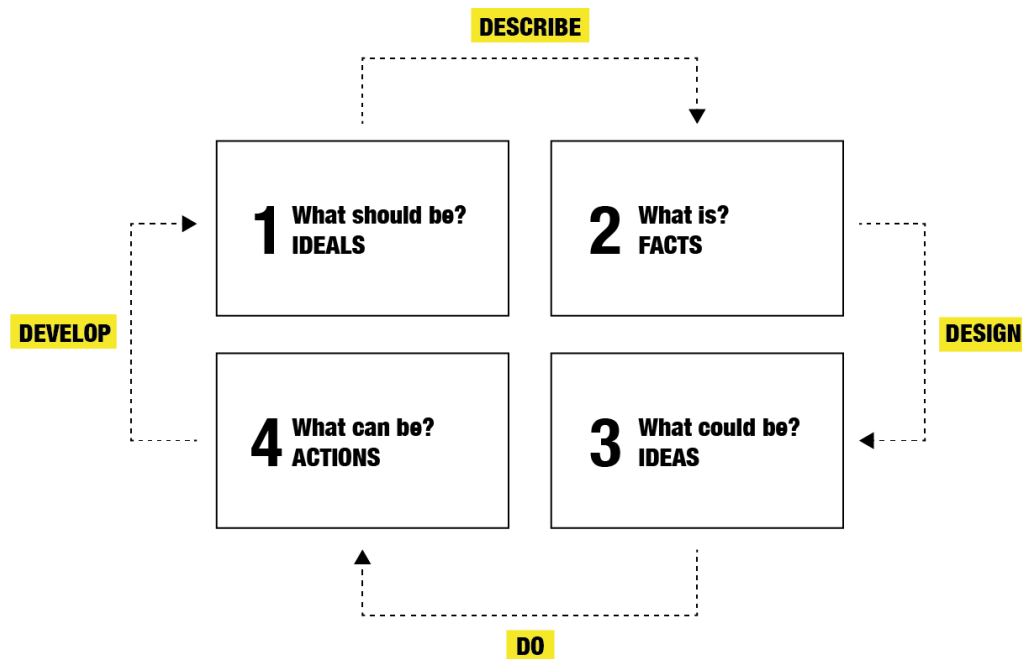

Figure 2: After: Brown (2008) The process of conducting the collective learning cycle

To explore how the challenges of these negotiations played out between the highly diverse and collaborative partnerships involved in the MAZI project, we explore how two pilots experienced these challenges.

Methodology

MAZI took what Cresswell and Poth (2018) refer to as a 'transformative' approach to research and action, seeking to address "issues of power and social justice" (p.9) throughout the project, understanding that the work would be "intertwined with politics and a political change agenda" (ibid.) with the goal of responding to social inequities and enhancing social justice (Mertens 2010). This was recognised both within the consortium's internal actions by the scheduling of activities to trigger reflection and analysis, as well as an understanding that political issues would be implicit throughout the pilot studies, where MAZI was anticipated as a tool or catalyst to help address local sustainability challenges. MAZI iterative processes were designed and programmed into the project timeline to enable partners to move towards transdisciplinarity, through periodic collaboration, reporting, analysis and generating a framework supporting knowledge generation (e.g. Helgason 2016, Apostol and Antoniadis 2018). The processes identified tensions and conflicts that had been encountered and perceived, strategies planned and tactics deployed, roles that partners had played and guises assumed to tactically progress actions (Apostol et al. 2017, Unteidig et al. 2018a). For the pilot studies, these characteristics were played out intensely through the paired partnerships of 'academic partner' and 'community partner' while engaging in their field study context.

The pilot contexts

The Berlin and London pilots were two of four MAZI pilot studies[3]. 'Berlin' was a partnership between the Design Research Lab of Berlin University of the Arts (UdK), a university with a strong design-in-society focus, and Common Grounds (CG), a civil society actor based across the city in the Moritzplatz area of Berlin-Kreuzberg. Prior to the MAZI project, UdK and CG had not worked together, but the key researcher in UdK had come to know one of the CG organisers, and proposed they work together on MAZI in Prinzessinnengarten, a community managed green space and the base for Common Grounds. The community garden worked together with neighbours as well as with local activists in the neighbourhood, acting as a focus of action. Very early in the project, local politics meant the planned focus promised in the MAZI project's Description of Work (a civic participatory planning process for the future of the space itself, Prinzessinnegarten) was no longer possible. UdK and CG worked together in the first few months to propose an alternative focus for the Berlin pilot, agreeing to work with local civil society activist groups that were mobilised in the same neighbourhood to ensure residency rights in the face of rapid gentrification and were seeking methods for sharing best practices.

'London' was a partnership between The Open University, Milton Keynes (OU), a distance learning university with a strong social agenda, and SPC, local community technology activists with a long history of wireless networking in Deptford, south-east London, 50 kms away. The principal investigator of the OU research team had previously worked as a community technology practitioner with the owner of SPC before studying a PhD on community networking (e.g. Mulholland et al. 2006). A second employed researcher in the OU was new to the field and balanced two roles: both facilitating the London pilot fieldwork,

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[3] The third pilot was in Zurich (Apostol et al. 2018), supporting democratic processes in a housing cooperative, undertaken by two civil society actors, Nethood (a local NGO encouraging civil engagement) and INURA (a distributed NGO exploring action and research in localities and cities). The fourth pilot explored sustainability in rural Greek villages with aging populations, undertaken by Napier University (based in Edinburgh, Scotland) and the nomadic art group UnMonastery, that based two 'test labs' in villages and explored how MAZI might enhance their work in the localities (Helgason et al. 2018).

but also responsible for coordinating evaluation across the whole project. MAZI research was carried out along Deptford Creek, a watercourse that runs through the inner-city London borough of Deptford. Deptford had historically been an industrial area with commercial and naval waterfronts, which had then become economically depressed leading to opportunities for artists and creative industries to thrive, but more recently was experiencing rapid economic growth and gentrification. Deptford Creek links together a number of different communities, including artists, activists, residential boaters and environmental groups; all of whom were experiencing rapid change, and in many situations residential uncertainty due to urban development.

The factors characterising the challenges faced by the communities in the Berlin and London pilot were similar. Social justice was at the forefront of discussions when engaging with local audiences. In both cases, the MAZI toolkit was introduced into neighbourhood settings as a tool that might help local voices be heard in the face of urban change and disruption, 'making the invisible, visible' and enhancing their capacity to share knowledge to promote activities and resolve their identified neighbourhood challenges (Davies et al. 2016, Unteidig et al. 2016). In both cases there was a clear disparity between the size of the research and community partner (researchers in a university infrastructure collaborating with individuals from small activist organisation). Pairings sought to work together on the ground closely, with frequent visits to the site of activities supported by an ebb and flow of frequent and informal meetings and interim communications, e.g. via email and phone conversations.

Methods and data

As an overarching evaluation approach, the MAZI project used a case-study approach (Yin, 2009) to examine the pilots; realist evaluation to frame pilot activities (Pawson and Tilley 1997); and cultural historical activity theory (Engeström 1987) to reveal the conflicts and tensions that impacted on the pilots' ability to meet the needs of their communities (Davies et al. 2018). Scheduled reflective activities (identified in Methodology, above) identified that greater insights could be gathered by further researching the interactions between the pilot partnerships to better understand how diverse pairings addressed power inequalities, negotiated contested agendas and benefited from their collaborative working (Apostol 2017).

Towards the end of the second year of the three-year project, the Berlin pilot pairing undertook a semi-structured, self-reflective interview (e.g. Myers and Newman 2007) with lead researcher and community partner interviewed by an external researcher, in order to reflect on progress and inform the last year of activities. The interview questions were structured by key themes identified through the project's self-reflection exercises. This interview was then translated and transcribed (German to English), and taken as a model and replicated to provide a structure for a following semi-structured interview carried out between the lead researchers from the London pilot pairing (The Open University, and SPC). Interviews were thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke 2006), drawing both from themes identified through the prior project transdisciplinary research activities (e.g. Unteidig et al. 2018a), and also inductively explored to identify additional themes specific to these pilots' circumstances. Findings were triangulated (e.g. Twining et al. 2017, Elliott et al. 1999) by researchers from each pilot coding both their own and the comparable interview.

Findings

Pilot partnerships in Berlin and London debated how best to serve both the EU funded project requirements and community agendas throughout the duration of the project. Here, we describe partners' reflections on how working together as a pilot pairing, seeking to achieve

meaningful change and the objectives of the funded project, both brought challenges but also potential benefits.

A key theme arising was the importance of early discussions between partners establishing and reflecting on their agency within the consortium. A critical reflection was around the ***negotiation of roles*** that had been designated, and how these would be fulfilled. In each pilot, the academic partner was allocated as a formal lead to deliver the pilot, and the paired community partner expected to catalyse action on the ground. There was a recognition that these 'absolute' roles could be easily fallen into, and had to be negotiated and managed. "What should be" - Brown's (2008) first stage of the process of conducting collective learning - was a key point of discussion early in the project. In both pilots there was an appetite to overcome the division of 'research' and 'practice' in line with the project's ambition for inter- and transdisciplinarity:

> *"...it was important to me to reach a level of real collaboration where Common Grounds becomes the UdK and vice versa and everyone acknowledges each other's competences and meets at eye level."*
> *(academic partner, Berlin)*

This was not, however, straightforward. In the Berlin case partners were unknown to each other:

> *"We had to understand what our relationship was" (community partner, Berlin)*

In London, the two lead researchers had been known to each other in the role of practitioners, but MAZI represented a first encounter on a formal, funded research project. This novel collaboration required accommodation and reflection, particularly because of the inclusion of a postdoctoral university researcher:

> *"...he was having to pick up on what we were doing and because we had this sort of history of being able to have communication. [...] We were having to slow down a bit in order to, to bring [researcher X] up to speed." (community partner, London)*

Both in London and Berlin, community partners felt that power imbalances had been played out in previous engagements with universities, and were wary of what might happen.

> *"There was a mistrust on both sides in the beginning that had to be overcome… dozens of masters theses had been written about the garden [the field location] in the past, but hardly anyone ever asked what the garden needed to get out of it" (academic partner, Berlin)*

The ambition of **achieving 'transdisciplinarity**', moving beyond the bounds of one's own discipline towards a unified approach, required reflection on partners' self-identification. While the researcher in Berlin described his role in terms of classic academic disciplinary boundaries ("I represent both design and technology"), the community worker emphasised the importance of personal and political identity, a very close self-identification with the association she represented: ("When I, [...], talk about Common Grounds, I'm not just talking about a chapter in my CV, I'm talking about myself. The association is closely connected with me and stands politically for what I stand for.").

Roles also had to be negotiated between the partners and the neighbourhood initiatives with whom they sought to engage. It was seen as critical to generate a shared understanding of how the partner dyads would **present themselves to engaged participants** within the pilot context:

"How do [we] present ourselves in front of other communities?"
(community partner, Berlin)

"A discussion before the first joint event in the [garden] revolved
around the question: Who invites? [the audience to participate in the
project]" (academic partner, Berlin)

De Certau (1984) talks of 'tactics' as a bottom-up, emerging equivalent to top-down 'strategies'. Through project-wide reflective activities, MAZI had identified the tactical, responsive equivalent of 'roles' as '**guises'**: a mechanism for working out how to progress project goals sensitive to the local contexts, groups and situations, and responding to changes over time (Unteidig et al. 2018). There was a recognition that community engagement might not be easy to activate in already wary and overstretched local conditions:

"...you have to try and diffuse this preconception that people might
have, that you're a posh, white bloke who is just going round and doing
what he wants" (community partner, London)

For the civil society partners already engaged within the neighbourhood settings of the pilots, deeply embedded in the local situations and accustomed to navigating through local politics, taking on guises appropriate to different circumstances was not novel:

"We try to connect different (urban) discourses with one another. So a
lot of networking and mediating or translating between different
languages and worlds [...] And we are regularly given this role by others"
(community partner, Berlin)

"...there are layers of networks that you are involved in, and perhaps
the role that any individual plays is traversing layers of network..."
(community partner, London)

In London, for example, the community partner engaged the "Friends of Brookmill Park", volunteers maintaining a local greenspace that wished to better promote their activities to a wider local audience, through his local identity as an active blogger. Meanwhile, he used his identity as a networking expert to encourage participation from an environmental charity, Creekside Discovery Centre, through encouraging them to consider how low-cost MAZI systems might be used to collect sensor data to better inform school science projects. Figure 3 shows MAZI conversations in these contexts.

Figure 3: Taking on different guises to encourage community participation: (a) blog writing workshop with Friends of Brookmill Park (b) Environmental data discussion at Creekside Discovery Centre

The guise of a collaborative team working on an EU project was sometimes seen to encourage participation, with the respective organisations "giving each other credibility" (academic partner, Berlin). While legitimacy and access were achieved through the community partners' long standing involvement, an outside partner could bring validity and the guise of working in a formal funded project enabled the community partner more leverage than they might otherwise have had:

"The Open University part of the relationship [...] was vital because it meant that they [engaged participants] had the reassurance of there being some grander scheme that they were seeking a verification from, in order to take things on" (community partner, London)

"Conversely, we also profited greatly from the university's network of relationships. It was very motivating to see that what we were working on in small scale, found echo on a national level…" (community partner, Berlin)

However, bridging the worlds of the EU funders and local aspiration could lead to activities that led to community partners querying the value to local participants:

"I think there were tensions about EU money coming into the community setting" (academic partner, London)

"And we got all these outputs and made them dance around all day, fed them, watered them … and got the deliverable data out of the otherwise unfunded engagement." (community partner, London)

MAZI formal strategies had to take into account local sensitivities, and often managed through emergent tactics that enabled the pilot teams to sympathetically support local goals or ways of working while achieving funders' requirements. For example, the project contract expected 'community workshops' as a *strategy* for engagement and were interpreted *tactically* to suit local conditions. In Berlin, these included 'unboxing' workshops, where civic action groups, curious about the technologies, were given hands-on sessions to configure their own toolkit deployments. These were then followed up through support in form of regular one-on-one meetings or telephone calls to ensure the communities were not feeling left alone during their appropriation of the technology. In London, the community partner had a long-running regular informal technical meet-up in their space, "Wireless Wednesdays", and so regular drop-in gatherings in cafes and other community spaces familiar to local residents were initiated, promoted as "MAZI-Mondays". Figure 4 shows these different contexts.

**Figure 4: Interpreting strategies using local tactics: (a) Berlin Unboxing workshop
(b) London MAZI-Monday**

Project pilot teams recognised that processes needed to be given time to emerge, and that heavy-handed pressing of project objectives would not be helpful. This was both true when working out processes between the pilot dyads, as well as when engaging with local communities:

> *"Especially at the beginning, I was very keen to keep the process open, because there were always efforts to concretize as quickly as possible so that added value could be recognized.[...] If you push for a result too quickly, you artificially stop a lot of ideas that just need a bit more time to surface." (academic partner, Berlin)*

Engagements with community participants had to be handled sensitively to assure them that their agendas were being respected:

> *"You can't hurry things up by jumping an agenda, pushing the objective forward: it's either appropriate, the part of the conversation or it's not. If it's not, then who were you to jack it in there? it's not going to help" (community partner, London)*

> *" ...there are expectations immediately when people find that you're being funded…. they think that the conversation [around what community needs are]...[is] because of the need of the other agencies...the undisclosed puppet masters... And then the thing that they [community participants] have a conversation about is somehow a loss to them." (community partner, London)*

Local agendas forced the pilot teams to work out tactics against/towards the top-down strategies of the project, and to be creative in guises and agendas, to align local interests with the roles and goals of the project.

A key challenge was to ensure that MAZI project activities **added value rather than adding work** to already stretched local actors (the community partners, and the engaged neighbourhood groups). Project formalities could be perceived as adding work, rather than adding value by emphasising 'project-logic' over progression of local processes. For example, the London academic partners, conscious of project progress reporting requirements, sought to plan agendas for meetings and align write-ups with a formal framework, which was at odds with the community partner's existing practice of informal community gatherings and event blogging:

> *"...we rigourised a lot of what otherwise be a more organic and natural process into a set of reportable processes, which [...] added an untold amount of complication [...] as a consequence I missed vital things and vital clues..."* (community partner, London)

A key issue was promoting the agenda of **onward sustainability** at a local level while working within a funded project that implied closure and termination of funding at a set time:

> *"[We] both [community and academic partner], feel a very strong responsibility for what we have put into the world [through the project]. That's why it goes without saying for us that we continue to accompany the projects of the initiatives after the end of the funding period up to the point that they feel comfortable and good about what we have developed."* (community partner, Berlin)

> *"It should have been THE discussion. What is it, what is it that we're proposing and how does that sustain itself? should have been one of the primary research questions"* (community partner, London)

With the different roles and resources allocated to the partners, **power imbalances were recognised and had to be managed**. Academic partners were given lead of the pilots, and with it, greater resources, so were identified as having greater structural power or influence over what could be done:

> *"...equality would certainly have worked even better if the project had been structured differently in terms of funding. The allocation of the budgets led to an unequal weighting."* (academic partner, Berlin)

The dyads discussed how to practically accommodate this imbalance:

> *"[We] tried to lead on the European administrative and reporting processes and try to free you up as you say, to storytell"* (academic partner, London)

> *"We [...] wanted an equal partnership, but since Common Grounds had much less money at its disposal for the pilot, [the academic partner] had to do a larger part of the work when it came to reporting and handling the EU-level"* (community partner, Berlin)

Equally there was recognition that power came in other forms:

> *"...we [the academic partner] were seen as the lead for the pilot. We are nominally noted as this university pilot. But [...] you [the community partner] had a lot of power because you were the person who knew the community"* (academic partner, London)

Resources and agency limited how much partners could engage across the consortium:

> *"I would have liked to have had more time and influence on the development and design of the hardware and software"* (academic partner, Berlin)

While the EU sought to work with small community organisations, there appeared to be insufficient allowance for the disparity in capacities:

> *"What we see is that the EU as donors, want to work with communities and community organizations on the one hand, but have problems*

*allocating the needed funds or understanding the administrative
limitations and difficulties of small community organizations on the other.
You can't work with smaller organizations in the same way as you work
with large universities…" (community partner, Berlin)*

There was, however, recognition that the EU was trying something new and seeking to find a balance for how this should look. Pilot partners identified that MAZI was one of the CAPSSI trailblazers and the pilots were experiencing the challenges of this innovation at first hand:

*"CAPSSI [the funding framework of the project within Horizon2020]
has nevertheless managed, in some cases, to develop settings that have
allowed egalitarian collaborations and project work. Nevertheless, the
classical idea of innovation still prevails: that the universities are the
contact persons, secure the financing and fulfil the reporting
requirements. The fact that a platform like CAPSSI was possible is
nevertheless remarkable." (academic partner, Berlin)*

Discussion

MAZI pilot partners were aware from the beginning of the project that the collaboration process would be fraught with pitfalls as well as potentials: highly diverse partners were working to come to grips with a 'wicked social problem' in complex social settings. They experienced challenges that resonated with other social innovation projects such as aligning goals, and reaching common language (e.g. Chueri and Araujo 2018).

Negotiating agendas, ensuring added value to local situations, and managing power imbalances in order to align goals and achieve common understandings were challenges that operated at four levels: between partners in a pilot; between the pilot partners and the participant local communities; between partners in the wider consortium; and between the consortium and the funders. There was a need for both forward planning and maintaining a responsive and agile approach to circumstances to balance "project logic vs. engagement in local processes" (Unteidig et al. 2018a, p.14). Formal project mechanisms aided this process, yet partners in pilots had to be attentive to local, emergent situations: there was the danger that the "...ideal of collective experimentation to find innovative solutions is [...] reduced to more ritualized information and communication events." (Felt 2016, p.755).

Informal, ongoing debate and negotiation focussed around neighbourhood action was critical for pilot success on the ground. These pilot-specific conversations resulted in localised 'tactics' suitable for managing day-to-day realities. MAZI identified that 'planned roles' could be complemented by 'responsive guises': locally enacted roles that could tactically progress project goals. An ongoing investment and commitment was required between pilot partners as power imbalances changed over time. Academic partners holding a larger share of resources could be seen to have more structural power to direct work; however they were bound by university processes (e.g. the requirements of ethics committees), while the community partners, operating at smaller scale had more independence and might be considered to have more agency over how to act and respond locally as well as the power that came through their longstanding relationships with neighbourhood groups, and their gatekeeping role.

MAZI identified the importance of creating space for discussions between project partners, both scheduled, but also given space to emerge: strong collaborations have to be "crafted over time" (Unteidig et al. 2018a). It was important for pilot teams to find ways to work together to create corridors to maneuver and align agendas and interests. The challenge was to ensure these were narrow enough to provide guidance for the desired direction of travel, and to create

sustainability, yet still broad enough to create the possibility for all actors to connect and stay involved within the project.

One response was the generation of a research and action framework (Unteidig et al. 2018b) created by Berlin to help maneuver the pilot through the complexity with which they were faced (undertaking research and action between society and technology), see Figure 5.
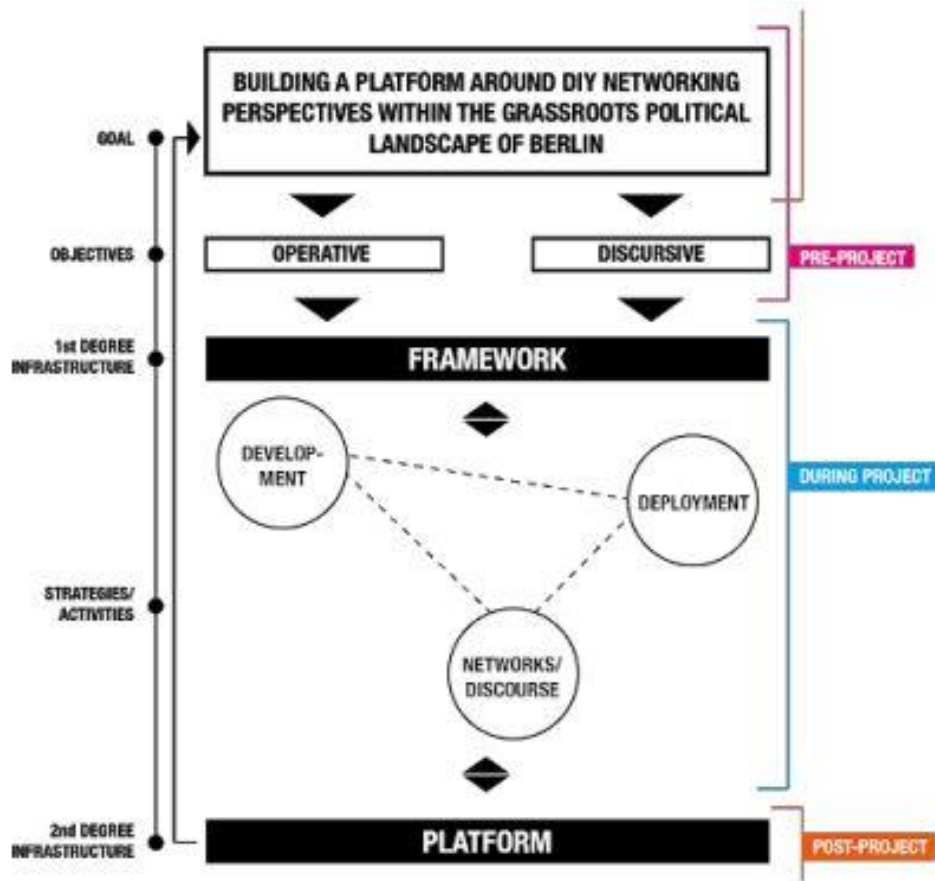

Figure 5: Process framework of the Berlin pilot design

The Berlin pilot partners recognised that the goal of building a platform (the MAZI toolkit) required the merging of operative and discursive levels of project objectives. Through initial conversations, pilot partners established interdisciplinary grounds for collaboration and negotiation of their highly differing perspectives. These enabled a broad alliance of actors to engage in activities towards building the final platform, embracing both initial community partners and new actors that the pilot team encountered, and creating a momentum on which the development of future activities could be based beyond the timeframe of the project. This formalisation reflected the Berlin partners' particular interest in discursive and design aspects of the work, and having been generated at the end of the second year of the project was used as a framework to guide the pilot through their final year of work.

The London partners, with a particular focus on the operative, technological development of the toolkit chose instead to negotiate cyclic processes through the use and development of a shared open source platform hosted by the community partner. This acted both as a site of negotiation and creation in its own right, and the boundary object through which challenges and responses could be managed.

Nevertheless, the process of negotiation depicted in Figure 3 characterises the dynamics of both MAZI pilot negotiations between the academic researchers and community partners. The commitment to negotiate the best way to meet the challenges of the local communities rendered them circular: the continuous circling back to negotiating "big picture-issues"

enabled the pilot partners to identify challenges of interdisciplinarity as well as to co-construct responsive tactics and reflect on the applicability and appropriation of project objectives, roles and strategies. This approach reflects Brown's cyclic process model for conductive collective learning and resonates with the social science perspective that has long considered that reflexivity is an important action within research activities (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994).

A key challenge was to agree and manage what ongoing sustainability represented. Like Day and Cupidi (2004), we saw tensions arise in balancing the 'project framing' of fixed time scales, prior defined goals and a set termination date, with the community perception of the work as operating as an 'initiative', taking as long as required, accepting of delays, periods of dormancy and changes in purpose; and open ended. The ultimate purpose of activities were strongly debated, with a concern that project metrics could overwhelm the broader societal value of the work leading to the missing of crucial yet more fragile opportunities that might not "comply with the auditing logic" (Felt et al. p 756).

Mutual learning moved not just across academic-civil society boundaries, but beyond into neighbourhood settings, and emphasises the need for collaborations to "exceed or escape 'professionalization'" (Löwenhaupt Tsin, 2015, p.285) allowing for openness to values beyond research systems and funder requirements. Sustainability could at its core be the negotiation of the fragile relationship between the partners.

Conclusion

The two MAZI pilots discussed in this paper illustrate challenges that may be encountered more widely by projects involving collaborations between large universities and small civil society organisations. While MAZI benefitted from the forward thinking of the EU's CAPSSI programme taking a progressive approach by bringing together a wide range of partners to solve a complex societal challenge, partners still struggled with imbalances and ensuring that both project objectives and local goals were achieved.

Building in explicit reflective processes into a project helped establish and keep alive conversations to ensure that different worldviews were respected, and points of contention resolved. Identifying "what should be" both early on in a project as well as ongoing discussions builds common ground, and ensures sustainability of both the project outcomes and partner relationships. The current state of affairs ('what is') will likely change, and touch points for returning to the discussion periodically to reflect and plan for what could and can be, are valuable to maintain an open exchange. Continued commitment was required by pilot partners to achieve understanding and reach mutually satisfactory goals.

In many cases, it was the continued commitment to ongoing conversations and unexpected discovery of common ground that broke through deadlocks and built the relationships between the pilot partners: "[s]ometimes common entanglements emerge not from human plans but despite them. It is not even the undoing of plans, but rather the unaccounted for in their doing that offers possibilities for elusive moments of living in common" (Löwenhaupt Tsing, 2015, p267). Creating the space, and a lightweight framework to encourage interactions and reflections was essential to finding a way towards a bridge of understanding and project success.

As a concluding note, we offer a meta-reflection on the conference topic of "whose agenda?". It is worth pausing to consider whether the ongoing work required after the end of the funded project to complete this academic paper re-ignites the identified possible inequalities. For the university-based researchers, ongoing academic writing is part of their expected funded duties, while we should reflect as to whether for the civil society partners, the continued unfunded contributions to this explicitly academic work offered more 'added value' to their practice than 'added work'.

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