



# Think Piece: Reflections on the Individual–Collective Relation in Change Agency Formation in the Samsø Renewable Energy Island Project

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## Abstract

*This paper offers reflections on change agency formation in the Renewable Energy Island (REI) project on Samsø, following a field visit to the island in June 2016. Both individual and collective agency are set out as central for the processes leading to the change in the REI project, spurring reflections on individual–collective agency dimensions in change agency formation related to climate change issues, inspired by notions of participation in everyday life (Marres, 2011; Micheletti 2002, 2006). The paper furthermore focuses on an exploration of two different formats of knowledge-sharing in the learning processes leading to change on Samsø – ‘neighbourly visits’ and web-based documentation – emphasising the role of knowledge in change agency formation. Drawing on Jamison’s (2001, 2010) notion of the making of green knowledge in the tension between environmental politics and cultural transformation, the paper suggests that the REI project can be characterised by both an adaptive approach and by social resilience development.*

**Keywords:** Samsø Renewable Energy Island project, change agency formation, individual–collective agency, social resilience.

## *A Project Underpinned by a ‘Green Business’ and ‘Energy Democracy’ Logic*

Marres (2011) notes the different logics according to which action and participation are co-articulated with economy in everyday material activities. This paper starts with a brief outline of the logics at play in descriptions of the Renewable Energy Island (REI) project. The project was initiated in 1998 with a plan to make Samsø a 100% renewable energy (RE) island in ten years. There is currently a follow-up plan for making the island fossil fuel free by 2030. Samsø is Denmark’s third smallest municipality with around 3 700 inhabitants, and farming, tourism and RE are main sources of income.<sup>1</sup> An article in *The Guardian* about the REI project (Kingsley, 2012) provides insight into the double meaning of emotional and financial investment in one of the key narratives of the project – community ownership. The article describes the REI project as truly remarkable, one of the world’s largest carbon-neutral settlements. The reason for this achievement is found in the co-ownership of the wind turbines, and in the bottom-up processes leading to their establishment, which meant that ‘the turbines haven’t been sprung on the locals. Instead, the latter are invested in the former, both emotionally and financially’ (Kingsley, 2012).

<sup>1</sup> See <http://arkiv.energiinstitutet.dk/>.

Materials on the webpage presenting and documenting the REI project point at its underpinning in a green business logic.<sup>2</sup> A presentation on the website refers to local responsibility-taking through the slogan ‘think local – act local’ and argues for continued investments in RE technologies as part of the fossil fuel free island plan, which would lead to ‘survival of the island, more jobs, local economy, independence, CO<sub>2</sub>-neutral, energy democracy, local activity!’ (Kristensen, 2015:11). The project can be described as a ‘child’ of late 1990s’ ecological modernisation, a market-oriented approach seeking to combine environmental concern with economic growth, and a part of a neoliberal knowledge regime, entrepreneurial and following a utilitarian logic (Jamison, 2010). The key narratives of the project link participatory technologies such as shared knowledge- and decision-making (energy democracy) with socio-technical innovation and economic development (green business). The island transition approach to RE can thus be read as an adaptive approach, in line with the normative agendas of the green governmentality knowledge regimes at the end of the 1990s, fixated on keeping a balance of the quantifiable environmental and economic costs, and benefits of individual and community actions. However, the REI project narratives of ‘energy democracy’ and community ownership described below speak for a co-articulation of the transition approach as social resilience development – as being about both local green knowledge development and about strengthening faith in Samsø as a viable community. A key indicator of social resilience is the capacity to learn from past experiences and to adapt and, if necessary, transform social, social-ecological or economic relations and institutions (Obrist, Pfeiffer & Henley, 2010). The focus is on the capacity to transform and access the knowledge and skill-sets to do so, emphasising the role of knowledge in educational responses to climate change.

Both individual and collective agency are set out as vital for change processes in descriptions of the REI project, and I discuss this first, before addressing two examples of knowledge-sharing technologies in the learning processes leading to change on Samsø.

### *Individual–Collective Dimensions in Change Agency Formation*

The main storytellers of the REI project are the director Søren Hermansen (SH) and the daily project manager Malene Lundén (ML) at the Energy Academy, an institution functioning as the fulcrum of the accounts on the REI project.<sup>3</sup> SH describes the project as being about ‘citizens responsible for the solution of their own problems’, stressing the island community’s ability to come together and act (conversation with SH and ML, 7.6.2016). Groups of farmers and local businesspeople, such as the smith, are described as key actors ‘won over’ to the RE project idea. When asked how this was handled in the public meetings about the project, SH and ML emphasised strategies such as figuring out beforehand who was ‘for’ and who was ‘against’ the project, as well as persuading key people. A sense of joint ownership of both the problems and the solutions, and shared decision-making, were crucial for the development of the REI project. SH thus characterises the REI project as an energy democracy project rather than a climate

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2 See <http://energiakademiet.dk/en/vedvarende-energi-o/>

3 Ibid.

change project: 'We made energy democracy. We didn't really talk about climate change, that's abstract. But we created jobs' (in Papazu, 2016:78).

Marres (2011) points out that an important trope in liberal theory is that participation in public affairs must somehow be made 'doable' for ordinary people. Rather than emphasising knowledge about climate change issues as a driver for change, SH focuses on action – making energy democracy and creating jobs on the island. His view on what has been going on seems to resonate with notions of direct democracy and related forms of participation, including Micheletti's (2002) notion of individualised collective action. She defines this as 'the practice of responsibility-taking through the creation of everyday settings on the part of citizens alone or together with others to deal with problems which they believe are affecting what they identify as a good life' (2002:7). The problems in focus on the island when the REI project was initiated were related to a loss of jobs and a decrease in socio-economic development. Farming and tourism were too vulnerable to provide the sole sources of living, and the business of RE was a promising contribution to the island economy. A change in a range of practices on both individual and collective levels was the prerequisite for establishing the district heating centres that today provide 60% of the energy on Samsø and thus form the backbone of the island's RE economy. These changes include the majority of citizens in the district agreeing to buy their energy from the centres, and most farmers agreeing to deliver the straw that fuels the centres.

ML describes SH as a great storyteller, a protagonist with a high level of credibility on the island, and as both a dreamer and the one who secured support by including all the main groups on the island through a lot of hard (leg)work, gathering 'the right people at the right time around the right project idea' (conversation with ML, 8 June 2016). This description of SH sets out individual agency as an important part of change agency formation. Although SH's 'island credibility' seems to have worked well to secure trust in the REI project, there were dissonant voices. For example, his role as the main driver of change at Samsø was questioned by some of the islanders in a meeting debating how best to secure the future of the island (through investments in farming, tourism or RE technologies). Thus, in spite of the tributes paid to SH as the innovator in stories about the REI project, 'the law of Jante'<sup>4</sup> – a pattern of group behaviour within Scandinavian communities that criticises individual success and portrays achievement as unworthy and inappropriate – also seems to have been at play.

The cultural values embedded in the law of Jante, a preference for community rather than individual achievement, provide a clue as to why the overall story of the project is one of community mobilisation characterised by 'energy democracy', joint ownership and knowledge-sharing. This seems to be a fair articulation, despite many of the stories that are told about the REI project underplaying the role of SH as the innovator and pioneer, the storyteller and protagonist in the change agency formation on Samsø. ML touches on a possible dilemma when discussing SH's central role in the project as a possible weak link by asking what happens when he is not there. The interplay between the individual and collective dimensions of the change agency formation in the REI project is thus central, both in the main storytellers' accounts of the project's past and in their speculations about the future.

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4 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law\\_of\\_Jante](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_of_Jante)

### *‘Neighbourly Visits’ and Web-Based Documentation*

The distinction between participation in ‘big’ and ‘small’ (or everyday life) politics is central in the field of socio-technical science addressing climate change issues. Marres (2011) draws on the notion of the materialisation of participation, involving the use of specific technologies as the means through which participation in everyday life is accomplished. Inspired by this perspective, I discuss two main technologies of knowledge-sharing in the REI project – neighbourly visits and web-based documentation – as essential in the change agency formation at Samsø.

SH was born on the island and brought up on a farm. His ability to visit farmers and talk about the project over coffee is construed as a main driver for bringing them aboard. Establishing wind-generated energy on a scale that would make a difference meant that farmers needed to provide space on their fields for the turbines. Moreover, to run the district heating stations, they had to agree to sell their straw instead of letting it rot on the fields to fertilise the soil, as was customary. Conversations about these essential prerequisites for the REI project formed part of the neighbourly visits by SH. Jamison (2010) points out that cultural practices and the mobilisation (or reinvention) of tradition often play an important role in attracting participation and involvement. The neighbourly visits drew on a tradition among the island farmers of using the ritual invitation for a cup of coffee as an informal learning space for sharing knowledge and thoughts on how to solve local problems.

An important factor here is that SH belongs to this community; he is one of them and can talk about the new practices so they seem doable in relation to the farmers’ everyday lives and values. An example of neighbourly visits as a technology of knowledge-sharing is also provided by Mikael Kristensen, an energy advisor and project manager at the Energy Academy. He describes ‘free of charge home visits’ by the local council energy consultants as one of the activities in the Samsø Fossil Free 2030 plan (conversation with Kristensen, 8.6.2016). This could be seen as regular energy consultancy, but Kristensen points out that it is more based on ‘neighbourly relations and visits’ than expert consultancy – that is, it is the same approach that SH took in his visits to the farmers, with the aim of bringing them on board the REI project.

The ‘us and them’ narratives throughout SH’s storytelling are central, for example emphasising the importance of getting locals such as farmers and the smith on board, as well as the potentials of local knowledge – there seems to be a limited need for expert knowledge, at least in relation to the establishment and running of the district heating centres. Papazu (2016) notes that it was the islanders’, and especially the workers’, previous experiences with the district heating centre technology, and not expert knowledge, that paved the way for the district heating stations in the REI project. The big wind turbine technology is more complicated and brought with it a need for external experts. However, SH emphasises that this arrangement is only for a short period, to provide local training and make it possible for the islanders to take over the job.

ML describes her task at the Energy Academy as ‘writing the story about the REI project and the Academy’, to document their processes and tell new stories. She points out that the Energy Academy could be described as an energy learning centre, but that the original notion of an academy – ‘to meet by the well and share knowledge, the place for community and the

common' (conversation with ML, 8 June 2016) – seems to be more fitting, considering that knowledge-sharing is one of the main goals of the Academy. The notions of 'community', 'community' and 'commons' play a central role in the storytellers' understanding of knowledge-sharing: Samsø Island is described as a community; 'community' as 'a sense of community', and 'the commons' as 'something people connect to [...] a place where you feel you can contribute – it's about giving and receiving'.<sup>5</sup> ML furthermore suggests that there is no such thing as a stable commons, and so '[w]e have to keep on creating small joint connections that will work with us on securing the commons of the future'.<sup>6</sup> The 'giving and receiving' and importance of 'joint connections' in knowledge-sharing are here construed as key aspects in community mobilisation to secure the commons of the future.

With reference to Beck's (1999) concept of 'sub-politics', Jamison (2010) notes that participation in small politics presupposes some kind of organisation or coordination that links actions to each other, and provides a set of shared values or beliefs, and thus a space for integrating different ways of knowing and doing. Open source documentation work based on collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information offers a space for participation other than the public meetings that have also been part of the REI project technologies. Also, and perhaps just as crucial to the REI project's change agency formation process, it provides a space for articulating the values and beliefs about the commons and sense of community described above. Given widespread frustration about the limited political action on state and market levels in relation to climate change issues, it might be tempting to turn to the potentials for political action in civil society. Examples of this line of thinking are offered in *The Wealth of the Commons* (Bollier & Helfrich, 2012) by a group that is presented as a future collaboration partner of the Energy Academy. Here, 'the commons' is described as a model for ecological governance outside the realm of the state and market.

### *Synthesis and New Beginnings*

In this paper I have attempted to put forward some reflections on individual–collective agency dimensions in change agency formation in the REI project, and on two formats of knowledge-sharing – neighbourly visits and web-based documentation – in processes leading to change on Samsø Island.

Although they capture just a fragment of the many diverging practices related to change agency formation in the REI project, I hope they have proved useful to illustrate the analytical potential of exploring individual–collective agency dimensions in change agency formation in the project. I am aware that my chosen tools are not neutral, as my choice of empirical and theoretical constructs is partly based on what I recognise and am familiar with. I grew up in a farming community, and thus some of the practices and ways of thinking on Samsø seem familiar to me. I am also familiar with the notions of participation in everyday politics, applied in previous studies of youth engagement in educational responses to climate

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5 See 'Reinventing the Commons', <http://arkiv.energiinstitutet.dk/2/28/BestNxt2014-LRreinventing.pdf>, visited 27 April 2018.

6 Ibid.

change (e.g. in Carlsson & Hoffmann, 2004). Notions of participation in everyday life and politics can open up possibilities for identifying and exploring change agency formation related to climate change issues within a place-based context such as Samsø, focusing on the liminal spaces along the borders of individual and collective agency. The theoretical construct that challenged me the most (and thus made me think the most) is the notion of material participation, which seems to attempt to break up the distinction between participation in everyday politics and big politics by pointing out how they are linked in co-articulations of multivalent action (Marres, 2011). Smith and Stirling (2010) and Bollig (2014) warn against downplaying the role of wider democratic politics in the public sphere and of structural change related to sustainable transitions, pointing to the need to unpack normative questions concerning power, such as whose sustainability gets prioritised. These questions have not been in focus in this paper, although they could have been addressed in relation to the islanders' debate on whether it was best to secure the future of the island through investments in farming, tourism or RE technologies.

Participation in small politics in everyday settings, such as installing an RE source in your home or business and a heating centre in your community, can be read as an attempt to turn everyday material actions into public participation. The REI project thus seems to provide a learning space that can offer possibilities for developing abilities relevant for participation in both small and big politics. In the case of the REI project, it became visible as big politics when the island 'got off the grid' and gained energy independence from the mainland, and thereafter made RE a main source of income by exporting surplus energy to the mainland. The REI project on Samsø is construed as an example of how it is possible and desirable to link green business with democratic participation (Kingsley, 2012), and is used in lobbying for community-driven RE investments in the UK and the US. Thus, it can be seen as a project transcending the local context. The question is where it leaves the local development processes on Samsø. The need to look back on who they are is mentioned as an important part of the Energy Academy's future engagement, and the open source web-based documentation could prove to be an invaluable technology as a stepping stone to future local development processes on Samsø.

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