Sowing Seeds and Promising a Harvest: Learning from the Delivery and Evaluation of a Local Sustainability Transition Initiative in the UK

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Abstract

Policymakers, practitioners and researchers increasingly understand sustainability transitions as requiring change within complex socio-technical systems. In parallel in recent years, many community-led initiatives sharing this systemic view of change, have sought to enhance sustainability on a local scale. Despite this alignment of understandings, many evaluations of local sustainability initiatives focus on measuring short term impacts, such as energy savings, rather than longer term shifts towards sustainable social practices.

This paper uses the case study of a sustainable food, energy, and water project delivered by a team of staff and other partners in a UK market town to explore the impacts that such projects can achieve and how they can be effectively evaluated. We draw upon in-depth participant observation over four years, project documentation and the reflections of project stakeholders. We analyse the project impacts through three lenses: the process of project delivery; progress towards project-defined outcomes and indicators; and the concept of capacity building for sustainable living.

Our findings point to building social capital to enable action for sustainable living as being the project's key impact. As a result, the capacity building lens was the most appropriate framework to evaluate this initiative. Our findings suggest that a professionally delivered approach to enable sustainable living has value when it aligns well with qualities of the local community. We suggest that future evaluation work of such initiatives could focus on issues of process, indirect impacts and capacities for sustainable living. Future research could seek to put these ideas into practice, enabling evaluation to better reflect processes of community engagement and social change.

Introduction

Over the past decade, academic literature on how societies and communities can shift towards more sustainable practices has increasingly drawn used systemic theories of change, leading to the emerging field of Sustainability Transitions (Markard et al. 2012). In parallel to this evolving theoretical stand, volunteer-led initiatives to transform local areas into more sustainable communities, such as Transition Towns (Hopkins 2008), have emerged in the UK and across the globe. Policymakers and researchers have viewed such initiatives as holding great potential to aid sustainability transitions within communities, for example by testing and developing innovative practices (Seyfang & Smith 2007), enabling renewable energy projects (DECC 2014) or developing knowledge sharing networks (Parag et al. 2013).

Still, evidence from these initiatives reveals significant challenges to sustainability transformation. Studies show community volunteers tend to be a rare breed of dedicated workers (Reeves et al. 2014) who, in the end, lack the power, resources and capacity to steer local outcomes (Middlemiss & Parrish 2010). Due to a lack of evaluation activity (Hobson et al. 2016) and a lack of detailed published empirical accounts (Forrest & Wiek 2014), policy makers and researchers question whether such initiatives can achieve the changes they envision (Hobson et al. 2016; DECC 2014). Researchers have suggested that voluntary initiatives could reduce their capacity constraints by employing paid professional staff (Creamer 2015), or by working in partnership with other local organisations (Middlemiss & Parrish 2010), but little research has tested these approaches.

Understanding initiatives like Sustainable Harborough (SH), the UK initiative at the heart of this paper, within systemic theories of society and social change, leads us to judge an initiative in terms of "its success in stimulating a sustainability transition at level of the socio-technical system"(Bussels et al. 2013). This perspective, which takes a long-term view and acknowledges that changes may be non-linear and influenced by multiple actors and contextual factors, challenges the common practice of delivering sustainability projects over a small number of years and basing evaluation upon measurable outcomes achieved during that time frame (Creamer 2015).

In this paper we draw upon our learning from SH to shed light upon the two issues highlighted above: what impact a professional, partnership-working initiative that seeks to facilitate local sustainability outcomes can achieve; and how this impact can be effectively understood and evaluated given a systemic understanding of change. We do so by describing and evaluating the impacts of SH using three complementary lenses: SH's *delivery process* (i.e. what happened); SH's own reporting regime, focussed upon pre-defined *outcomes and indicators*; and a conceptual framework of *capacity building* which is outlined below.

Conceptual Framework

A community's capacity to live sustainably is a recurring theme in the literature on sustainable communities and has been explored most thoroughly by Middlemiss and Parrish (2010). They highlight that a community can only live sustainably if it has the capacity to do so within its Infrastructure; Organisations; People; and Culture. Capacity is framed as encompassing a range of issues relating to the motivation to live sustainably (e.g. values, goals) and resources (e.g. time, skills, money). Key aspects of the framework include that capacities have *levels* that can increase or decrease over time, capacity in one domain can *influence* capacity in another, and capacity can be *activated* to enable sustainability outcomes. In contrast to frameworks for auditing the sustainability of a community in terms of the properties of ecological or energy systems (Forrest & Wiek 2014), a focus on capacity draws attention to what enables sustainability outcomes, and thus has particular value in accounting for the impacts and limitations of local sustainability initiatives.

Research undertaken since Middlemiss and Parrish's capacity framework was published highlights the contributions of social relationships between the actors described in the framework. Research has subsequently identified that the development of social networks and relationships between actors engaged with the sustainability agenda is a key impact of such projects (Parag et al. 2013; Hobson et al. 2016), as was envisaged when the Transition Towns concept was first documented (Hopkins 2008). As a result, we suggest that Middlemiss and Parrish's capacities framework can be usefully augmented with an integrative concept of social networks and relationships that link together each of the capacities. The well-established concept of *social capital* aligns strongly with our understanding of this concept, defined as "networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups" (ONS 2016).

Methodology

The paper addresses the overarching research question "What impact has Sustainable Harborough achieved during its first three years?" with a view to draw out implications for the evaluation and delivery of sustainability transition initiatives beyond the case study investigated.

Case Study Description, Outcomes, and Indicators

Market Harborough, described as a "quintessential English market town" (Rose Regneration

2016), is a relatively affluent settlement with approximately 20,000 inhabitants within the rural Harborough District in Leicestershire. Unlike some UK settlements of similar size, it has no town council, meaning local governance is at the district and county council levels.

Sustainable Harborough was developed and planned in 2012 and was launched in January 2013, employing a team of four professional staff to engage residents, businesses and other stakeholders in sustainability projects in the town. SH was one of twelve projects funded through Communities Living Sustainably (CLS), a Big Lottery (BL) programme that funded local sustainability and resiliency projects. Transition Town Market Harborough (TTMH), a long-running volunteer-run sustainability group, submitted a bid with the RCC (Leicestershire and Rutland), a local community development charity, and received £1million to cover staffing and other resources over a five year period. SH established a governing board, with representation from RCC, TTMH, the local County and District councils, De Montfort University, Action for Market Towns, Environment Agency, a social housing provider in Market Harborough, a river management partnership and the regional water company.

The broad aims of Sustainable Harborough, as described in the funding bid in terms of intended Outcomes and measurable Indicators of change, are captured in Table 1. This framing was in response to the funder's requirements for project aims to be expressed in this way (BLF 2011).

Table 1. Sustainable Harborough Outcomes and Indicators

Outcomes	**Indicators**
1: Improve knowledge and skills on sustainable living amongst the local community and increase public support and participation in activities to improve local sustainability	1a: Number of people participating as volunteers or community champions
	1b: Number of people reporting improved knowledge or skills
2: Bring about practical action and behaviour change to reduce the environmental impact and carbon emissions of local households, businesses and schools	2a: Reduction in carbon dioxide (CO_2)emissions due to energy use in MH
	2b: Reduction in CO_2 emissions per yr due to project
	2c: No of interventions carried out by households/ businesses / schools
3: Increase the resilience of the local community to environmental change, through increased community use of local natural resources and assistance for vulnerable people to manage changes in the local environment and increasing food and fuel costs	3a: Economic value of local natural resources used per yr in MH (+5mile radius)
	3b: No of vulnerable individuals and households with reduced food and fuel costs
4: Establish local enterprises that harness local resources and increase local trade to sustain and develop the local economy	4a: Increased annual value of local trade due to project
	4b: Number of new community enterprises
5: Preserve and improve biodiversity via the community including public and private spaces and the River Welland	5a: Increase in number of bees counted on buzzing borders
6: Improve and disseminate knowledge across UK communities on how to improve sustainability in an average sized UK market town, targeting market towns in particular	6a: No of people from other communities reached via dissemination activities
	6b: No of public reports produced describing learning from project

Evaluation Methods

We addressed the research question through systematic analysis of the documentary evidence

produced by SH from 2013 to 2015 inclusive. The data comprised: partnership board meeting minutes (×18); project team action research meeting notes (×33); project activity case studies (×3); notes from project evaluation interviews conducted with project stakeholders in late 2015 (×10); and annual and mid-year progress reports submitted to BL (×6). In addition, the project team reflected on evaluation through the lens of capacity building twice in 2014 and in early 2016.

Our analysis of data employed 3 lenses: Lens One: How SH staff and other stakeholders delivered activities and the resultant impacts; Lens Two: Progress towards SH's Outcomes and Indicators and reflections on this; Lens 3: Changes in capacity and social capital, and reflections on this. We used NVivo software to carry out thematic coding, using a mixture of a priori codes relating to our 3 lenses, along with codes emerging from the data that related to the research question.

Mowles (2014) highlights that whilst the implications of viewing social phenomena as complex systems are increasingly being recognised in evaluation literature, it is still commonplace for evaluators to not fully embrace this understanding, such as by not reporting their interactions with the systems that they are evaluating. In this study, our key interactions and influences are as follows: the lead author co-wrote the funding proposal that established SH in 2012, including the outcomes, indicators and evaluation plan, and delivered action learning training to the team in 2013; the second author has undertaken participant observation since October 2013, attending board meetings, action learning meetings, events and activities and contributing ideas on evaluation. As a result, the learning reported in this paper reflects a significant depth of understanding of SH's development and delivery.

Results

Results are reported below for the three lenses of analysis, including quotes from the project team, board members and project volunteers to support the account presented. Our analysis of these findings and possible implications relating to our research aims are in the Discussion section.

Lens One: Delivery Process

Project Management: The first year of SH involved "a lot of foundation building:" agreeing upon governance processes amongst partners; securing staff and an office; and developing branding materials. Several core principles were established in the first year and subsequently retained: viewing SH and its funding as a platform for achieving longer term and sustained impacts, rather than quick wins during the project lifespan; engaging transparently and fairly with partners and service providers; planning from the outset to "hand over knowledge" and activities developed by SH to the local community, both through increasing representation of local people on the project board and enabling projects, including SH itself, to become self-sustaining post BL funding.

Initial board and staff meetings led to consensus on "a common approach" of "enabling and facilitating rather than [...] directly doing". Over the three years of delivery to date, this approach is characterised by building relationships with community stakeholders (individuals and organisations), attending and organising public events to convene interested parties around themes (e.g. energy and food forum events in year one) and supporting volunteers and other stakeholders to develop activities. The project team funded feasibility studies and supported groups to develop project and business plans. Feedback from community members about the commitment and competency of the project staff was highly positive. Over three years the project team showed evidence in their action learning discussions of a systemic long-term view of the link between the delivery approach and intended outcomes. For example, in 2014 the SH project manager characterised their process as: "you start with one thing and it leads on to other things which will have larger impacts".

Project staff sought to engage the public through "what people are interested in", meaning focusing on tangible projects (e.g. a community garden) rather than promoting or mentioning

sustainability directly. Instead SH staff sought to embed sustainability aspirations in the "tone" of their interactions, whilst prioritising activities which were desired by the local community. Activities were developed with other community stakeholders – whether project partners, local volunteers or organisations – with the intention of having "a holistic sustainability ingrained within" each activity.

Project Activities. SH delivered a wide range of activities within three themes: Energy and Water; Food; Wildlife. Three of the key activities, which drew upon significant staff time or budget, are described below, with details of others summarised in Table 2.

The Eco-Home project worked with a local social housing provider to refurbish a house with insulation, PV and other energy and water efficiency measures, and then support the house's new tenant to use the systems and share learning through four open days. SH contributed £24,000 towards the £60,000 project cost and the modeled CO_2 savings due to refurbishment were 1600kg per annum. The SH team saw potential for this project to influence the social housing provider to adopt eco-refurbishment across other properties and train staff in energy literacy. This has not happened to date, due to the lead contact who was supporting this work leaving the housing organisation.

"edibLE16" is a click-and-collect food hub launched in the 2nd year of the project, enabling people to order food online from local producers and collect it weekly at a town centre drop-off point. The idea came from TTMH volunteers, based upon a similar project in a UK market town which employs one part-time staff member. In the SH funding bid, it was described as a project to be directly delivered by SH, but the focus on developing longer-term sustainable delivery models led to edibLE16 being set up as a social enterprise. It has received £27,451 start-up funding from SH over three years and business development support from SH staff and partners. At the end of 2015, it employs two part-time staff and has twenty six volunteers. It has served 110 customers since start-up, achieving a turnover of £3,369 in 2014 and £19,409 in 2015. However, its turnover is still some way short of its target to be self-sustaining.

Harborough Energy was incorporated as a co-operative in December 2014 with the aim of delivering local renewable energy projects through community share offers. It developed from a working group from the SH-organised Energy Forum with support by a dedicated SH staff member. Its first project, "Harborough Solar One", was launched in October 2015 and successfully raised its target of £183,600 to fund roof-based solar PV for a local school (160kW) and a natural health centre (10kW). This would have generated estimated annual CO_2 savings of 70 tonnes for 20 years, created a £109,500 fund for community projects and paid £100,980 interest to predominantly local investors. The project was however not realised due to a failure on the part of the school to request and secure permission from a Government agency for the project to go ahead prior to a deadline when Feed-in Tariff funding was due to drop significantly. At the time of writing, some investors have withdrawn their investment but £100,000 remains to develop further projects.

Table 2. Other Activities

Activity	**What was done and known impacts**
Anaerobic Digestion	£20,000 external funding secured for feasibility study for possible project with a business in the district. SH considering potential to develop further.
Business Energy Efficiency Club	Set up after Energy Forum, meeting quarterly. Three energy audits carried out, leading to one company adding a porch to its building.
Buzzing Borders	Four sites planted with wildflowers to provide bee habitat. Talk given on topic with 36 attendees. 200 packets of wildflower seeds distributed.
Community Garden	Establishment of 1350m^2 site for growing fruit and vegetables by around ten volunteers, running since year two.
Green Open Homes	Supporting volunteers to organise two days when homes with energy saving features could be visited. Year one: 6 homes with 20 visitors; year two 7 homes with 44 visitors. All visitors reported learning; one visitor reported intention to buy LED lighting; no responses to follow-up surveys to explore further impacts.

Activity	What was done and known impacts
I Love MH Festival	Held twice in town centre, predominantly featuring information stalls. Estimated 400 attendees each time, leading to around 30 new contacts for projects.
Local Food Forum	Stakeholder group set up and run with SH support to identify local food projects. Initiated Food Map. Volunteer engagement with group reduced to a low ebb, but still initiating new projects.
Local Food & Drink Map	A map highlighting local food and drink producers and outlets. Two versions produced and distributed (3000 copies). Impacts: one seller promoted its local suppliers in-store; three instances of new seller-supplier trading relationships; no specific feedback of increased custom due to inclusion on the map.
Market Hall Solar PV	Feasibility study conducted, with view to SH leading project development. The financial case convinced district council to install 10kW of solar PV themselves.
Prison Food Project	Attempt to establish food growing within local prison, involving inmates and volunteers. Abandoned as no secure process for volunteers to access the site.
State of the Town Report	A commissioned report evaluating the sustainability of Market Harborough relative to other comparable UK market towns (Rose Regeneration 2016)
Youth Club Orchard	Fourteen trees planted in 2015 on youth club site, funded by SH. Emerged from meeting on possible mutual collaboration and opportunity presented by the site.

Lens Two: Outcomes and Indicators

Progress against the indicators for each of the six intended outcomes is shown in Table 3, as a cumulative total for each year, alongside the "level of change expected" by the end of the project in the original funding proposal, referred to by SH as a "target". To put these figures into context, MH has a population of approximately 23,000, with around 10,000 households, and total CO_2 emissions of approximately 198,000 tonnes (Rose Regneration 2016).

Table 3. Cumulative progress against Project Indicators for each Outcome

Outcome	Indicator	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Target
1: Knowledge and Participation	1a: No. people volunteering	27	104	173	300
	1b: No. people reported learning		733	947	1000
2:Reduction in environmental impacts	2a: CO_2 emission cuts in MH	Not reported			10%
	2b: CO_2 emission cuts due to SH			44	1000 tonnes
	2c: No. interventions carried out	26	330	579	1000
3: Resilience and vulnerability	3a: Value of local resources used	Not reported			£750,000
	3b: No. poor households helped	1	8	26	250
4: Enterprises and Trade	4a: Increased value of local trade		£42,961	£103,083	£100,000
	4b: No. new enterprises		2	3	6
5: Biodiversity	5a: No. Buzzing Borders created		2	4	10
6: Knowledge Transfer	6a: No. people reached			56	200
	6b: No. public reports produced			3	5

At face value these figures reveal a mixed picture of targets achieved or on the way to being achieved (e.g. 1b; 2c; 6b), targets whose achievement is in question (e.g. 3b; 2b) and those not reported due to measurement challenges. The details behind specific figures reveal something of the nature of decisions taken on what can reasonably be counted. For example, the majority of reported learning (1b) is due to brief interactions on stalls at events, rather than deeper learning activities such as attending training or visiting the Eco-Home. The number of interventions carried out includes activities that may lead to an intervention (e.g. distributing 200 wildflower seed packets) but where the link to action is unknown. The reported carbon reductions are made up of 14 trees planted (14 tonnes, a lifetime estimate), 22 tonnes for the market hall solar PV (an annual estimate) and 8 tonnes

based upon energy advice provided to 20 local residents at the 2015 I love MH festival.

Project Team Reflections. When the project team discussed the SH reporting regime, three main themes emerged: the concern that the project was achieving many impacts that were "not captured in the reporting;" the challenge of meaningfully measuring progress for each indicator; and the role that the perceived targets played in shaping activities undertaken. The latter theme manifested in two contrasting forms: a re-affirmation of the project's ethos that progress against outcomes will follow later as groups and activities developed; and a perceived pressure to meet the targets and ensure that they were achievable. The concerns with achievability and measurability led to dialogue with the funders to: change an indicator seen as unrealistic to achieve or measure (2a, which was dropped); convert 5a to a measurable output ("Buzzing Border" wildflower garden sites created, rather than bees counted); and measure 2b and 3a differently (work still ongoing).

Lens Three: Capacity Building for Sustainability

Social Capital. The key impact of SH reported by the project team, board members and other stakeholders was its role in building relationships, both between SH and the local community, and within the community to identify activities of local interest. The team saw the role of SH as building "connectivity" and creating the "glue between groups" and reported the main benefits of their projects as being "the interactions and networks that are developed". Specific impacts of this included convening a group of interested residents who developed the Community Garden, connecting three local experts in sustainable energy at a festival leading to knowledge exchange, convening groups at Energy and Food Forums who developed projects in those domains and developing the Local Food & Drink Map to build links and a network among retailers and producers.

SH's own relationship to the community evolved over the 3 years. Years one and two focussed upon relationship building, achieved through the project team organising and attending events or conducting small scale projects such as the Food & Drink Map. This led to local community members increasingly trusting the team's intentions, capabilities and visibility. As a result, by year three, community members increasingly contacted SH staff to initiate collaboration and became more receptive to requests for support.

Organisational Capacity. Establishing SH as a five year commitment of human and financial resources helped build organisational capacity for sustainability. Its niche and contribution within the network of existing organisations was described by the team as bringing people together collaboratively. Although there was some initial frustration from TTMH around the project ideas SH picked up in terms of ownership, leadership and start-up delays, this dissipated as SH drew in "many more volunteers… and raised the level of involvement" which enabled several TTMH project ideas to be launched on a firm footing. While the team's time capacity was frequently reported as a significant constraint to supporting the community, their skills capacity to do so evolved over the three years, using action learning discussions to inform changes in delivery. SH was perceived by some stakeholders as making a unique contribution to local democracy within MH, due in part to an absence of a town council, with one project volunteer describing their role as "promoting MH for what it is and for what it could be".

The role of project partners included contributing to governance decisions through quarterly board meetings and providing project ideas (e.g. the Prison Garden, edibLE16). Levels of involvement and commitment varied significantly. For example, the social housing provider was heavily involved in year one to develop the Eco-Home project, but has engaged very little since. The project team has viewed the lack of involvement of district councillors as a "real gap" constraining impact, although council staff have offered support on particular issues (e.g. energy).

SH staff have also helped develop organisational capacity of the new Harborough Energy and

edibLE16 enterprises. Teams of volunteers have taken on leadership roles for each body and their learning (which has been captured in case study reports) represents significant capacity increases within the community. The long-term sustainability of these enterprises remains uncertain however: Harborough Energy has relied to date on SH staff doing the administrative "grunt work", and edibLE16 has not achieved sufficient turnover to be self-sustaining.

With existing businesses, SH staff have taken the approach of developing projects that businesses wouldn't initiate themselves, due to a lack of capacity in terms of time, capital funding or sufficient motivation to launch action. The Harborough Energy development of a solar PV project with a local school is an example of all three of these issues at work. The case of the market hall PV project illustrates, in capacity terms, how initial impetus from SH with funding for a feasibility study and motivation for a project, led to buy-in from the council and the installation of a solar PV system. This may also have an indirect impact, through the council's experience of developing a PV installation leading to others being carried out in the future.

SH stakeholders frequently highlighted the uncertain future for SH beyond its five-year funded period. Staff and board members used this as a motivation to secure SH's "legacy" or, less frequently, it's "sustainability". Consequently they sought to establish self-sustaining projects on the assumption that SH could have little or no resources to offer beyond the funded five years.

Finally, SH was perceived by several project stakeholders as enhancing processes of local democracy. They saw this being achieved through SH staff convening local people and organisations around issues of mutual interest and aiming to achieve representative participation.

Other Capacity Types. SH staff activated Personal Capacity by enabling local people to give their time to projects that interested them, although as one stakeholder described it, "20-30 volunteers out of a town of 18,000" is a small proportion of the population taking on more active roles. Personal Capacity was also activated through community members using their skills (e.g. a food forum member drew upon prior knowledge of consumer marketing surveys) and financial resources (over £180,000 invested in the Harborough Energy share offer). A lack of capacity of volunteers was a constraint in several projects. For example, the project team observed "a lack of people to steer the projects" (e.g. Food Forum, Community Garden) and felt that volunteers were unlikely to have the time or skills to collect evaluation data related to Indicators. Evidence of increased Personal Capacity included Eco-Home tenant reporting increased knowledge of home energy and the learning reported by project volunteers (Indicator 1b).

Changes in Infrastructural Capacity were harder to identify. The opportunity for local residents to source local food through edibLE16 could perhaps be seen as an infrastructure change, although in many cases the products could already be purchased in local shops. The market hall solar PV installation might also be framed as an infrastructure change, although its benefits to date are limited to the owners of the building. The lack of land identified for food growing projects emerged as a constraint, with the youth club orchard and the Community Garden being exceptions.

In terms of Cultural Capacity, the SH team did not encounter widespread buy-in to the sustainability agenda, which in part led to their strategy of avoiding the "S-word" in their engagement activity. The project's attempts to connect people around a local food culture have had mixed results – successfully connecting with independent retailers in the town's "food quarter" but encountering resistance to the concept of collaboration more widely.

Reflecting on the capacity building framework, the SH team saw it as having value, observing in year two that it "refers to all of the things that SH has done so far, whereas the outcome targets don't". Applying the framework to edibLE16, the team observed that their work to increase one type of capacity would support the development of others, and that relationship building was integral to the capacity building process.

Contextual Influences. The project team reported national contextual factors as influencing local capacity in some cases. Examples included the lack of regulatory drivers for small businesses to

save energy and cuts to feed-in-tariffs influencing Harborough Energy's solar PV project.

Discussion

Sustainable Harborough's Impact

To what extent has SH aided a process of sustainability transition within Market Harborough (MH)? The three lenses employed tell contrasting stories. Lens One suggests that the project's role has been akin to the *systemic intermediaries* described by Van Lente et al. (2003), brokering participation and collaboration around shared goals and acting as a hub within a social network of actors, as similar projects have done elsewhere (Parag et al. 2013). Lens Two, which focuses on the project's stated Outcomes and measurable Indicators highlights that the activities described through lens one have had some success in engaging the local population (as volunteers, or as members of new organisations) but have struggled to deliver on harder measures of sustainability, such as carbon emission cuts or reduced fuel bills for vulnerable households. Lens Three, which explores capacity building and social capital, indicates a more positive impact, showing an apparent increase in involvement and knowledge by local individuals and organisations, but also that much of the capacity built is under threat when the project's funding expires after five years.

The key impacts of the project appear to relate to developing social capital and organisational capacity, and yet these issues were not readily captured through the project's own evaluation process, which focussed on measurable indicators related to sustainability outcomes. Thus the original evaluation framework and the project actually delivered appear to be poorly aligned. This situation appears to relate to several issues: the original Big Lottery funding call sought both an enabling approach and sustainability outcomes; the submitted funding bid pledged to meet these outcomes during the project's lifetime (e.g. through CO_2 emission cuts) rather than by steps along the way (e.g. by convening groups to take action); the bid development team lacked evaluation experience, meaning that a "logic model" of how activities would relate to outcomes was not articulated. The end result was a project plan which, to use gardening terminology, promised a bumper harvest, when it could only sow seeds and help them grow, with little control of the final result.

Implications for Sustainability Initiatives

What does the experience of SH tell us about using professional staff, partnership delivery and an "enabling" approach to improve the sustainability of a market town? The contrast between the impacts of SH's delivery and previous impacts of the long-running Transition Town group illustrates the benefits of partnership and professional delivery. More volunteers were recruited, seed funding for projects was available, and these and other factors led to stronger project development than before SH was in existence. Despite the extra capacity that partnership working and paid staff unlocked, the enabling approach appeared to only have value in so much as the community and wider context were receptive to the agenda of working collaboratively for sustainability. Thus, volunteer numbers were increased but still quite limited; impacts were constrained where key local actors (e.g. local councillors) did not offer strong support; the breakdown of financial models for projects (e.g. the cut to Feed-in Tariff funding for solar PV) struck a blow to an energy project.

This situation points to settings where a project such as Sustainable Harborough can play an positive role in supporting local sustainability: where no organisations are strongly playing a network building and agenda setting role around the issue; where there is sufficient interest amongst individuals and organisations to secure participation in projects; where viable financial models exist for projects (e.g. local renewable energy share offers funded by Feed-In Tariffs) but have not yet

been taken up in a community. The capacity building framework employed also highlights the value of Government or project funders assessing what type of capacity investment is most needed to develop local sustainability. For example, this may be an initiative like Sustainable Harborough where the above criteria hold true, or may be an investment in infrastructural capacity (e.g. improved recycling systems, better transport links) or cultural capacity (e.g. developing buy-in for the sustainability agenda) when other issues are the key constraints to progress.

Implications for Evaluation

Does the apparent misalignment of SH's own evaluation process with its delivery model offer broader lessons for the evaluation of similar initiatives? The project funder's guidance did suggest that "steps along the way" could be used as indicators rather than the final achievement of intended outcomes (BLF 2011), so certainly there was scope for the evaluation strategy to be better aligned at the outset or changed along the way (ibid). However, the situation does also perhaps point to a tension between the needs of funders, policymakers and sustainability project workers to achieve positive outcomes, and the challenge of evidencing impacts where an initiative seeks to achieve change indirectly through an enabling approach. Below we explore three ideas arising out of this study to partly address this issue.

Firstly, evaluation of a local sustainability transition initiative could focus more strongly on *process* by asking the question "What is effective enabling?" and seeking to gather data to judge its performance. Criteria might include reported trust in the organisation's competence and commitment; awareness of the organisation amongst key stakeholders; assessments by beneficiaries of the support provided. Our findings suggest the use of criteria that would evolve over time in recognition of the pathways of development of an enabling organisation (e.g. from initial awareness at the outset to collaborative working in later years).

Enabling initiatives seek to generate largely indirect impacts through the actions of other actors which, as the case of SH illustrates, are challenging to capture. They therefore rely upon the validity of their theory of how change occurs and any evidence that can be gathered on how their actions influenced outcomes. The lack of compelling evidence of the positive impacts of local sustainability initiatives still holds back support from government, so evaluation strategies that seek to capture evidence of indirect impacts and employ and test the validity of theories of change would be worthwhile to employ. Examples of improved practice would be using evaluation tools such as the "Most Significant Change" process of collecting stories from project beneficiaries to better evidence indirect impacts (Van Ongevalle et al. 2012), or drawing upon research that has developed strong theories of how change takes place for particular issues (e.g. Wilson et al. (2013) offer an account of how energy efficiency refurbishment decisions are taken).

Finally, the capacity building framework employed in this paper appears to offer promise, but at present is a very broad heuristic for understanding the capacity of a community live sustainably. Defining the concepts employed in the framework further might aid actors seeking to guide local sustainability transitions in evaluating the state of capacity of a community, planning interventions and tracking change over time. For organisational capacity this might include listing key public and voluntary sector actors that are (or could) set the agenda for local sustainability action and what role they currently are playing; for social capital this might include a review of the formal and informal networks and organisations that bring local people together with an interest in the sustainability agenda. It is unlikely that a one-size-fits-all approach would be taken up across multiple communities, but some sort of repeated capacity for sustainable living assessment could aid strategic thinking on this issue within local communities.

Conclusions

This paper has explored the impacts of Sustainable Harborough, which sought to enable action for sustainability through a small staff team working in partnership with volunteers and local organisations in a fairly typical UK market town. We found that its main impacts were improved networks and local buy-in for sustainability and that the professional and partnership working approaches used helped achieve this. The impacts were best understood using a theoretical framework focussed upon community capacities for sustainable living and social capital. The project's own evaluation framework did not capture this well, which may reflect a more general misalignment in the field of sustainability transitions between evaluation approaches and the impacts that local enabling initiatives can directly deliver.

For local sustainability transition initiatives, our findings suggest that delivery through professional staff and partnership approaches can enhance the positive impacts of volunteer-led delivery, and is worth considering where a community may be receptive (e.g. having sufficient public and organisational buy-in; having gaps in the market for successful projects). In terms of how to evaluate initiatives that seek to enable rather than directly deliver sustainability outcomes, our findings highlight the challenge of evidencing impacts, but point to three strategies that may aid this situation: evaluating the quality of the enabling process employed; articulating and testing a theory of change, collecting data on indirect impacts wherever possible; and using the capacity building framework to better understand capacities for sustainable living within particular communities.

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