The double-edged sword of grant funding: a study of community-led climate change initiatives in remote rural Scotland

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Community-led initiatives are commonly advocated as an effective way of encouraging individuals to adopt more sustainable lifestyles. Since 2008, the Scottish Government’s climate challenge fund (CCF) has distributed over £50 million in grants to community-led, carbon-saving projects across the country. Drawing on participant observation within two CCF organisations in remote rural Scotland, this paper examines the assumption that the receipt of government funding is necessarily of overall benefit to community-led initiatives attempting to facilitate more sustainable communities in the long term. Observations indicate that funding can bring with it a number of significant complications to community-scale action as a result of: (i) misaligned output timeframes, (ii) administration demands, and (iii) local competition. It is concluded that the design of funding schemes can in fact hamper the full potential of grassroots initiatives to engender more sustainable lifestyles throughout the community.

Keywords: sustainable lifestyles; community-led organisations; grant funding; climate challenge fund; rural Scotland

Introduction

The desire within capitalist economies to maximise the production and consumption of goods and services in order to generate continual economic growth is exerting unsustainable pressure on the earth’s ecosystems. Arguably the most apparent consequence of this activity is the unprecedented rise in global temperatures linked to the dramatic increase in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions since the industrial revolution. Whilst technological solutions have a crucial role to play, it is widely accepted that “substantial lifestyle and cultural change, especially in the more developed world, will need to take place” (Mulugetta et al. 2010, p. 7542).

Since the creation of the Agenda 21 framework following the 1992 United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development, national and international policy has increasingly recognised the need to develop local action plans to respond to the global threat posed by climate change (Peters and Fudge 2008). A central element of these strategies has been to recognise and reduce the GHG emissions resulting from individual consumption and lifestyle choices (Moloney et al. 2010). Encouraging low carbon, “pro-environmental behaviour” (that is, “behaviour that consciously seeks to minimize the

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negative impact of one’s actions on the natural and built world” (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002, p. 240)) has become the fundamental aim of much of the current government policy on climate change (Darnton and Horne 2013).

As individuals are often observed to find the global-scale concerns of environmental degradation and natural resource depletion “distant, abstract, and even disempowering” (Macnaghten 2003, p. 79), it has been suggested that the community level represents the best scale at which to encourage individuals to adopt pro-environmental behaviours (Prugh et al. 2000) as this is the level at which “people are able to learn, feel, and be empowered to act” (Maser 1996, p. 166). As a result, promoting and supporting community-led action on climate change has become increasingly integrated into government policy for sustainable development (Seyfang and Smith 2007), and the Scottish Government’s climate challenge fund (CCF) represents a prime example of this political approach.

However, there remain significant gaps in our understanding of how the contested concept of “community” is being employed by governments as a mechanism by which to deliver carbon reductions (Hauxwell-Baldwin 2013), with very limited discussion of how the relationship between top-down, government-led funding providers and bottom-up, community-led organisations influences the projects being delivered. Specifically, there is a lack of research which considers how the transition of informal, voluntary grassroots initiatives into monitored government-funded projects affects the way the initiatives operate within the community, and little critical examination of the assumption that the provision of government funding for community-led climate change initiatives will always be of overall benefit (environmentally, socially, and economically) at the local level. In the following paper, I seek to address these gaps by looking specifically at the position and influence of CCF initiatives in two communities in remote rural Scotland.

Funding for community-led development has particular significance in Scotland’s remote rural communities. Throughout history, informal collective action and collaboration at the local level have been fundamental to the management of natural resources in these communities (Pretty and Ward 2001), but unprecedented rates of social change are bringing a number of challenges to this way of life. Uncertainties about the economic future of farming, the lack of affordable housing, youth out-migration, and inadequate transport provision mean that remote rural locations include some of the most deprived communities in the country (Garrod et al. 2006). Consequently, rural development is a priority for the Scottish Government, with “community empowerment” and “tackling climate change” named among the four main strategic pathways to developing the rural economy (Scottish Government 2011a, p. 144).

Following a brief overview of the existing literature on community-led climate change initiatives and an introduction to the CCF, an account of two periods of participant observation with two CCF projects in remote rural Scottish communities is presented. From the analysis of these cases, I conclude that, whilst a government-scale funding scheme for community-led initiatives, such as the CCF, can provide the financial support to deliver tangible carbon savings for the communities involved, it does not necessarily capitalise on the potential of the grassroots initiatives to influence local values, attitudes, and norms.

In this paper, I use the phrase “community-led climate change initiatives” to refer to grassroots projects that aim to reduce the GHG (or “carbon”) emissions of their local community1 in order to mitigate climate change. Whilst I recognise that climate change adaptation efforts are an increasingly important strand of community-led action on climate change, in this paper, I have chosen to focus specifically on projects designed to reduce carbon emissions. Community-led initiatives to reduce emissions are viewed as an element of the broader ambition to create more sustainable communities. Although
definitions of a “sustainable community” are nebulous and remain contested, significant reductions in GHG emissions are considered to be a fundamental requirement for sustainability within industrialised countries (Middlemiss and Parrish 2010).

Community-led climate change initiatives

Efforts to influence individual consumption and behaviour choices have become central to UK climate change policy (Barr et al. 2011). Understanding the factors influencing the uptake of pro-environmental behaviour has attracted extensive academic enquiry from a range of disciplinary perspectives, including psychology (e.g. Stern 2000, Bamberg and Möser 2007, Steg and Vlek 2009), sociology (e.g. Shove 2010, Hargreaves 2011), geography (e.g. Blake 1999, Barr 2003), education (e.g. Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002, Jensen 2002), economics (e.g. Autio et al. 2009, Pollitt and Shaorshadze 2013), and politics (e.g. Grant 2001).

Taken as a whole, the varied findings, theories, and models emerging from this body of research serve to demonstrate the tremendous complexity of the challenge faced in trying to untangle the vast web of factors determining behaviour. It is evident that behaviour is not solely the product of an individual’s internal attributes (such as knowledge, attitudes, values, and habits), but is also heavily influenced by the material and social context within which people live (Darnton and Horne 2013).

One key theme to develop across the literature, as well as within policy and practice, has been the potential role of “the community” as an appropriate site at which to influence both internal individual attributes and the context in which people live (Middlemiss and Parrish 2010, Mulugetta et al. 2010, Peters et al. 2010).

There are a number of key reasons for the “community” attracting so much attention within this field. First, evidence suggests that this may be an effective scale at which to communicate messages about climate change, partially because individuals are more likely to trust information that comes from community peers as opposed to politicians, the media, or local authorities (Reeves et al. 2011), but also because the physical environment is observed to become most meaningful to people when it engages and interacts with social life and human relationships. Consequently, by framing environmental problems at a level at which individuals have a personal, lived experience of the natural world, there is increased potential to connect with individuals’ concern for nature and encourage pro-environmental choices (Macnaghten 2003).

Second, it is believed that “the community” itself is a powerful vehicle for delivering the right social context to encourage pro-environmental behaviour. The “social organisation” of communities and, specifically, the social capital thought to be embedded within communities, is frequently highlighted as a key element in facilitating more sustainable lifestyles (Putnam 2000, Pretty and Ward 2001, Dale and Newman 2008, Peters and Jackson 2008). Often described as “the glue that holds society together” (McKenzie et al. 2002, p. 280), social capital is most commonly defined as “networks, together with shared norms, values and understanding, which facilitate co-operation within or among groups” (Cote and Healy 2001, p. 41). These attributes, Pretty and Ward (2001) argue, create a social structure which encourages more altruistic behaviour. They suggest that, where there is high social capital, individuals are more willing to invest in collective activities, confident that others will also do so, and are less likely to engage in actions for personal gain that have negative consequences for others, such as natural resource degradation. It has been proposed that community-led climate change initiatives are an effective way to draw out, harness, and build on this social capital, increasing the community’s capacity to act
(Walker et al. 2010) and creating a positive feedback loop whereby communities are empowered to lead projects in the future (Assadourian 2008).

Third, the community scale has been identified as an important site for social and technological innovation and experimentation, where alternative solutions for sustainable development can emerge outside of the mainstream. Community-led initiatives can foster innovations that are more tailored to the interests and values of the communities in question (Seyfang and Smith 2007).

A number of empirical studies have provided evidence to support the notion that participation in community initiatives can elicit individual pro-environmental behaviour change and reduce carbon emissions (e.g. Church and Elster 2002, Preston et al. 2009, Middlemiss 2011). However, there remains a lack of certainty about whether these initiatives are helping to create the sustainable communities and societies that the underlying government policies are ultimately aiming to achieve.

The “Low Carbon Communities Challenge” (LCCC) is a recent example of a UK government intervention to promote community-led climate change action. Between 2010 and 2012, this £10 million programme provided grants to community groups to help with the installation of low-carbon technology and infrastructure, alongside support for engagement and behaviour change activities (DECC 2012). It was reported that “some specific household routines and practices did change among direct recipients of LCCC measures” (DECC 2012, p. 41, original emphasis). However, they found “very few community-wide shifts in attitudes, behaviour or the uptake of low carbon measures” (DECC 2012, p. 41). In an independent case study of the LCCC, Hauxwell-Baldwin (2013) argues that, while it has been demonstrated that communities can deliver a range of renewable energy and energy-efficiency measures, “there is little to indicate that change towards low(er) carbon living necessarily followed, or will follow as a result of similar efforts in the future” (p. 13).

This therefore begs the question of whether community-led initiatives are, in practice, an effective means by which to promote and encourage low-carbon living throughout the community, or whether these initiatives in fact are, as often characterised to be, simply “a middleclass niche pursuit for the ecologically minded” (Barr and Devine-Wright 2012, p. 531).

The following section introduces the CCF, the Scottish Government initiative that has provided funding for the two organisations that are the subject of my case studies in this paper.

The Scottish Government’s CCF

Sustainable development is stated to be integral to the Scottish Government’s overall purpose, and the CCF is a significant part of the government’s plan to transform Scotland into a low-carbon economy (Scottish Government 2013). Established in 2008 with a stated ambition to “empower Scottish communities by building the capacity for sustained future [carbon] reductions” (Gunn 2008, p. 3), the CCF forms part of the government’s “Low Carbon Scotland: Public Engagement” strategy (Scottish Government 2010a) as well as its regeneration strategy “Achieving a Sustainable Future” (Scottish Government 2011b). The CCF was recently extended until March 2016, by which time, almost £70 million will have been distributed to hundreds of carbon-saving, community-led projects, enabling activities such as local recycling collections, construction of micro-generation infrastructure, electric vehicle trials, provision of community allotments, and completion of home energy audits.
In 2011, the Scottish Government commissioned Brook Lyndhurst and Ecometrica to carry out a review of the CCF. The findings of this review support the notion that the community scale “seems to be one at which climate change action is meaningful to people” (Brook Lyndhurst and Ecometrica 2011, p. 3). The CCF projects were found to be particularly good at engaging individuals who are already “moderately interested” in the environment and spark them into action. However, due to time and resource constraints, none of the projects were actively seeking to convince uninterested members of the community to participate. Consequently, as with the LCCC, the projects studied were having little influence on the beliefs, values, and attitudes of the wider community.

It was observed that the largest and most reliable carbon savings tended to come from projects focusing on technical measures requiring little or no behaviour change, particularly housing insulation, rather than community engagement and capacity-building. It is suggested that this is likely due to the CCF’s primary requirement for short-term, measurable emissions reductions, which risks groups “over-prioritising quick carbon savings at the expense of other sustainability goals” (Brook Lyndhurst and Ecometrica 2011, p. 114).

These findings raise significant questions about whether community-led initiatives such as the CCF and the LCCC are an effective means by which to address climate change and foster low-carbon communities. In the case of delivering technical fixes, suggested to be the quickest and most reliable means of reducing emissions, the benefit of operating through local community groups is questionable. For some CCF projects, external barriers, such as infrastructural restraints and planning restrictions, were reported in the review to be seriously restricting the action that the community groups could undertake.

In the research presented in the remainder of this paper, I seek to deepen the investigation of CCF projects initiated by the Brook Lyndhurst and Ecometrica review. Using an ethnographic approach, I explore the socio-political dynamics of government funded community-led initiatives aiming to encourage more sustainable lifestyles, seeking to uncover the advantages and disadvantages of a community-led approach.

**Methodology**

The findings in this paper come from two in-depth case studies. For each case, an eight-week period of participant observation was conducted with a CCF project in a remote rural Scottish community.

**Selection of case studies**

The primary criteria for selecting communities to be studied in this research was that they had a currently funded CCF project in place, and that they met the Scottish Government definition of a “remote rural” settlement, namely, a population of under 3000 individuals and location that is over 30 minutes’ drive from a settlement of 10,000 people or more (Scottish Government 2010b). The initial purpose of the research was to investigate the role of these groups in encouraging more sustainable lifestyles within the community; consequently, the organisations within this list that appeared to be actively seeking to engage the wider community in their work were identified and contacted. This led to meetings with project managers across the country to discuss the groups’ activities and to assess the feasibility of using the community as a case study. Many were concerned that there was insufficient community engagement activity to be of value to the research, echoing the aforementioned findings of the Brook Lyndhurst and Ecometrica (2011) review that many projects rely on technical rather than behavioural interventions to secure emissions...
reductions. Whilst this was interesting in itself, the specific focus of this research was to observe first-hand the everyday activities and interactions of a community group attempting to encourage more sustainable behaviours within the wider community. Therefore, it was largely through a process of elimination that the two final sites were selected.

Case study 1: island

The first case study was conducted from October to December 2011 in an island community of approximately 1300 individuals (General Register Office for Scotland 2013). The island has a small airport which has one scheduled direct flight to mainland Scotland per day as well as flights to surrounding islands. The mainland can also be reached daily by ferry (weather permitting). The majority of the houses, services, and infrastructure are clustered close to the airport, with a number of additional smaller crofting townships scattered across the island.

The CCF group based here, Group 1, was initiated by a small group of friends who were moved to take action after attending a local screening of The Age of Stupid, a film made with the specific intention of motivating people to take action against climate change (see Howell 2011 for a study investigating the influence of this film on UK audiences). The community defined by Group 1 also includes the adjacent isles, increasing the total target population to approximately 4500 individuals. Between March 2010 and March 2012, Group 1 secured funding from the CCF to conduct various carbon-reduction projects, including vegetable growing trials and demonstrations, home energy audits and insulation tests, a district heating feasibility study, and a lift share scheme.

Case study 2: lowland

The second case study was conducted from April to June 2012 in a southern mainland settlement of just over 2000 residents (General Register Office for Scotland 2013). It is situated along a main access route from England to the Highlands of Scotland and, consequently, has a long history of serving English tourists. This continues to be an important part of the local economy, with the majority of residents employed either in wholesale and retail or in hotels and restaurants (General Register Office for Scotland 2013).

The CCF organisation, Group 2, emerged from a small group of individuals who had come together with a shared desire to take action on environmental issues. The original group had started pursuing small-scale projects without funding, including a can collection and recycling service from local pubs and restaurants. As the ambitions of the group began to grow, differing priorities among members led to a few individuals leaving to form a new organisation, Group 2. Since 2009, Group 2 has been awarded funding from the CCF to carry out an extensive suite of projects on a number of different themes, including recycling, energy efficiency, food growing, furniture restoration, garden sharing, and sustainability education.

In the field

The participant observation was conducted overtly in both locations. In each case, I volunteered full time with the organisation for two months whilst living in private accommodation in the local area. On feasibility visits to the communities prior to starting the official study period, an interview was held with the project manager where the full details of the research were disclosed. The project manager was therefore able to give
their consent to the research methods. Any possible gains that might have been made by concealing my purpose for being there did not appear to justify the ethical implications and additional methodological complications of going undercover.

Over the study period, I felt that a degree of trust and friendship naturally built up between the groups’ participants and me. The frank and honest opinions and information gathered this way was a fundamental reason for selecting an ethnographic approach. However, it also blurred the boundaries between a point of view consciously being divulged to a researcher and a private remark being shared with a friend. Furthermore, because I regularly observed the group’s interactions with members of the wider community who were not aware of my research, it was not feasible to gain written or verbal consent from all the people I encountered. For these reasons, the names of all places, people, and institutions in this paper are pseudonyms.

Whilst the overarching aim of the research – to understand the role of the group in encouraging more sustainable behaviours within the wider community – was established from the start, the precise remit of the investigation was not defined prior to starting fieldwork. One of the aims of the wider research from which this paper draws is to understand the local interpretation of “sustainable lifestyles” within the specific social and cultural context of remote rural Scotland. Therefore, a “Grounded Theory” (Glaser and Strauss 1967) approach was selected to allow themes to emerge unfettered by my preconceptions upon entering the field.

When able, I recorded observations in a field journal as they happened throughout the day. On occasions when it was not feasible or appropriate to take notes at the time, a summary of the event or interaction was written up as soon as possible. These direct observations were supplemented by a diary that I updated each evening. Here, I reflected on the day’s observations and began to draw out the issues and concepts that were arising. This process enabled the focus of the research to gradually become increasingly refined over time. Towards the end of the study period, qualitative interviews were conducted with a few individuals who seemed to have a unique perspective on the concepts I had identified.

**Observations and analysis**

Although the two groups existed in very different physical and socioeconomic circumstances, they functioned in a similar way. In both cases, the organisational structure was the same: both the groups were set up and overseen by a board of unpaid directors, with the day-to-day running of the project currently being conducted by paid employees funded through the CCF. The groups both operated out of an office located within the geographic community they represented, which is where I was based in both cases. To varying extents, both groups had activities connected with local food growing, community waste reduction and recycling, low-carbon transport, and energy efficiency in the home, and both had strong links with schools and young people.

A considerable amount of both the groups’ time was spent in the office and, consequently, this is where I, too, spent the majority of my research period. The daily interaction with a small group of individuals that being based in an office environment provides enabled me to get to know employees and volunteers quite quickly, building useful relationships and exposing me to the more private workings of the organisations. Furthermore, as both groups had experience of short-term staff, sometimes only employed for a few months at a time, I appeared to be accepted into the office environment with relative ease and speed. As a result, the intricacies of day-to-day life within a community-led sustainability organisation became the focus of my investigation.
One of the most surprising themes to emerge from my analysis was the largely unre-ported potential challenges that grant funding can present for community-led initiatives. While the many self-evident benefits of funding were regularly observed during my field-work (for example, the generation of local employment, infrastructure, and services), there was also clear evidence of a number of ways in which the receipt of grant funding may complicate community-led activity. Therefore, the rest of this section discusses the influence of the following three elements of grant funding on community-led initiatives: (i) the timescales of funding, (ii) the administration demands associated with funding, and (iii) the competition for funding. Where appropriate, my account is illustrated with direct extracts from my field journal and interview transcripts. In each case, both the source and date of the excerpt are provided.

(i) The timescales of funding
The CCF currently awards up to £150,000 per year per project in funding rounds which open for applications a few times a year. As a result of the four-year cycle of the leadership of the Scottish Government, the CCF has never been guaranteed for longer than three years. The vast majority of funding to date has been issued on a one-year basis. In 2012, the CCF permitted applications for funding for up to three years, to the end of March 2015. Whether operating on a one- or three-year basis, all projects must achieve a reduction in carbon dioxide equivalent emissions (CO₂e) within the lifetime of the funding. As Keep Scotland Beautiful (KSB), the administrators of the CCF, explain in their application form guidelines, “Your first outcome should state the CO₂e reductions your project is aiming to make and what you are going to target to make that reduction ... [and] you should identify the CO₂e baseline against which you will measure your CO₂e reduction” (KSB 2013, p. 11). KSB identify that projects are likely to also deliver other social, economic, and environmental outcomes for their community and ask that applicants estimate baseline values for each of these to enable progress towards up to five additional outcomes to also be measured. If applications are successful, evidence of progress made towards these expected outcomes should be regularly recorded and reported back to KSB.

In addition to achieving CO₂e reductions and being “community-led”, projects funded by the CCF must fulfill a third criterion: they must “have a positive lasting legacy beyond the funded period” (KSB 2013, p. 24). This expected legacy can be in the form of new physical infrastructure, ongoing behaviour change, improved awareness of the issues, or a social change, such as increased community cohesion. Fieldwork observations suggest that, for the participants of the groups in both communities, this third element, the long-term influence of the project, is considered the true mark of its success.

Group 2 has been working in the community for over three years. Within that time it has established a number of facilities, including a community garden with allotments, and has set up a number of other ongoing services to the local community, such as recycling collections. However, it was clear that, for many members of the community, this is only the very beginning of a long and uncertain journey. Within the initiatives themselves, participants expressed concerns about whether the group would be effective in the longer term, a sentiment echoed in a conversation with Group 2’s project manager towards the end of the study period:

I asked what Ben [Project Manager] thought the impact of [Group 2] was on the community ... [and] what would be the permanent imprint of its existence. He thought for a while and then said that he thought there probably wouldn’t be one yet – they need to carry on a bit longer and try to weave themselves into the fabric of the community. (Journal, 11 June 2012)
Similar views had also been expressed in conversations with members of Group 1, suggesting that community development groups, such as those funded by the CCF, are frequently perceived as temporary and unstable. This was an observation that emerged in an interview with Mike, an employee of the Local Authority for the area in which Group 1 operate:

Mike: I’ve seen it time and time again. You get waves of them coming in and they last 5 or 6 years and then they peter out and another lot take over. (Interview, 8 December 2011)

It is evident that the perception among some community members that grassroots initiatives are usually only passing fads is completely at odds with the groups’, and the CCF’s, stated desire for permanence and legacy. However, observations suggested that the conditions of CCF funding are perpetuating this appearance of transience, and may even encourage a short-sighted approach from the funded groups.

For example, during my stay with Group 1, they were approaching the end of their current year of funding and were in the process of applying for further CCF support for their activities over the following three years. This process captured the inherent paradoxes and contradictions within the CCF, and I saw first-hand how the requirement for short-term outputs inevitably alters the ambitions of the projects that the community groups will take on:

Group 1 got feedback from KSB on the first draft of their CCF application … Many of the projects they were planning to apply for are thought to be inappropriate and unlikely to be funded. The KSB officer commented that [one of the proposed projects] is “too long term” to be funded … Group 1 have a portion of their strategy focussed on research and development projects which will not necessarily result in significant carbon savings within the lifetime of the funding (3 years), but will set up the infrastructure and knowledge for much bigger, long-lasting savings in the future. Therefore, they would like to set a 20 year timeframe for this particular project. KSB states that this is not the kind of work that is eligible for CCF funding as they are specifically seeking immediate carbon savings. (Journal, 18 November 2011)

After two years of working on projects to encourage sustainable living within their community, Group 1 believed that they had built up a strong foundation of context-specific knowledge and had come to the conclusion, echoed by the findings of the recent review of the CCF (Brook Lyndhurst and Ecometrica 2011), that there was a limit to the amount of individual behaviour and attitude change that they could achieve in the short term. Therefore, they decided to design projects with a longer time horizon and with ambitions to work with the Local Authority to enable a more institutional-level approach. However, they were advised to refocus their strategy on short-term individual behaviour change if they wanted to have a chance of receiving CCF funding.

As a result of this advice, Group 1 removed the projects that they saw as their legacy projects from their strategy, focusing on a couple of ideas to promote sustainability in schools instead:

Anna [Group 1 Project Manager] submitted final copy of CCF application this morning. I talked to her over lunch about how confident she was that they would be successful. She said she really didn’t know and that it could go either way. She said she hopes they [KSB] appreciate how stripped back the application is … She said that the most important thing is that they get some funding for now so that the office doesn’t have to shut down completely as they need to keep a presence in the community. (Journal, 1 December 2011)

The CCF states an ambition to enable lasting change within communities but its insistent demand for immediate carbon savings is not often consistent with this ambition. If a group is applying for funding for one financial year, the project has to have been completed
and have achieved measurable carbon savings within that year. Therefore, upon receipt of the funding, the group will appear to suddenly burst onto the scene and be very visibly active within the local community, but this activity is entirely dependent upon the grant funding to cover the associated salaries and overheads. It is inevitable, then, that in the case that funding was not renewed the following year, the group would no longer be able to maintain the services or presence within the community as it could previously, giving, perhaps, the appearance of “petering out”. The danger here is that, if this cycle is repeated over time, the credibility of community projects and the messages they are promoting will be increasingly diluted by a belief that the group will not last, leading to cynicism and a lack of buy-in from the rest of the community.

(ii) Administration demands

Both the groups studied had successfully applied to the CCF soon after their formation (Group 1 in 2010 and Group 2 in 2009) to provide the resources required to realise their respective projects. At the time of my visit, both groups had also been successful in subsequent applications: Group 1 had received one further round of funding, and Group 2 had received two further rounds. The groups also supplemented their income with smaller grants from other sources. Neither currently had their own means of generating any significant income. At the time of the research, CCF awards specifically prohibited projects from raising any revenue. This was recently revised and from Round 13 (announced March 2013) onwards applications were permitted to include income-generating activities.

Both groups spent a considerable portion of their time during my observation period applying for funding. Group 1 was in the process of applying for their third round of funding from the CCF. Group 2 had just had their third CCF application accepted and were applying for additional support from a number of other funds.

Group 1 often flagged up the time-consuming nature of the CCF process to me, highlighting the effort that they were expending on their application. Preparing this application was the priority of both Group 1 project managers from my arrival at the end of October until the submission on 1 December. As well as devising the strategy, preparing the budget, calculating the estimated CO₂e savings, and writing up the application documents, Group 1 also spent time seeking letters of support from influential members of the community, such as councillors and teachers, which would boost their application.

From observing the application process, it is easy to envision that many grassroots groups could be discouraged from attempting to apply due to the resources and skills required. Both groups studied were run by professional, university-educated individuals with extensive project management experience and high-level accounting and budgeting skills. It is apparent that those with less training and experience would be at a disadvantage and may not have the time and resources to commit to the application process.

The Group 2 Project Manager, in contrast to Group 1, was surprisingly self-conscious and almost apologetic about the resources being invested in seeking out funding:

Ben [Group 2 Project Manager] came into the office this afternoon in order to fill in a funding application. He said he heard about a new pot of money that was available for applications until tomorrow so he rushed to submit something. He said, half-jokingly, that maybe Steve [a local resident vociferously opposed to the group] is right that they are money-grabbing and will apply for any funds going. (Journal 13 May 2012)

Group 2 were particularly well tuned to local and national politics and current affairs and had an effective information network. This gave them a significant advantage in terms of
knowing where and when they would be most likely to be successful in a funding bid. Grassroots community groups may not always have the same national networks to draw on or have the technical skills or resources required to monitor the changing political landscape and its influence on third-sector funding. Therefore, there is a risk that the community-led initiatives that end up being successful in gaining funding may, as opposed to necessarily being the most deserving, simply be those who are the most competent in navigating the process of seeking and applying for the funding.

In addition to the time spent in the annual application process, once in receipt of a CCF grant the community group must report on their progress towards their expected outcomes at regular intervals throughout the year. This is usually every two months but is negotiable in certain circumstances. If the group is receiving any additional funding from other sources, as is encouraged by the CCF, this too is likely to have its own reporting and administration demands. If a community group has decided to take on paid employees this, again, brings further administration. Therefore, it was observed that one of the consequences of gaining grant funding is the necessary allocation of a significant portion of the group’s time to being in the office preparing reports and completing paperwork.

This time spent in the office inevitably detracts from the time the group has to carry out face-to-face community engagement and awareness-raising events and activities and may, in turn, affect the relationship between the group and the community, threatening its reputation locally. For example, a local businesswoman and member of Group 2 (who held an allotment space and took up the recycling service) believed that many of the wider community were not fully aware of the group’s activities because “the garden is the only visual thing for the community” (Journal, 30 April 2012), a comment which suggests that local people expect be able to see first-hand the work that the group are doing and what is being achieved. Similarly, in an interview with a member of Group 1, when discussing another funded community-led initiative in the local area (Group A) that has particularly struggled to gain public support, the interviewee suggested that one of Group A’s problems was a lack of visible, direct interaction with community activity:

... some of the criticism of [Group A] is that they’ve... not really... got their hands dirty at community level very much. (Interview, 14 November 2011)

This comment raises some fundamental questions about the scope of projects that can legitimately be labelled “community-led”. If the group evolves in such a way that they are not seen to be getting “their hands dirty at community level”, not seeming to be actively working with the individuals in the community, it is perhaps somewhat incongruous to continue to define their activities as community-led. Observations suggest that the administration demands embedded within the conditions of grant funding may be contributing to a distancing between the group and the community.

(iii) Competition and rivalries
Remote rural economies in Scotland still rely heavily on traditional primary-sector industries. In 2010, agriculture, forestry, and fishing provided 17% of all jobs in these communities (Scottish Government 2011c). However, primary industry has been in steady decline for many years, as illustrated by the national 14.2% fall in employment in agriculture and fishing between 1995 and 2008 (Bell 2011, p. 72). It was evident from conversations with residents of both communities that this decline, and the subsequent increasing reliance on
farming subsidies, is a major cause for concern locally. For example, David, a smallholder in Group 2’s lowland community, poignantly told me of the struggles that he is facing:

David: I have everything I have always wanted, it is idyllic but also terrible, endless worry and struggle to make a living, constantly having to adapt to changing legislations and market forces, always being liable for unforeseen catastrophes . . . I can see the sheep farms and agricultural community in this area disappear under conifer trees and development . . . I don’t know what our future will be, it is not possible to make a living on a small farm now . . . (Interview, 6 June 2012)

The declining private sector has made the public and third sector increasingly important sources of employment and services in remote rural communities. In the island community in particular, community-led initiatives have historically provided essential local facilities, such as nursery schools and carers for the elderly. However, in an interview, Tom, a development officer for a third-sector organisation in the island community, suggested that the number of funded community groups has now greatly exceeded requirements. This, he argued, has led to a glut of development officers all tasked with the same remit but working separately, leading to unnecessary duplication and confusion. Tom believed the reason for a lack of coordination between community groups stems from a desire to protect their individual strategies for future funding:

Tom: . . . we are absolutely falling over ourselves with Development Officers . . . they aren’t good value for money, including my post . . . what you need to do is to get them together, coordinated. There’s no coordination between all these people. They barely speak to each other . . . they don’t want to give too much away in case somebody else takes that idea and runs with it . . . They need to produce a report every year to justify their existence . . . . (Interview, 13 December 2011)

This was echoed almost exactly in an interview the following day with Christina, a Local Authority “Community Coordinator” whose job is to assist and facilitate community-led activity on the island. She notes that her job is often complicated by the fact that many groups do not want to discuss their plans and activities in case their ideas are stolen by others:

Christina: . . . my job is really making sure that people know what other people are up to – if they want it to be known – because there’s always sensitivities . . . competing for the same funding, you know! Trying to get that very fine line between social enterprises . . . who are in a competitive situation and want to keep their cards very close to their chest, versus the fact that I think that that’s not a particularly good way for people to operate. (Interview, 14 December 2011)

The influence of local politics and competition was a surprisingly significant element of everyday life within both CCF groups and in both circumstances there was stark evidence of an ongoing rivalry with specific local community groups.

I discovered that Group 2 existed within a web of local politics and entrenched rivalry. In addition to Group 2, there was a second CCF-funded initiative operating in the same geographic community (Group B). The two groups began as one unfunded group of a few individuals who volunteered to collect cans from local pubs and restaurants for recycling. As the group’s ambitions developed, the members began to disagree about pivotal development issues and, as a result, divided into two separate organisations to pursue their own interests: Group 2 and Group B. Although both have since been successful in securing
separate CCF grants, there is a high level of residual personal and political resentment and the two groups are not able to collaborate. Group B believes that Group 2 stole much of their strategy in order to secure funding and pursue their political ambitions. Group 2 are equally suspicious of Group B and believe that they are trying to undermine and discredit them in the local area.

This level of secrecy and mistrust was also observed in the island community. During my time with Group 1, I encountered another community-led initiative (Group C) operating in the same community with a similar remit to Group 1. As with the lowland scenario, Group 1 and Group C had attempted, but failed, to work together on a previous grant-funded initiative. On this occasion, the groups had been encouraged to work together on an application for a grant that had become available for local development projects. They were successful in securing the funding but Group 1 was unhappy with the way the project developed and so dropped out. The groups have subsequently pursued similar (sometimes identical) projects in the same community but are not able to work together, leading to unnecessary duplication of effort and resources.

Discussion

The CCF is part of the Scottish Government’s strategy to achieve their target of an 80% reduction in GHG emissions by 2050. In order to ensure projects are contributing to this ambition, it is a requirement of the CCF that groups deliver measurable CO₂e reductions within the lifetime of the funding, most commonly one year. Detailed carbon assessments of eight CCF projects conducted as part of the 2011 review gave a huge range in estimates, from 66 to 11,400 tonnes of potential emissions savings across the lifetime of the projects. It was found that the most reliable means for community projects to achieve measurable short-term success is through technical measures (such as installing house insulation or micro-renewables) and small behaviour changes related to energy use, such as switching off lights or turning down the thermostat (Brook Lyndhurst and Ecometrica 2011). It therefore follows that these are the types of projects that are most likely to be proposed and subsequently accepted for funding, as opposed to projects with more ambitious goals to encourage lower-carbon lifestyles. However, as Hauxwell-Baldwin argues, the use of “the community” to install low-carbon technologies in or on individuals’ homes does not necessarily mean that those individuals will identify themselves as part of a “low-carbon community”, or feel inclined to adopt low-carbon behaviours (Hauxwell-Baldwin 2013).

Even when some individual behaviour change is achieved, there is uncertainty about the long-term contribution that these small changes can make to the broader sustainability agenda. Crompton and Thøgersen have criticised the tendency of government policy initiatives to focus on “simple and painless private-sphere behaviour changes” (2009, p. 26). The authors suggest that the only reason for targeting these types of small-scale changes is to act as precursors to larger-scale behaviour change (a “spillover” effect), or to initiate more active involvement in the political process (the “foot in the door” effect). They note, however, that these secondary effects are unpredictable and unreliable. There is evidence to suggest that, rather than encouraging the uptake of other aspects of a sustainable lifestyle, individuals who adopt one pro-environmental behaviour may see it at as a way of off-setting other environmentally detrimental behaviours, leading to a negative spillover (or rebound) effect. The 2011 CCF review reported very limited evidence of a positive spillover, noting that “Even where projects were deliberately trying to catalyse spillover, this . . . very rarely worked when the promoted behaviours were, in their eyes, unconnected” (Brook Lyndhurst and Ecometrica 2011, p. 31).
In order for CCF initiatives to have a significant influence on local lifestyles more broadly, as opposed to isolated behaviours of certain individuals, projects need to be a small part of a much stronger and longer-term sustainability narrative. The observations and analysis presented in this paper suggest that, whilst a group may have long-term ambitions to alter the social norms of their community, their participation in a funding scheme such as the CCF can erode this intention as they adjust their strategy to deliver measurable outputs, such as emissions savings, within the (typically one year) funding period. This demonstrates how the priorities and timescales of national governments are necessarily forced on to community groups participating in government funding schemes, diluting part of the value of operating at the community level.

The need to align the group’s activities with the reporting timescales dictated by the funders risks the initiative being — or at least giving the impression of being — a relatively short-term endeavour, beginning and ending with the provision of funding. This is perpetuated by the stipulation built into the CCF that groups cannot reapply for funding to continue the same project, but must be expanding or evolving in some respect, demonstrating that they are continuing to achieve new outcomes.

Community action on climate change is a slow, long-term process, often taking longer than expected as unforeseen challenges arise along the way (Preston et al. 2009), and it is incongruous to expect grassroots organisations to operate in the strategic manner dictated to them by funders (Rowe and Robbins 2005). As Rowe and Robbins state,

the “output” measures to which public funding is generally attached tend to make a mockery of community-based initiatives: organic growth can rarely be predicted, and ... the bureaucracies of accountability may, paradoxically, make activists and leaders less effective by taking them away from the community work .... (2005, p. 161)

This is supported by the observations in this paper which illustrate how, in addition to the time needed to strategise and compile further funding bids, the various administration tasks which accompany grant funding necessitated the CCF groups to spend a significant proportion of their time in the office. The inevitable consequence of this is that the amount of time left for practical community-based activity is reduced. This was one of the key barriers to success of community action on climate change identified by Preston et al. in a best practice review; “it became clear that significant volunteer time usually has to be directed at sourcing funding and the application process is often complex and time consuming ... efforts could be much better spent than on form filling and box ticking” (2009, p. 39).

The third sector is an increasingly important element of development strategies across the whole of Scotland (Woolvin 2012) but a lack of private-sector investment and sparseness of public-service provision makes the third sector particularly important in remote rural communities (SCVO 2011). There are more charitable organisations per head in rural locations, each likely to be serving their immediate locality (Skerratt et al. 2012). An observed consequence of this proliferation is the emergence of rivalries between local third-sector organisations seeking funding. This competitive approach to funding has been overtly encouraged by some community funding schemes where the application process has been explicitly organised and advertised as a competition, for example, the “Big Green Challenge” (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts 2007–2010), the “Low Energy Assessment Fund” (Department for Energy and Climate Change 2011–2012), and “Green Streets” (British Gas 2010–2011).

Although the CCF is not designed as a competition, evidence was found within both the communities studied that suggested that the need for constant innovation and new ideas in
order to secure future funding perpetuated a degree of secrecy and protectiveness over current and future strategies. Therefore, the requirements of funding schemes such as the CCF can alter the nature of the community organisations involved in a way that makes them less open about their plans and somewhat unwilling to share information. This clearly runs counter to the observed opinion among funding bodies, and the community initiatives themselves, that making connections and forming networks with other community organisations is an important source of information and support (Park 2011).

Conclusion

Community-led organisations have the potential to play a crucial and unique role in encouraging more sustainable lifestyles. Embedded within the community, they can use established networks and local knowledge to alter social norms, build community capacity, and increase individuals’ willingness to change (Assadourian 2008).

In the two cases described, participation in the CCF has provided the resources for local initiatives to install renewable energy infrastructure, create allotment spaces and polytunnels, carry out energy-efficiency audits throughout the community, offer a recycling service, host local food events, and assist with local EcoSchools projects. These projects have delivered clear and tangible outputs which are unlikely to have happened without public funding. However, these types of projects do not necessarily capitalise upon the aforementioned unique position that community-led initiatives can have within a community. As has been discussed, the short-term, output-driven agenda of national government grant funding is not well aligned with the organic, unstructured development of grassroots initiatives. Once in receipt of top-down funding, community organisations appear to take on more business-like form, competing with others for the resources (and authority) to deliver certain services.

If the primary underlying ambition of the CCF, and schemes like it, is to minimise national carbon emissions, there is a significant question about whether the current approach of funding numerous, very small-scale, and largely unconnected, community-led carbon mitigation schemes is the most appropriate one. Due to the scale at which community projects are operating, the potential carbon savings that can be made through these schemes is limited and has been demonstrated to be very variable. Governments cannot rely on community-led initiatives to supply the dramatic and difficult reductions required to meet national emissions targets.

If, however, the intention of a scheme such as the CCF is to strengthen networks and alter social norms within communities, these initiatives could play a crucial role. The CCF has the potential to help harness and strengthen social capital and, in turn, create stronger, more pro-active communities. In order to maximise this potential, however, funding schemes need to focus less on detailed accounting of immediate measurable outputs, such as the number of tonnes of carbon saved within short periods of time and more on building up a cohesive and comprehensive narrative of community-scale sustainable living. Local Authorities have the potential to play a key role in fostering connections and collaborations between projects and creating regional portfolios of inter-connected initiatives (Peters et al. 2010).

However, it is inevitable that governments will be intrinsically restricted and constrained in the activities they will fund by conflicting interests, ambitions, and electoral concerns, and will pass these constraints on to Local Authorities. It has been argued that one of the central roles of grassroots initiatives is to operate outside of the political mainstream, pressurising governments to act more urgently and more effectively and demonstrating a
public readiness for change (Rootes et al. 2012). Therefore, perhaps it is naïve to expect that a government-controlled fund such as the CCF will ever be able to give the scope and flexibility needed to initiate such regime-changing grassroots innovations (Seyfang and Smith 2007).

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Notes
1. The concept of “community” has been, and continues to be, extensively debated within the academic literature (e.g. Hillery 1955, Tönnies 1957, Minar and Greer 1969, Bell and Newby 1974, Plant 1974, Etzioni 1993, Bauman, 2001). However, furthering understanding of the meaning of community is not the purpose of this paper. Consequently, the term “community” used here refers to the common dictionary definition of the word, that is, “a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common” (Oxford Dictionaries 2013, p. 1).

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