

Power to the People: community-led wind energy – obstacles and opportunities in a South Wales Valley

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ABSTRACT External community development practitioners often find themselves in a difficult negotiating position between beneficiary communities and donor agencies. Taking the role of *analysing* and *assessing community needs* with residents can lead to constructive ideas and decisions. These, however, are not always met with co-operation from higher level decision-makers. The power that a community has over its project is dependent to a large extent on the channel created between them and funding sources. Where a community group initiates an idea and leads a project, sourcing funding directly, there is greater potential for *residents to maintain control* of their ideas. Nevertheless, there are obstacles facing community-led projects that an established agency is well set up to deal with. Looking more closely at these issues in the context of planning a community-led wind farm, the paper suggests some recommendations as to how an external agency may help to support community ideas without importing its own agenda and control into the community.

Introduction

Drawing on lessons learnt from working in overseas social development, some residents in a South Wales Valley have found themselves in a position to respond to the needs and opportunities of their own community through the preparation of a multi-million pound community development project. Through this experience of 'bringing work home' it has been possible to compare the experience of being an insider, a member of 'the community', a potential 'beneficiary' with that of being an outsider, an advocate, an external facilitator. It has highlighted a number of obstacles and opportunities that are especially relevant to the development of a community-led initiative.

This paper maintains that there is a blurred distinction between the situation of external agencies supporting the development of community ideas and agencies controlling community development projects. While many development organizations are moving more towards playing a role of catalyst for community ideas, the process of truly empowering people is severely restricted by the fact that the final decisions often rest with outsiders (Guijt and Shah, 1998).

It argues that retaining the ultimate power and control over an idea and consequent project is a crucial factor in the success of a community development process. However, communities often lack the resources, the confidence and support to retain the control, raise the necessary finance, and draw on relevant expertise. While community empowerment is a key criterion for many community development implementing agencies, it is questionable whether this can really occur while outsiders hold financial control, and therefore retain the ultimate decision-making (Hussein, 1995).

This paper looks at an eighteen month process of research, project identification, planning and donor liaison undergone by a group of residents to develop a renewable energy project in their area. This group has contributed extensive time, energy and resources to the development of the project. This has given them a level of control and power that would not have been possible if initiated by an outside agency. However, they have also faced a number of setbacks and difficulties that would have been less problematic or non-existent had an external organization been managing the process. Furthermore, within the process of applying for funds, the choices available have influenced the structure and planning of the project. In the event, this has supported the group in shaping the project and identifying appropriate ways forward.

The project that forms the focus of this paper is the development of a wind farm as a community asset where profits aim to fund a process of local regeneration. Given that there are no other examples of community-led Renewable Energy (RE) schemes in the UK (Stevenson, 1999), the process of developing this project in a South Wales Valley is being observed with interest and excitement. The broader regeneration remit of the project is of interest to the community development field where the formation and development of such a large regeneration project by residents is unusual in the UK.

The paper gives an overview of the process of project development, and the main issues that have affected positively and negatively the ability of community members to lead such a project.¹ Furthermore it draws on some of these issues to make tentative recommendations as to how external

1. It should be pointed out that this paper refers to the planning process, rather than the implementation process. It is anticipated that there will be a range of further issues that will come out of the various phases of the implementation of the project.

organizations might support a community-led initiative ensuring that the power and control remains firmly in the hands of community members.

The formation of ideas

As part of a Borough-wide Local Agenda 21 consultation process, the Local Authority conducted a range of public meetings around the borough to discuss LA21 issues with residents and generate ideas for action. Among other ideas, a wind farm was suggested. The borough had limited funds to pursue the ideas mentioned by the community, so everyone who had attended received a copy of the minutes some time later, but little further was heard about LA21.

However, the idea of the wind farm triggered a spark among some of the participants and they formed a group of 'interested residents'. This steering group, some of whom have had experience in community development in the UK and overseas, took the idea forward moving it from an engineering project to a sustainable development project underpinned by community decision-making. An eighteen month process of developing the idea, researching the renewable energy (RE) situation, liaising with appropriate institutions and identifying funding sources has been undertaken by the group.

Whilst the idea of a wind farm maintains a crucial position within the planned project, the community and social benefits have become the driving force and the emphasis on the wind farm itself has diminished. Technical and social aspects have been integrated throughout, helping to ensure that the project is both technically viable and beneficial and appropriate for the community.

The residents involved have a commitment to facilitating a broad local assessment of whether the wind farm should go ahead and on what basis. From a study of the UK RE literature, this emphasis on residents leading a RE scheme is unheard of. Many developers talk of community participation and involvement but in most cases it is 'participation without power' (Smith, 1998),² and usually entails a series of public meetings. From the group's experience, it has become apparent that community decision-making and leadership is not fully understood by organizations and companies working in the RE sector.

Essentially there are six issues that underpin the project's logic behind, and understanding of, community leadership:

- The wind is a **local resource**. It is a sustainable resource that can be developed to benefit the community. For around 150 years the area has been mined for coal with little profit going back to the local community.

2. See Smith, 1998, for an assessment of the benefits of the 'weakest forms of participation' – *utilization, contributions, enlistment, cooperation, consultation*.

- There is a **locally identified need** for regeneration. There is high unemployment in the area, especially with the decrease in coal mining, recent factory closures and the current farming crisis. There are few employment opportunities, a need for retraining, access to local education facilities, appropriate childcare and affordable transport. There are few facilities or long-term prospects in the area and a significant risk of a 'brain drain' from the valleys.
- Residents have researched and outlined the **opportunities available locally** to meet the needs within the community. These include an interest in the use of RE (as demonstrated at the LA21 meeting), a windy site (which is potentially technically viable for a wind farm), a fairly defined community of 14 villages around the site, and a possible source of funding for the construction and installation of turbines.
- The **decision-making** throughout the planning has been in the hands of residents. A two year participatory assessment and planning process is scheduled to support decision-making at community level as to whether and on what basis the proposed wind farm goes ahead.
- The **ownership, control and management** of the wind farm itself aims to be community based. Jobs created will be locally sourced, and investments made in training where necessary. Finance sourced from donors will enable ownership of the windfarm to be at a community level. A proportion of the investment may be through a local share issue, where limits will be set on the number of shares individuals or organisations can own, and policies established whereby shares are fixed at a price so that all can afford to purchase.
- **Benefits** from the wind farm will be gained locally. The benefits are wide ranging with substantial potential spin-offs. While decisions over the use of profits³ will form a part of the participatory planning process, residents have outlined key ideas that will support local businesses, community groups and individuals of all ages. In addition to the use of the profits other benefits to the community include: employment opportunities; contribution towards LA21 objectives; education and training (for all ages); development of European partnerships with exchange visits; an energy efficiency programme and potential tourism.

Moulding the project

As the ideas of the project began to gel, the steering group continued to meet. Experienced community development practitioners have been part of the group from the start and have greatly influenced the development of the project plans. In particular they have emphasized the need to structure the assessment process to ensure broad community participation and develop a process whereby the overall project is based on the needs and criteria

3. It is estimated that the profits from the proposed development would be in the region of £180,000–380,000 per year.

highlighted by the community at large. The opportunity for residents to explore their needs and ideas internally, following their preferred direction and making appropriate decisions is highlighted as a crucial aspect of the process.

The field of Renewable Energy, however, was new to almost everybody on the steering group⁴ (all but one of whom were local to the area), but the idea of a community-owned wind farm in this particularly windy locality was appealing to all, and considered a valuable thing to explore. Through networking, the steering group was able to tap in to free RE advice and get to grips with the broader political environment, the Local Authority position on wind energy, and draw in support from the University of Wales, LA21 and RE companies. Key community members have been co-opted, specialist personnel external to the area have been widely consulted and appropriate donors identified.

In particular, a large local community-based organization has been approached and its board has approved that it supports the principle of the project, and should support it in a practical way if and where it can. This approval has given the project an additional level of local and external credibility and has led to support from the organization in terms of local knowledge, use of facilities, access to networks, project advice and some in-kind support. In particular the project itself has been granted permission to use the organization's charity number. This has not only enabled the project to meet the eligibility criteria for many funding applications, but also has drawn in the organization's reputation and recognition in the way the project has been judged. There is, it is to be noted a degree of overlap in the management of both the community organization and the project itself.

The project proposal was continually revised over a period of time putting the various drafts out for comment to people that had expressed an interest in the idea. One of the most valuable comments was from a distant family friend of one of the steering group who constructively questioned the logic behind the idea of the wind farm. As an objective observer and with his own interest and knowledge of RE he was able to spot some flaws in the argument set out in the project. Likewise, community development colleagues were a useful sounding board for ideas.

During the course of its research the group has discovered that their idea is a novel one. There are no community-led wind-farms in the UK and no examples of an in-depth community assessment attached to a RE project in the UK. They also discovered that a commercial developer had been interested in the same site and had carried out some wind-speed testing two years earlier. As a result of two incidents of vandalism on the testing equipment, the developer abandoned their interest.⁵ This gave the steering group

4. The steering group is made up of ten people.

5. On contacting the developer (a national company), the steering group discovered that the wind-speed data gives a fairly good indication that the site could be viable for a wind farm. However, difficulties with the Local Authority Planning Process in the UK are forcing them to look more at overseas development.

confidence in the site, but also, it served to highlight the importance of community involvement and ownership, and it fuelled their motivation in planning an 'empowering community assessment' where an open debate could be facilitated.

This helped shape the project in many ways. Firstly, it was felt that if one developer was interested in that site, others would also be interested at a later date, especially given the current political climate with regards to RE.⁶ It was a highly motivating factor that if anyone was going to make a profit out of 'our wind' it was going to be *us* and not an external developer. For that reason, it was felt that the community consultation had to go ahead and had to be as thorough as possible including educational components as well as a full exploration of the arguments against wind farms.

Secondly, it was recognized that working with communities, supporting communities to develop RE, and actively involving communities in proposed projects were not being undertaken by RE developers, and support to do so is not available. The high level of local opposition to wind farms is one major factor in the rejection of many wind farms at the Planning stage. The RE sector is struggling at present to find ways of working in more 'community-friendly' ways, and consequently the steering group identified a 'knowledge gap' that could be explored within the community assessment process. The first phase of the project was re-worked, stressing the capacity it would have to assess a variety of methods of community consultation appropriate to the RE developer or community organization interested in wind farm development.⁷

Maintaining control

Retaining the control of the project has not always been straightforward. External organizations have attempted to take over control of the project. As the ideas developed, and the group was beginning to draw in recognition from RE companies, LA21 groups and community development practitioners, there were several instances when the steering group struggled to maintain control of the project. In many ways it is ironic that external companies who are interested in the project because of its (innovative) community-led nature should try to take control (thereby destroying what is novel about it). Nevertheless, this happened with two external RE organizations. There were also some difficulties over the nature of the partnership with the local community-based organization.

6. The Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions are committed to a new and strong drive for renewable energy, aiming to deliver 10% of UK electricity demand from renewables by 2010.

7. The overall project is divided into five Phases, over five years: I, Participatory assessment process; research; further windspeed testing; securing of necessary land use documents. II, Participatory planning process; environmental impact analysis; planning application; business feasibility study. III, Raising funds. IV, Construction and installation of infrastructure; establishment of community business; participatory planning for use of profits in community; launch of wind farm. V, Establishment of grant fund, business support, etc. (according to community plans).

The project was offered conditional support from two separate RE organizations. In many ways the terms of negotiation only really became apparent in hindsight, but the offer in both cases was conditional on the steering group relinquishing a substantial level of control to 'outsider' engineers.

In one situation a local RE company were offering the group support to put together a major European bid for funding. While this was a funding source that the group was looking to explore, the company was very pushy to (i) get the group to submit an application before it was ready and (ii) to apply together as partners in the project. The offer was tempting, given the size and work required for putting together the bid. However, within a series of email communication, the company demonstrated a lack of awareness as to the overall project objectives and a lack of faith in the ability of a community to lead the project.

The second situation was with a respected charitable RE organization who had been given money to explore a range of models appropriate to community RE schemes and were looking for a 'community'. They proposed to fund part of the project on the condition that it would conform to their timescale, their project objectives and test their models. The temptation was the possibility of access to funds and the links with an organization with mutual principles of community ownership of RE schemes. The group talked through various ways in which it could link up with the organization, but the two projects were fundamentally different.

In both situations, the group was tempted to compromise some of its ideas and plans in order to access funding. But on both occasions, the steering group reaffirmed its commitment to community leadership and, with the ringing of warning bells in the background, recommended that the project take a step back, and reassess the proposed 'partnership' in terms of both groups' respective motives, interests and outputs. The potential loss of community leadership became clear, and the group agreed not to commit themselves to any relationship that would restrict the level of community decision-making and control.

In many respects these situations were valuable to the project. Firstly, they provided a motivating factor due to the reaffirmation of its innovation, and were confidence building in that organizations had recognized this (despite their inappropriate actions). More importantly, the process of assessing the situation generated intense discussion around the aims, objectives, and criteria for success as well as the logistics of implementing the project, thereby reinforcing the project values and process. It also served to highlight the capacity that the group has as well as its weaknesses and needs. Furthermore it was recognized that the group, through its research, has developed the capacity to identify gaps in their knowledge and draw in appropriate outside personnel where necessary. Consequently the group reasserted greater control of the project, affirming their right to commission support and generate partnerships that would enhance the project

objectives rather than latching onto partnerships that 'come along' which may or may not be beneficial.

A further complication developed with the local community-based organization. A rather more delicate and complex relationship was beginning to develop in which mutual benefits were recognized in the developing partnership. The wind farm steering group was very keen to retain strong links drawing on the credibility, expertise and local base of the community organization. In exchange the wind farm proposal built in to its strategy support for the organization in terms of training, generating relevant local information to feed into its development programme and potentially substantial funds from the wind farm profits.

However, the status of the wind farm project within the community organization lacked clarity. The board had given its approval of the project, and the organization given its support, but due to the way the project had evolved, there were no clear guidelines as to how and who should manage the growing project. This was exacerbated by the fact that the steering group themselves were not a formally constituted group and relied on the community organization to act as a channel for funding. Furthermore, a process of restructuring and personnel changes was taking place within the community organization so that this lack of clarity was passed on to new staff.

Through a series of intense discussions the issue of management and control has been resolved. The steering group has established itself as a legal structure and set up a partnership with the community organization expressing mutual interest in the project. Members of the community organization have been co-opted onto the steering group.

In all three of these cases, the situations were unexpected and resolving them took a lot of time and thought to ensure that relationships were not damaged, particularly so in the latter case. In the first two situations, the terms of negotiation were fundamentally about money and control, liaising with external engineers over what is principally a community development project. Once the differences of expectation were clear a relatively straightforward decision was made by the steering group not to pursue the partnership. However, the relationship with the local community organization was much more crucial to the group as a continuing partnership was considered vital and any conflict felt to be detrimental to both.

Applying for funds

The amount of research and networking required to support the process of project planning was not anticipated at the start. It was one year's work before the group started submitting funding applications and a full eighteen months before an application for a substantial sum towards Phase I was submitted.

With respect to external support, the residents have received substantial input from specialist RE advisors, LA21 officers, local authority personnel,

and other wind farm operators, many of whom have given their time voluntarily, as part of their employment remit, or through them accessing finance by linking into advisory funding programmes.

Over the period of project design, there has been a gradual broadening of the focus in Phase I of the project. This has been essentially due to the realization of a knowledge gap surrounding the process of community decision-making and involvement in RE projects in the UK. Bearing in mind this process underpins the project, it was recognized that valuable lessons would be learnt, and replicable aspects could be extracted and disseminated to other RE developers and communities. The proposal was redrafted to integrate a 'research' element that would objectively assess the process undertaken. Redefining the project with this approach has significantly enhanced the project's capacity to attract large-scale funding from government sources.

The support offered by donors has been a mixed bag. In many respects the hoops and hurdles to overcome (even for small start-up costs) from donors whose remit is specifically to support small-scale community development have been far greater than those from donors who have an interest in environmental projects.

The group has submitted approximately twenty funding applications to a range of donors for support for Phase I. Two donors with a remit for environment-based projects have agreed to fund the project with limited funds but with equally limited paperwork required. One regional community-focused charity has eventually agreed to support the project with 'kickstart funds'. The confirmation letter arrived following a stream of further forms and documentation to fill over the course of four months, and after the deadline for which the funds had to be spent. A further donor with a remit for community assessment and participation has still (after six months) not confirmed one way or the other. Two research bodies were approached for small grant funding. One has rejected the application, the other has not responded. Approximately ten appropriate grant-making trusts were approached, none have replied positively. Full funding for Phase I has now been raised from 7 donors.⁸

A local authority community development programme refused to fund the project drawing attention to its controversial nature, and potential problem with planning (appearing to miss the point that the project will terminate after Phase I should there be substantial local opposition). Some time later, the group was contacted again by the local authority to say that they would consider an application after all, should they decide to resubmit. The process and criteria for judging applications were unclear.

In general, donors have been slow to respond. This is due to a variety of

8. Donors include: Department for Trade and Industry New and Renewable Energy Programme, Welsh Development Agency Environmental Goods and Services Programme, Princes Trust Cymru, Jigso, Shell Better Britain, Hyder, Welsh Language Board.

reasons: individuals within organizations not being supportive; the controversial nature of the wind energy has meant that many charities have had to defer the decision to higher board level; the need in some cases of further form-filling following the initial application; and the general speed at which applications are progressed is often very slow. In many respects the ease of dealing with donors whose remit is community development has been notably more difficult in terms of the speed of response and the quantity of paperwork required for limited sums. This seems unreasonable when a major part of their remit is to support groups that are usually small with very limited resources.

In particular, it is worth highlighting that in order to get access to large amounts of money, the project needed to address not only the local level situation, but a broader remit. While this has led to a redrafting of the project plans, and has increased the workload and cost of the project, it has enabled the group to maintain the fundamental aspect of community decision-making and control.

Obstacles and opportunities facing community-led initiatives

Drawing on the experiences of developing the wind farm project, it is possible to reflect on the experiences of being an 'insider' and the difficulties of retaining the control of ideas. The need for the community to interact with external organizations across many sectors and at many levels has provided some insight into the obstacles and opportunities facing community-led initiatives. There are huge constraints against residents taking an initiative and maintaining control.

How a community balances the process of raising money while maintaining control of the decision-making process determines to what extent they will have to compromise their ideas and can make or break a community-led initiative. The ideal situation of raising enough money from donors to carry out community ideas without compromise is rare. It is often the case that residents have appropriate, constructive and realistic ideas and the motivation to fulfill them, but not the total capacity to carry them out. In liaison with organizations, the type of support offered can undermine the ideas and the community's capacity to fulfill them. Supporting the premise that community development is substantially more successful if residents are supported appropriately to carry out their ideas, the paper points out the value of external support when directed at decreasing the obstacles and enhancing the opportunities faced by residents when developing a project.

Time, skills and resources

Developing a realistic and viable project acceptable to many donors as well as to the community requires a substantial amount of time, appropriate

skills and resources as well as motivation and perseverance. Time is a major constraint for many community members who may well be juggling this with other commitments.

The appropriate skills for planning a community development project are not readily available. Networking, developing and writing a proposal and budget, knowledge of social development and participatory processes, fundraising, facilitating planning meetings, etc., are specialist skills.

Logistical problems such as finding meeting places, having an address that is not linked to one group member can be difficult to organize. Linking to existing groups is a way around some of this although compromises may then have to be sought. In addition to some logistical support, the experiences and knowledge gained from such collaboration can be invaluable.

Access to information and IT

Access to information and communication channels is crucial in developing an idea. This is a potential problem for community members who do not have access to specialist libraries or internet facilities etc. Liaising with a variety of people at different levels and sectors is an important aspect of linking a local level project to a broader remit. Having a defined contact point and means of communication is essential for ensuring that information can be requested from outside organizations. Knowledge of relevant information channels and the confidence to network in the broader arena (particularly political arena) enhances the access to current thinking and opens up opportunities. Within many organizations information structures (e.g. resource centre, databases, press office, IT equipment, etc.) are established to facilitate this valuable process.

Liaison with organizations

In most cases designing a community based project requires active liaison with other organizations, whether they are local community groups, public sector agencies, companies, donors or other charities. In many cases it requires working at different levels and across different sectors. For most residents the links are not already established and it requires a lot of work to initiate and develop relationships with a variety of organizations. This is especially so when contacting organizations with different types of remits and those that are not used to dealing with community groups.

Implementing a local project is enhanced if it is linked to strong community-based organizations. A structure that can represent the community, has local credibility and access to residents can act as a valuable communication channel and support structure. It is common for development agencies to work through and with existing organizations as a means of approaching community members. Creating a new structure is a complex and difficult task. In a situation where residents initiate a project, their task

is made easier if a community-based structure is already in place and can give its support to the project. This not only gives credibility to the project locally, but also externally in terms of networking and applying for funds.

Money and funding

Initial financial requirements can be difficult to source for travel, communication, paper, photocopies, etc. Despite the relatively small amounts that this requires in terms of the overall project costs, it is unlikely that it can be recouped, and therefore may be prohibitive especially if the risk factor is high. Small start-up grants from donors are particularly appropriate for this initial phase but if it is administered in an overly bureaucratic fashion it can increase the workload substantially for limited funding.

The costs required to implement a project may well be a deterrent to many community members. Many, especially large, community development projects rely on outside funding. The power of the donor cannot be underestimated and activities must conform to funding requirements (Carroll, 1992; Rahman, 1995). Where an intermediary (NGO or developer) is involved community ideas may have to be further contorted to link into the agenda of the agency. Community-led projects have to deal with this compromise of power – unless they raise all the funding among themselves. One advantage of a community-led project is that a variety of funding sources can be approached directly, without relying on a middle person. While this does inevitably create more work for the community it gives them control of the finances.

This requires a good level of fundraising skills, including a knowledge of ‘types of fundraising’ (e.g. charities, trusts, companies, etc.) the capacity to pitch a proposal appropriately and a familiarity with the ‘system’ of fundraising (e.g. terminology, process of application, level of donor involvement, etc.). Without access to these skills residents will struggle to raise necessary finance.

A clear lesson learnt from the wind farm project was that in order to access large amounts of funding from external organizations, a level of compromise is likely to be required. However, with a clear set of criteria for success, it is possible to make compromises without undermining the principles of the project. Defining this set of criteria and principles is not always a straightforward process and can require considerable time to tease out what is fundamental to the project from what could potentially be compromised.

Furthermore, being aware of the national and international context with regards RE meant that the steering group could reframe the project in order to tap in to larger pots of money. Without the networking skills, the confidence of liaising with a broad range of organizations and the resources with which to do this, the group would not have recognized the knowledge gap and consequently been unable to apply for government money.

Earning respect and retaining the lead

There is often a lack of respect or belief by outsiders in community members' abilities by the very fact that they are not part of an organization. Dealing directly with community members as leaders is not easy for all organizations, especially ones that are not used to recognizing community knowledge and skills. There can be a tendency for a developer or organization to want to take over the management of the project, through a belief that a community cannot realistically lead. Experiences from this project are that this can be paternalistic and patronizing as well as lacking an understanding of the nature of community leadership and the basis of the project. It is vital for community members to maintain a clear vision of the project objectives, earning respect through strategic planning and informed decision-making.

In many ways residents need to work harder to prove themselves than an established organization working on a similar project. This is the case even if individuals in the external organization are relatively inexperienced, as they have the backing of an established institution. Collaborating with outside organizations may be of benefit to the project, but the negotiations regarding control and financial management can be fraught with tension and potentially result in the loss of community leadership. In the case of the wind farm project, the point of contention was that the steering group needed money to implement their ideas, while the external organizations wanted the power to control the implementation with the consequent credit and potentially further contracts. The main lesson learnt from this was the need to actively seek appropriate external support and make acceptable compromises rather than respond to inappropriate offers.

Having an identity

Linking to the point above, having an identity is crucial, and affects the way outsiders and residents view the project. Having a name, logo, contact point, email address, are all part of establishing an identity. Equally importantly in this project was the process of defining the geographical boundaries and establishing the essence of what made the project different from others.

The process of establishing a formal group is not straightforward and requires a knowledge of different types of legal structures and their associated constitutions. Applying for funds from certain organizations requires the group to formally constitute itself. Being attached to or in partnership with another existing group may get round this formality but may not be worth it in terms of associated compromises.

Maintaining confidence after set-backs

Within an externally managed project, the ability to be objective about obstacles can make them easier to manage. For residents who have invested

time and energy and their own money in an idea, the setbacks can be very disheartening, especially if the obstacles require additional finance, and substantially more time. Nevertheless, the confidence of the community in their ideas can make it easier to ride over the rough times in a community-led project.

Flexibility and opportunism

One of the key advantages of a community-led project is the possibility to be flexible and spontaneous unlike a larger agency where bureaucratic systems may slow up action. In addition the independent community group is liberated from the broader agency agenda and therefore can move with the ebb and flow of community ideas.

There is a need for communities to seize opportunities as they arise and while there is motivation in a community. The broader context has considerable impact on the nature of opportunities, for example the political climate with regards renewable energy, the push for community ownership of renewable energy systems, the planning process and funding opportunities. It can be easier for an agency to sit on an idea waiting until the time is right or the funding available before submitting a proposal.

Ability to respond to needs of the community

Community development trends in the last ten years have moved towards responding to the needs of communities through building on their strengths and capacity. Careful assessment and analysis with communities about their needs and aspirations are a key aspect. In a community-led initiative, there is a substantial amount of knowledge and first-hand experience of the long term and more recent context which provides a fuller base with which to start an analysis. Having a thorough knowledge of the community make-up is a vital step towards the goal of clarifying the needs of the various factions, groups, and isolated individuals. With decision-making at a community level, the process of analysis, planning and review can tailor the project clearly along the lines of community needs. An advantage of external facilitation is the enhanced objectivity which can reduce the chances of management cliques and too much community baggage being brought into the project.

Conclusion: giving support to community ideas

The ability of residents to retain control of their ideas is crucial in terms of empowering them. Drawing on the above issues, therefore, it is worth making some recommendations as to how an external organization may support a group of UK residents to develop their ideas:

- Support in accessing relevant information (electronic, secondary literature, local authority and government departments, consultancy firms, charities, etc.).
- Training in relevant skills (IT skills, chairing meetings, designing assessment process, fundraising, bookkeeping).
- Support in establishing a formal group (identifying appropriate legal structure, constitution, organizing finances, etc.).
- Logistical support (meeting place, access to computer, email, printer or photocopier, etc.).
- Feedback on ideas and analytic support in writing proposal and application forms; support in clarifying aims and objectives and the logic behind the project.
- Support in networking at different levels and across different sectors (identifying appropriate individuals, departments and 'sympathetic' contacts).
- Support in developing a funding strategy (identifying appropriate donors, support in pitching a proposal appropriately and advising on level of funds to request).
- Support with kick-start funds for initial costs like photocopying, childcare, telephone, etc.
- Helping to facilitate steering meetings, focus groups, public meetings, etc.
- Support in assessing and analyzing community needs.
- Maintaining confidence and motivation through moral support, constructive criticism and practical assistance.
- Allowing the use of charity number, bank account, name, etc., to give legitimacy to project.
- Support in lobbying key local actors (Local Authority, MPs, agencies like the TEC, etc.).

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