ELSEVIER

Energy Policy 36 (2008) 497–500

ENERGY POLICY

www.elsevier.com/locate/enpol

Viewpoint

Community renewable energy: What should it mean?

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Received 24 October 2007; accepted 25 October 2007
Available online 28 November 2007

Abstract

Community is a much used word that is readily attached to projects, initiatives and policies as part of the discursive politics of modern governance. In this viewpoint, we consider the way in which community has become attached to renewable energy projects in the UK, both in grassroot action and in mainstream energy policy. We ask what those involved have seen as distinctive about community renewable energy projects that makes them different from other renewable energy installations. We identify a diversity of understandings and interpretations that revolve around questions of both process (who the project is by) and outcome (who the project is for). We evaluate the implications of this diversity, identifying the importance of the process of project development for realising the catalytic and learning effects of meaningful and substantial local involvement.

Keywords: Community; Renewable energy; UK policy

1. Introduction

In the UK, the term 'community renewables' has recently become part of mainstream energy policy, with funding and support schemes, such as the Community Renewables Initiative, helping a wide diversity of local projects to get off the ground (Walker et al., 2007). Since the term echoes the advocacy of 1970s alternative technology activists who argued for local, small-scale and collective approaches to sustainable energy generation (Smith, 2005), its recent emergence may suggest a significant change in UK energy policy away from focusing only on the large-scale, centralised technical systems devised to generate and supply energy in the mid to late 20th century (Devine-Wright, 2007). However, the conjoin of the two words 'community' and 'renewables' and their appearance in mainstream policy discourse begs a key question. What is it that is distinctive about community projects and technology installations that make them different from other renewable energy projects? What *should* the term community renewables mean and include?

We have examined the policy and practice of community renewables in the UK in a research project conducted between 2004 and 2006 involving three elements: (i) the construction of a database of projects tagged as being 'community' in character; (ii) interviews with policy makers and managers of programmes supporting the setting up of community projects; and (iii) case studies of six projects, involving wind, solar, biomass and heat pump technologies, in which lead participants and local people were interviewed and surveyed (see www.lancaster.ac.uk/geography/cei for details). Across all of this research activity, exactly what community renewables does and should mean was a recurrent theme of discussion and analysis—and one that continually proved difficult to pin down. When we undertook the research, a total of 12 governmental, non-governmental and industry-led initiatives had the term 'community' in their title or objectives, but our interview analysis showed that representatives of these initiatives interpreted this word in quite different ways. Some interpretations were legally driven such that community projects were simply defined as ones led by organisations with a charitable status and without commercial interests. Some had a physical rationale so that community projects were ones that involved public buildings used by members of the

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doi:10.1016/j.enpol.2007.10.019

community. Others stressed the importance of local people being involved in project development or having a direct financial stake in a project through cooperative share issues. One interviewee referred to '*making it up as we went along*' rather than trying to define what community meant in advance.

2. Process and outcome dimensions

It is maybe not surprising that we should find a panoply of different interpretations. The word community has a long history of evolving and fluid meaning and has been used for numerous ideological and rhetorical ends (Delanty, 2003). However, emerging from all the materials that we collected in the project, we have identified two key dimensions that underlie the views of policy makers, administrators, activists, project participants and local residents. First, a *process* dimension, concerned with who a project is developed and run *by*, who is involved and has influence. Second, an *outcome* dimension concerned with how the outcomes of a project are spatially and socially distributed—in other words, who the project is *for*; who it is that benefits particularly in economic or social terms. These are dimensions clearly not of the technology itself, but of the particular social arrangements through which a given technology, irrespective of its scale or cost, is being implemented and made useful (Walker and Cass, 2007).

These two dimensions are put together in Fig. 1 to form an indicative abstract space in which different combinations of 'process' and 'outcome', as exemplified in particular projects, can be positioned and represented. To show how this works, we would position a conventional utility-developed wind farm at the bottom left of this diagram—a project that has minimal direct involvement of local people and is developed by a distant and closed institution, that generates energy for the grid rather than for use in the locality and that produces economic returns for distant shareholders rather than local people. Here neither process nor outcome is locally focused. At the very top right, we would position an 'ideal' community project, one which is entirely driven and carried through by a group of local people and which brings collective benefits to the local community (however that might be defined)—a project that is both by and for local people. One of our case studies in the North of England provided such an example—a village hall refurbishment involving the installation of a ground source heat pump and small wind turbine, organised entirely by the village hall committee, installed to a large part by local people and with an end result of a collective resource at the centre of village life—an attractive, warm, cheap to heat community hall.

We have superimposed over the axes in Fig. 1 three interpretations of the term 'community renewables' derived from interviews with different actors, each denoting a view of the space that renewable energy projects need to be positioned in order to be legitimately classed as 'community' in character. The first viewpoint (A) focuses on the process dimension and sees community projects as necessarily needing a high degree of involvement of local people in the planning, setting up and, potentially, the running of the project. Some of our interviewees, particularly those from alternative technology and community development backgrounds, took such a view, being strongly driven by normative principles of empowerment, participation and capacity building.

The second viewpoint (B) focuses on outcome and is less concerned with who is participating in the project than with where the benefits of it are distributed. This

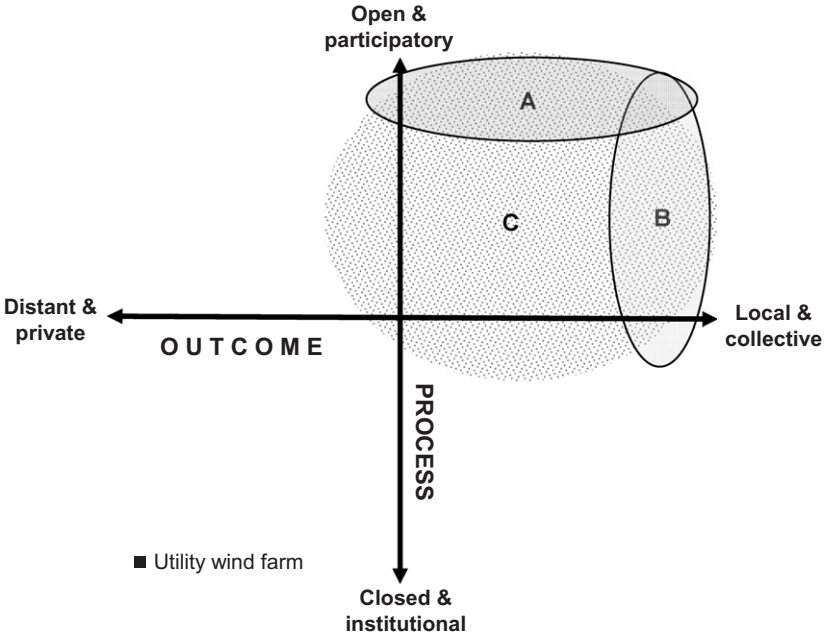

Fig. 1. Understanding of community renewable energy in relation to project process and outcome dimensions.

perspective was adopted by interviewees who were happy to see projects essentially conceived, set up and managed by local institutions—local authorities, parish councils, national park authorities and the like—as long as they particularly benefited the local community including providing jobs, contributing to local regeneration or providing an educational resource (in addition to the wider global benefits they contributed through carbon reduction).

The third viewpoint (C) is a more expansive space, open to many different forms of project being given a community label. Here people tended to be less concerned with whether or not a proposed project ticked the right 'community' boxes, but that it was actually going ahead and would lead to something productive and useful happening. Many different possible combinations of process and outcome are therefore deemed acceptable.

3. Diversity and flexibility: good or bad?

This two-dimensional framework necessarily simplifies the complexities to be found when considering the diverse forms that 'process' and 'outcome' can take in different projects. It is however a useful way of representing the core issues that are at stake, as well as the diversity of meanings of community renewables that we identified through our research. This diversity explains why the meaning of community renewables has become, at times, an object of contestation. For example, in one of our case studies, there was clear disagreement between those leading a small wind farm project and a group of protestors as to whether or not the particular scheme proposed should be called a 'community' wind farm. Protestors argued that since most of the benefits were flowing to three local farmers rather than to the community as a whole, it was not legitimate to describe the project as a community wind farm (Walker et al., 2008). It also begs the question of whether or not diversity in the meaning of community renewables is a good thing. Are there benefits in flexibility and openness to a wide range of perspectives and combinations of process and outcome (space C), or should a more particular vision of community renewables be pursued (e.g. space A or B)?

Our own assessment is a little mixed. On the one hand, the flexibility of the community renewables 'space' in the UK has, to date, been pragmatically and strategically of value. It has enabled experimentation with many different models of project development; it has enabled projects to be formed in ways that are appropriate to particular local circumstances and contexts; it has enabled a flourishing of grassroot activity without restricting this to a particular top-down notion of what a community project *had* to look like. For example, our case studies reflected a diversity of heterogeneous development models including social enterprises, public sector partnerships and locally owned cooperatives, as suited each particular case.

On the other hand, during the research we became concerned that there is something significant and important about a community approach to renewable energy that is lost when projects are labelled community yet end up being positioned towards the middle of our process/outcome diagram rather than more firmly in the top right quadrant. These concerns relate to both outcome and process dimensions. In terms of outcome, our research suggests that renewable energy projects can become more locally divisive and controversial if benefits are not generally shared among local people. Considerations of equity and the distribution of costs and benefits have been shown to be important in local debates about many development proposals (Lesbirel and Shaw, 2005; Wolsink, 2007) and in this respect community projects are no different—indeed labelling a project as community and then local people feeling they are getting nothing out of it will itself simply increase the scope for resentment and objection. We therefore support recent government guidance on the distribution of benefits to communities from wind energy developments (Centre for Sustainable Energy (CSE) et al., 2007), and would argue that this distribution is particularly important for developments described as community based.

In terms of process, our surveying of local residents suggested that more direct and substantial involvement of local people in a project also contributes to greater project acceptance and support, and there was evidence that this involvement could have a positive impact on local peoples' understanding of and support for renewable energy more generally (leading for example to their own installation of microgeneration technology in the home) (Devine-Wright et al., 2007). This is particularly important, as part of the justification for public investment in grassroot community projects is that, above and beyond their impact in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, such projects will work on the 'hearts and minds' of local people and have wider catalytic effects in promoting positive beliefs and actions about renewable energy. This does not necessarily mean that all people involved in or connected to a community project will be converted to liking all renewable energy projects at all scales—for example, it is quite defendable to be in favour of community and household microgeneration, yet to be against large-scale utility-owned wind farms (a more bounded support for RETs noted well by Bell et al., 2005)—but the research does suggest that when projects are characterised by substantial levels of local involvement, a process of recognition of the positive value of renewable energy is at least supported or set in train.

More cases need to be examined to substantiate this evidence more thoroughly, but if verified the implication for policy and practice is clear: that there is value, above and beyond the immediate impacts of a community project, if the catalytic and learning effects of meaningful and substantial local involvement can be harnessed. Therefore, support measures provided by government and other actors should help projects move towards the top of our process-outcome diagram and support them in so-doing. While guidance to local authorities, developers

and community groups advocating the distribution of community benefits is a step in the right direction (e.g. CSE et al., 2007), this addresses only one dimension of the meaning of community, serving to promote a narrower, outcome-based rather than process-based understanding of community renewables.

In this respect, it is a retrograde step for funding to have been recently withdrawn from the Community Renewables Initiative (CRI). This programme, set up in 2001 by the Countryside Agency, had its roots in rural development approaches that emphasised devolved processes and local empowerment. The CRI funded 10 local support teams (LSTs) operating in areas covering 70% of England with the remit to provide an expert advice and support service to communities wishing to develop local renewable energy projects. By 2006 this service was dealing with over 2000 enquiries per year and had successfully delivered over 160 installations with 100 more in development (Community Renewables Initiative, 2006). Evaluation data also showed that in the areas where the LSTs were operating, applications to a government capital funding programme, Clear Skies, were over double the rate of those in areas where there were no LSTs. Particularly significantly is the fact that these higher rates of application were observed for both community *and* household streams of capital funding, suggesting that activity in the community sector was stimulating activity in the household sector, supporting our own case study findings.

Even though some of the LSTs have been able to find other funding sources to keep their work going, and various central government capital funding programmes do remain in place, removing the core funding of the CRI and its existence as a coordinated programme across England displays the fragility of actual, rather than rhetorical, policy commitments to alternative, less centralised models of energy technology utilisation. As well as flying in the face of public enthusiasm and demand for advice and support, it suggests a preference for a more constricted understanding of community renewables that is less focused upon process, to the detriment of the learning and catalytic effects described above. In Scotland, in contrast, an integrated advice and funding service has been maintained—the Scottish Community and Household Renewables Initiative (SCHRI) and associated Scottish Community Renewables Network (see http://www.energysavingtrust.org.uk/schri/). With SCHRI funding recently increased by 60%, here, at least, a more concerted commitment to the deeper meaning of community in 'community renewables' can be found, providing the locally based advice and support that is crucial for projects to be successfully developed by, as well as for, local people. As is increasingly the case, Scotland provides an example that the rest of the UK could do well to follow.

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