Big society, little justice? Community renewable energy and the politics of localism

Philip Catney [a] , Sherilyn MacGregor [a] , Andrew Dobson [a] , Sarah
Marie Hall [b] , Sarah Royston [c] , Zoe Robinson [d] , Mark Ormerod [d] &
Simon Ross [e]

[a] Research Institute for Social Sciences , Keele University , Keele ,
UK

[b] School of Environment and Development , The University of
Manchester , Manchester , UK

[c] Association for the Conservation of Energy , London , UK

[d] Research Institute for the Environment, Physical Sciences and
Applied Mathematics , Keele University , Keele , UK

[e] Marches Energy Agency , Shrewsbury , UK
Published online: 17 May 2013.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Big society, little justice? Community renewable energy and the politics of localism

Philip Catney[a], Sherilyn MacGregor[a], Andrew Dobson[a]*, Sarah Marie Hall[b],
Sarah Royston[c], Zoe Robinson[d], Mark Ormerod[d] and Simon Ross[e]

[a]*Research Institute for Social Sciences, Keele University, Keele, UK;* [b]*School of Environment and
Development, The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK;* [c]*Association for the Conservation
of Energy, London, UK;* [d]*Research Institute for the Environment, Physical Sciences and Applied
Mathematics, Keele University, Keele, UK;* [e]*Marches Energy Agency, Shrewsbury, UK*

This paper challenges "Big Society (BS) Localism", seeing it as an example of
impoverished localist thinking which neglects social justice considerations. We do
this through a critical examination of recent turns in the localist discourse in the UK
which emphasise self-reliant communities and envisage a diminished role for the
state. We establish a heuristic distinction between positive and negative approaches to
localism. We argue that the Coalition Government's BS programme fits with a
negative localist frame as it starts from an ideological assumption that the state acts
as a barrier to community-level associational activity and that it should play a
minimal role. "BS localism" (as we call it) has been influential over the making of
social policy, but it also has implications for the achievement of environmental goals.
We argue that this latest incarnation of localism is largely ineffective in solving
problems requiring collective action because it neglects the important role that
inequalities play in inhibiting the development of associational society. Drawing upon
preliminary research being undertaken at the community scale, we argue that staking
environmental policy success on the ability of local civil society to fill the gap left
after state retrenchment runs the risk of no activity at all.

Introduction

> You can call it liberalism. You can call it empowerment. You can call it freedom. You can call it
> responsibility. I call it the Big Society. (David Cameron 2010)

A broad sweep of the ideological spectrum now advocates localism as a primary vehicle
for, and even a goal of, new forms of social, political and economic organisation. Govern-
ments of different political complexions laud the virtues of the "community" and "doing
things locally". Similarly, environmental non-governmental organisations have long advo-
cated community self-reliance and decentralising all aspects of social life to the lowest poss-
ible scale. Yet, there is no monist "localism" and it has proven to be an exceptionally
protean entity, extremely elastic in its application so that anarchists, social democrats,
neo-liberals and environmentalists alike can subscribe to it as a focus for new forms of
social organisation. However, while there has been a return to the local scale for enhanced
policy effectiveness, sustainability and re-legitimisation of the political process, this shift
has not been accompanied by a concordant consideration of matters pertaining to justice.

---

*Corresponding author. Email: a.n.h.dobson@keele.ac.uk

The latest high-profile localist turn comes in the form of the UK Coalition Government's "Big Society" (BS) project.

In this paper, we challenge what we call "BS localism", arguing that while it employs the language of "empowerment" and "freedom" it neglects social justice considerations. With a reduced role for the state, BS localism seeks to employ market-based instruments and competitive funding schemes to promote community renewable energy and fuel poverty reduction initiatives. We contend that there is too often little consideration given to the issues of distributional justice and limited recognition of groups and communities that are poorly positioned to take advantage of localist approaches which are predicated on "reactive" sources of funding. We argue BS localism falls into an analytical and normative/ethical "local trap" where initiatives are considered socially just merely because they are local. Although there seems to be broad agreement from left and right over the potential for greater community control over energy production and governance, we claim that there is an apparent unwillingness to face the difficult questions of resource redistribution, social capital/community capacity and justice to prevent "localist wastelands". If one believes that there can be no sustainability without social justice, then this is a worrying situation. Our purpose here is not to dismiss all forms of localism per se but to note the all- too-frequent absence of social justice concerns within many of its formulations, and in particular in the recent localist turn in energy policy.

The discussion is organised in four parts. In the first, we present an overview of localist thinking in UK politics. We identify a number of key drivers of "community" and "locality" as an increasingly favoured scale of policy intervention. However, we note that while "localism" is a term employed by a wide range of political as well as activist groups, there are important differences we identify – between a *positive* and *negative* localism – which can distinguish how localism is incorporated into broader ideological and policy rationalities. We then examine BS localism as the latest turn in localist thinking. The second part of the paper examines the (relatively late) focus on community in UK energy policy – which began in the last years of Labour government with moves to experiment at the community scale, supplementing policy initiatives targeted at the most deprived areas. We then go to argue that social justice concerns have been notably absent in the Coalition Government's recent environment and energy-related policies. In the third section of the paper, we illustrate our arguments with preliminary observations from a research project working in a disadvantaged area in England which suggests that BS localism's emphasis on self-activated communities may potentially reinforce rather than redress socio-economic injustice. We conclude the paper with a discussion of how BS localism and other forms of localist-based political strategy have fallen into a "local trap" before discussing what shape a "positive localist" vision for energy policy could take.

The "localist turn" in UK policy and politics

The current popularity of localist approaches to renewable energy can be seen as part of a long tradition of localism which has many different varieties and incarnations. We know localism is a malleable concept when, for example, radical localism is currently being embraced by both the Tea Party and the Occupy movement in the USA. In the UK, both the former Labour and current Coalition governments claimed that decentralising power to local government, local communities and voluntary and community actors is at the heart of their policy agendas, with the former promising a "New Localism" and the latter a "BS". Both talk about mutualisation, the importance of cooperation and the need to build social capital/trust.

Two broad visions of community that can be distinguished for analytical purposes. The first sees the turn to the community as largely a *response* to large-scale changes in the nature of state-social relations arising from the rise of post-materialist values and the legacy of neo-liberal policy settlements. In this regard, community is seen as an essential riposte to a globalised economy, state retrenchment, and the rise of "critical citizens" (Giddens 1998). It is claimed as a progressive response to state and market failure and a wider delegitimisation of representative politics, arguing that "communities" are better placed to serve their own needs and make informed choices which are situated in the "grounded" experiences of their lives. But it also has the potential to contribute to building social capital and forging "virtuous circles" of trust and reciprocity which have wider societal benefits. In this regard, community is a focus of political discourse in part for normative reasons, but also for instrumental concerns. This is essentially a vision of "positive localism". Here, the state plays a key role in facilitating the development of a vibrant civil society but this is supplemented with recognition of the uneven capacities of groups and power geometries across society – across lines of class, gender and race (Massey 2004). Furthermore, it recognises the complex mutual obligations that exist across different groups and places and accepts the need for redistribution – or at a minimum, active targeted helped – to secure social justice (Amin *et al*. 2003, Massey 2004).

The second vision of localism locates the growing popularity of community as a *strategic* component within new forms of neo-liberalism. Regulation theorists such as Peck and Tickell (2002) see the turn to the community as part of a new phase of neo-liberalism that draws upon selective notions of "community" as a means of managing the tensions created by the previous phases of "roll-back" neo-liberalism, and in order to enable new regimes of capital accumulation to commence. This new phase – which they refer to as "roll-out" neo-liberalism – sees government operating a technocratic form of economic management alongside more interventionist governmental strategies for managing populations through a range of depoliticised "institutional hardware" (Peck and Tickell 2002, p. 389). Community groups and other non-governmental forms are only selectively empowered as flexible, low cost service providers that buttress neo-liberalising strategies (Peck 2010). The turn to the community is considered by Foucauldians such as Rose (1999, 2000) as part of broader "disciplining" strategies, directed at mobilising populations in particularly sanctioned ways. Community here is about devising new techniques of social control. These are visions of *negative localism*. Here, the discourse of "freeing communities" is used without any – or at least highly limited – understanding of differences across society. Places (and individuals) are imagined as islands, with the emphasis on the positive virtues of competition and self-sufficiency. As will be discussed below, BS localism offers little analysis of the structural impediments which affect particular social groups and communities and how particular flows and connections lock certain groups out of, for example, community renewable energy schemes. As Taylor (2011, p. 3) and De Phillippis *et al*. (2010) have warned, the frequent and indiscriminate use of the term "community" alongside a failure to grapple with the realities of power differentials may lead to it being discredited as nothing more than a "spray-on" to cover the fault lines of economic decline and social fragmentation or to consolidate neo-liberal political economy.

We use these two contrasting visions of localism as a heuristic for exploring the greater focus on "community" as a form of governance in UK[1] energy policy.

BS (negative) localism: community self-reliance in the face of austerity

Despite being something of a neologism, BS localism needs to be seen as the latest stage in a 30 or more year historical movement which has seen successive UK governments moving

away from a social welfare state towards a hollowed-out state with an increasingly "disciplined" and "responsibilised" citizenry (Amin 2005). The term was floated during Cameron's "modernisation" of the Conservative Party in opposition. In a lecture in 2009, Cameron outlined the key principles of BS localism as:

> The first step must be a new focus on empowering and enabling individuals, families and communities to take control of their lives so we create the avenues through which responsibility and opportunity can develop.[. . .] But I also want to argue that the re-imagined state should not stop at creating opportunities for people to take control of their lives. It must actively help people take advantage of this new freedom. This means a new role for the state: actively helping to create the big society; directly agitating for, catalysing and galvanising social renewal. (Cameron 2009)

For Gamble (2011, p. 175), the themes of BS localism are a restatement of Conservative values of bolstering the institutions of civil society against the state. In this respect, it shares some affinities with Thatcherite ideology but it also fused with communitarian and civil libertarian strands of thought (Gamble 2011, p. 176; see also Ellison 2011). Perhaps due its complex roots and its protean nature, it has been criticised by many – including members of Cameron's own party – for its abstract and intangible form. Norman (2010) and Blond (2010) (through his think tank ResPublica) have sought to elaborate the ideas underpinning the project. As will be discussed below, while BS localists seek to appropriate the discourse of "empowerment", "democratic renewal" and even "social justice", these ambitions must take place in the context of a significantly reduced role for the state with charitable giving and time for volunteering proposed in its place. This ideology was evident in Cameron's first speech on BS localism after the 2010 General Election:

> The Big Society is about a huge culture change. . .where people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplace. . .don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face. . .but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities. (Cameron 2010)

While the intellectual roots of the turn to civil society inside the Cameronian project are diverse, the "ideal" community that emerges from governmental policy is one that is increasingly self-reliant (or resilient), "responsible" and enterprising. Again, this resonates with Conservative values of the acceptance – even defence – of inequality as an intrinsic part of social relations (Hickson 2009, Dorey 2010). From moderate Conservatives such as David Willetts and Oliver Letwin, a form of "civic conservatism" has developed over the past decade which asserts the importance of associational action (Meredith and Catney 2007, p. 367, Hickson 2009, p. 358). However, much of governmental rhetoric and policy frames inequality as either arising from deficiencies within sections of society (framed either through "problem families" or a lack of entrepreneurial spirit) and/or the consequences of state intervention. Such pathologies are evident in the 2012 *Social Justice: Transforming Lives* document produced by the Department of Work and Pensions (HM Government 2012) where the term "community" is peppered throughout yet the term "inequality" is used only once. Instead of addressing broader market failures, the policy focus is fixed on how third sector organisations, individuals and communities can address complex problems with minimal state support.

While there appears to be some awareness on the part of BS localists to agitate, catalyse and galvanise social action, they have often failed to acknowledge that such policy prescriptions may be ill suited for promoting renewable energy schemes and ensuring distributional justice. A weak recognition of the different capacities spread across society combined with

an austerity mind-set manifests in policy frameworks which are based on competition for governmental funding or other forms of public support which require a high degree of self-coordination and/or financial capital to start-up projects. As Ellison (2011, p. 55) observes, there is a significant risk that without recognising the significant differences in capabilities distributed across society there will emerge a "bifurcated BS". This limited recognition of the uneven capacities and complex nature of "community" translates into policy frameworks which are largely untargeted and based on a "reactive" approach. As we shall see below, BS energy policy is largely untargeted and demonstrates limited recognition of the distributional aspects of social justice.

Energy policy in the UK: From "big six" to "BS"?

Since the privatisation of the UK energy sector in 1990, the energy market in the UK has been dominated by the "Big Six" energy companies with the state playing a limited role in regulating the market (Mitchell 2008). Reforms aimed at promoting sustainable development through the promotion of renewables have been sought primarily through market-based policy instruments and other regulatory mechanisms, for example, by offering incentives and implementing directives designed to push large-scale private investment in renewable energy developments (Bergman and Eyre 2011). While concerns over sustainable development and climate change hardened in the decade following privatisation, politicians were unwilling to face the "unpalatable reality that the costs would be great, and prices would have to rise" (Helm 2004, p. 370). UK energy policy on renewable energy was focused on the cultivation of large-scale commercially led developments, rather than what were considered "niche" community renewable schemes (Rogers *et al.* 2012). But the past decade has seen the emergence of a multiplicity of decentralised renewable energy hardware across various sites and scales, and in different forms, from macro, (large windfarms), meso- (community-orientated schemes) to micro-level (individual household) schemes (Walker and Cass 2007, Devine-Wright and Wiersma 2013). Our concern in this paper is principally with meso- but also covers micro-level schemes.

New labour's energy localism

Community renewable energy schemes have long been advocated by environmentalists and have been experimented with by activists but until comparatively recently were ignored by policy-makers. While (new) labour showed considerable interest in incorporating "the community" into policy development/delivery across a number of policy areas (Bache and Catney 2008), it was only during the early 2000s that the potential role of "the community" in renewable energy generation was incorporated into UK energy policy discourse. As Walker *et al.* (2007, p. 69–70) identified, several schemes were devised for meso-level schemes. These included initiatives such as Community Action for Energy in 2001, which sought to utilise pre-existing community networks to community capacity and networking. This was followed in 2002 by the Countryside Agency's Community Renewables Initiative, which provided funding for 10 local support teams to offer expert advice to rural communities wishing to develop a community renewable energy project (Walker and Devine-Wright 2008, p. 500). This evolution in UK policy was reflected in the scattered use of "local" and "community" throughout the 2003 Energy White Paper, the first articulation of the importance of the local level in national energy policy (Walker *et al.* 2010, p. 2656). This was followed by the Climate Change and Sustainable Energy Act of 2006 which introduced a duty on the Secretary of State to promote community energy projects,

as part of a range of measures to encourage microgeneration. (Walker 2008a, p. 4403) The 2007 White Paper echoed similar sentiments as the 2003 White Paper about the importance of community. Both of these White Papers set out a series of initiatives designed to support community renewable schemes, such as capital funding grants and regionally based support teams which were tasked with giving advice to local communities on renewable energy schemes (Walker *et al.* 2010).

Rapid increases in energy prices and growing concerns over fuel poverty in 2008 gave greater impetus to experimenting with more targeted area-based initiatives in deprived communities, such as the Community Energy Saving Programme (CESP) and the Carbon Emissions Reduction Target (CERT). The aim of CESP was to reduce the energy bills of low-income households through an obligation on energy suppliers to improve the energy efficiency of households in low-income areas. This was to be achieved, *inter alia*, through requiring energy companies to form and utilise "existing, local and community partnerships to drive delivery of energy efficiency measures" (DECC 2011a, p. 4, 27). While the CESP programme talked about "community" engagement in low-income areas, the reality was that:

> ... local authorities and [housing associations] were generally the key partnership organisations for energy companies. The key driver for energy companies working with [housing associations] and local authorities was their role as social landlords. (DECC 2011a, p. 10)

CERT placed an obligation on energy companies to promote carbon emissions reductions in households, which came into effect on 1 April 2008 until December 2012. In order to meet this target, energy companies were expected to promote the uptake of low carbon energy technologies to household energy consumers, such as microgeneration. Within CERT, there was a focus on "vulnerable consumers" with energy companies being required to direct at least 40% of carbon savings to a priority group of low-income and elderly consumers (DECC 2009a).

Interest in the potential for community-level activity was reinforced by the results of the Department of Energy and Climate Change's "Big Energy Shift" public dialogue in 2009. This was a significant process in that fostered a dialogue between policy-makers and the public and developed the understanding of each about the importance of community-level collective action as well as government-led action (Rathouse and Devine-Wright 2010, p. 37, 42). The findings from these citizens' forums suggested that there was "huge potential for people to change their energy behaviour" (Ipsos-Mori 2009, p. 15) and that despite people's good intentions, there were a number of impediments to households and communities reducing their home energy consumption. It recommended that a joined-up package of locally delivered support be developed to help communities reduce their carbon emissions. These recommendations led to the development of several important initiatives, such as the Low Carbon Communities Challenge which provided funding and advisory support for 22 area-based schemes (DECC 2009b). In terms of supporting an increase in community energy projects, the introduction of the feed-in tariff scheme in the last months of the Labour government was an important step. It was particularly significant for our discussion here in that it encouraged local authorities and housing associations to develop energy schemes for low-income communities (HoC 2011), although, as will be discussed below, the reduction in the tariff rate by the Coalition government threatens to slow the pace of community energy projects for socially deprived groups.[2]

BS energy localism

When the "BS" was launched officially in government in July 2010, the UK Prime Minister David Cameron made only two short, and somewhat ambiguous, references to giving communities powers to "generate their own energy" (Cameron 2010). The discourse of "community energy" and "energy localism" within the BS agenda emphasises taking control away from both the Big Six energy companies and central government, and placing it into the hands of local people. Here, there is a stated preference for collective control and management. The aim is to turn passive consumers making choices individually into active producers and managers of energy within communities.

Similar themes are developed in a vision articulated by ResPublica – a think tank closely linked to the Cameronian project – in its "green paper", *Re-energising our Communities* (Julian and Dobson 2012). The authors suggest that the benefits of micro- and meso-level renewable schemes are not just the environmental and social effects they stimulate but also that they could create micro-economies which are "transformative on a much broader level, achieving incremental economic change to the entire supply and demand process" (Julian and Dobson 2012,p. 2). But such transformative change, they argue, can only be achieved if community schemes are undergirded by "self-supporting trust networks" between communities and other "partners" and the formation of "local trust economies" (Julian and Dobson 2012, p. 2) – largely formed through models of community ownership or partnerships with energy companies. They argue that it is a lack of choice in energy generation that cultivates a "learned helplessness" and that given the opportunity, "communities and neighbourhoods will always be best placed to discern local need, identify shared value and assess what resources are at hand". (Julian and Dobson 2012, p.: 5)

The "green paper" celebrates success stories associated with community renewable energy schemes but, like many analyses of such initiatives, fails to pause to consider the factors which explain why schemes do not take place. Little direct attention is paid to the difficulties of stimulating activity where "self-supporting trust networks" do not already exist. They do note, however, that:

> Difficulties with finance, skills and resources will greatly differ for different communities – particularly for disadvantaged and underdeveloped areas – and the impact of changes to legislation will come to affect some communities far more than others. (Julian and Dobson 2012, p. 11)

They are clear on the need for a supportive and integrated policy agenda at the centre and a more proactive role for local authorities in stimulating community projects in low-income areas (presumably where trust networks do not exist). In addition to these suggestions, they propose the creation of an energy industry-driven body to build coalitions with communities to develop energy projects, particularly in "disadvantaged communities who are without access to assets" (Julian and Dobson 2012, p. 11). In short, where low-income communities have been failed by the energy market and lack resources necessary to have the options open to wealthier and more professional communities, the market should play a role in addressing these failures. In this sense, ResPublica's proposal resonates with a more *positive localist* vision than that which has been articulated to date by the Coalition: it empowers communities, fosters social capital, creates jobs, regenerates economies and reduces carbon emissions. It was warmly received by environmental groups, such as Friends of the Earth (Friends of Earth 2012).

Yet, returning to the policy of the Coalition government, while the 2011 Electricity White Paper (DECC 2011b, p. 94) stated the government's support for more "[c]ooperative

fund structures and not-for-profit business models", there were few concrete policy proposals – and few clear commitments on how this would be delivered (Friends of the Earth 2011). The proposal in late 2011 to reduce by more than half the rate of the feed-in tariff for newly installed solar generators appeared to contradict this commitment to challenging the "Big Six" energy companies and fuel poverty. The key reason cited for this change was that between April 2010 (when the feed-in tariff began) and November 2011, the cost of installing solar photovoltaic (PV) technology fell by average of 30% and more than 100,000 solar generators were installed (Ares *et al*. 2012, p. 9). The changes to the tariff system were announced in part to contain the costs of the scheme and to prevent "windfall" profits (DECC 2011c, p. 20, Mawhood 2012). Of particular relevance for our discussion here, the government's initial proposals were to reduce the rate for owners of "multiple installations" to 80% of that of an individual project. Friends of the Earth (2011) stated that the reforms to the tariffs would have the effect of making many social housing and community projects unviable and restrict developments.

The impact of these changes on low income and disadvantaged communities led the House of Commons Energy and Climate Change and Environmental Audit Committee to argue that the government was giving "insufficient weight" to the social justice aspects of sustainable development as the "lower aggregator" tariff would reduce the viability of schemes such as "rent a roof" – whereby residents can rent their roof-space to an energy provider and receive the benefits of solar generation without the prohibitive up-front costs of financing – and that "likely adverse impact of the proposals on community schemes will disproportionately be felt by disadvantaged and poorer communities" (HoC 2011, para 46). It argued that a "community tariff" should be introduced to encourage the development of renewable energy schemes by social landlords, local authorities and community groups.

In April 2012, the Coalition Government launched what it saw as a cornerstone policy for stimulating associational activity: "BS Capital" (BSC). This is a £600 million "social investment wholesaler", which seeks to provide funding for charitable, social enterprise and "community" projects which make a financial and social return. It is not a charitable vehicle – like any lending firm it expects profits to be made and loans to be repaid. The development of a "social investment wholesaler" is not a new idea of the Coalition; the idea was first floated in the UK in 2000 by the Labour government's Social Investment Taskforce (Big Society Capital 2012, p. 6).

At one level, this is a welcome policy development in that it will offer a potential line of credit for community schemes in disadvantaged areas. One of the first projects announced under this scheme was the "Community Generation Fund", which is run by a business services company and funds projects on a reactive basis. The underlying assumption of BSC scheme (and BS localism generally) is that associational groups are "out there" and the only thing barring their growth is limited access to investment. Communities that fail to become "active" or poor at developing bids for funding will be unlikely to receive funding with more profession, higher income communities better equipped for such schemes. BSC's "vision" document (2012) gives extensive coverage to "deprived" groups and communities but it offers few indications of how it will solicit collective action from the "hard to reach". No schemes to directly support or cultivate community-bids are proposed.

It is tempting to point out that while the government is pump-priming these social investment vehicles, it is reducing by a significantly greater amount – up to £3.3 billion by 2015/2016 – the grants given by the state to charitable organisations (NCVO 2012). But BSC does, at least in theory, have the potential to nurture the kinds of "niche" community energy organisations that have identified in much of the "transitions" literature in the

field of energy and sustainability (Geels and Schot 2007, Walker *et al.* 2007), though the relatively modest scale of the funding involved (when compared with the financial resources of the Big Six) gives grounds for believing that this will not fundamentally challenge the structure of the established energy market in the short-term.

The second major policy development is the "Green Deal", which was announced as part of the 2010 Spending Review. The Green Deal is essentially a financing mechanism which enables private companies (from their own capital) to offer consumers energy efficiency improvements for their "homes, community spaces and businesses" with no upfront cost to the household[3] (DECC 2010, p. 5). The private firm's investment (with interest) would be recouped from future energy bill payments. DECC stress a "golden rule" to the scheme: estimated savings on bills should always equal or exceed the cost of work. But the government does recognise that low income and vulnerable households may not benefit from money savings since they often do not heat their homes sufficiently (DECC 2010, p. 6). In order to help these groups, the government has stated that a new £1.3 billion-a-year Energy Company Obligation will be introduced so that energy companies will be required to focus attention on how low income and vulnerable groups (defined by receipt of certain welfare benefits) these can affordably heat their homes. However, as Goodall (2012) and Monbiot (2012) observe, of this money, only 25% (£375 million) will be spent on addressing fuel poverty, and the overall amount significantly lower than the money levied under Labour's CERTs programme (£2.4 billion). The replacement of CERTs and CESPs at the end of 2012 with a scheme that will target even less money on deprived households and communities is certainly cause for concern. More generally, Monbiot (2012) has argued that reductions in the funding available for home insulation, linked to the promotion of market-based policies such as the feed-in tariff and the Green Deal, is highly "regressive" and is effectively redistributing money from the poor to the wealthy.

In short, BS localism neglects targeted, area-based initiatives and instead promotes market-type processes as a means of facilitating the development of renewable energy schemes and reducing fuel poverty. Until the launch of the BSC scheme, little clear policy attention was paid to the community scale in energy policy by the Coalition (despite much of the rhetoric). Even after this, the level of resources dedicated to energy projects is likely to be very low indeed compared to what was previously in place. Changes to the feed-in tariff have threatened the viability of a number of social landlord schemes for renewable energy. Until the Green Deal and BSC are fully implemented it is hard to see beyond the existing cuts that have been made. Furthermore, the "response mode" approach to funding will potentially benefit well-organised and professional groups, doing little for those with more limited capacities for proactive engagement in such schemes. Certainly, commentators such as North (2011, p. 824) have raised concerns over the potential of communities with greater wealth and strong social capital networks dominating the funding race for resources while poorer communities (in terms of wealth and social capital) suffer from "further processes of residualisation".

While ResPublica is clear that local authorities should play a more proactive role supporting the development of local energy infrastructure, this does not align with the policies of the Coalition which is squeesing local authority budgets with reductions in central government revenue support grants. It has also scrapped national performance indicators, which pushed less environmentally focused local authorities into action (Fudge *et al.* 2011). BS energy localism is being embraced at the same time as swingeing cuts to public services, local government and wider civil society, which will leave the most disadvantaged communities even less well-off and less able to rise to the BS challenge of

self-reliance and social entrepreneurialism. The existing literature on community regeneration shows that "it cannot be done on the cheap" and that BS-type, do-it-yourselves schemes will not fill the void created government cuts (Westwood 2011, p. 695). It remains to be seen whether "active" BS localist communities thrive under this "negative localist" approach, or whether they become part of "localism's wastelands".

Reality check: How would BS energy localism "fair" in a deprived community?

Enthusiasm for localism is not restricted to political and environmental movements: with the recent localist turn in the field of energy policy has come an explosion of research on community-based renewable energy schemes of the sort the Coalition government wishes to promote (see Walker 2008b ; special issue of *Energy Policy* 2010). This research often focuses on success stories from UK and abroad to illustrate with enthusiasm the promise of this approach in, as noted above, "ticking all the economic, environmental and social boxes". However, seldom does this research pause to ask why community energy projects get off the ground in some communities and not in others. This lacuna means that the distributional and justice dimensions of energy localism have received insufficient attention in the literature. To illustrate, when we consider the potential for its application in the areas in which we are currently conducting research, it becomes necessary to stand back and request a "reality check" on the purported benefits of BS energy localism. How would an ex-coal mining community suffering from years of economic decline and dependence on the state ever begin to take up the Cameronian vision of community control over energy production? To what extent would there be either the interest or the capacity to rise to the challenge of "re-energising [their] communities" (Julian and Dobson 2012)? Our concern is that if we only know about the exemplars, it will be difficult to develop policies that ensure fair and equal access to renewables schemes within and across local communities in the UK.

Our argument is informed by an on-going research project which explores, in part, the ways in which knowledge about energy reduction circulates and may potentially be made more durable via community networks in local places (Catney *et al.* 2013). While not specifically investigating the potential for community self-organising around setting-up energy projects, we are able to establish profiles of the kinds of networks and social infrastructures that facilitate or inhibit the development of low carbon "communities of practice" (Wenger 1998). Using in-depth qualitative methods (community mapping exercises; home interviews and focus groups) we are comparing community knowledge networks in two places in the West Midlands: two relatively affluent wards in Shrewsbury and two relatively deprived wards in Newcastle-under-Lyme.[4] The wards of Knutton and Silverdale and Cross-Heath (K & S & CH) in Newcastle are largely white, working-class communities with relatively high levels of socio-economic disadvantage and a history of coal mining and related de-industrialisation. The project's second case study is of two wards within the Borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme: Cross-Heath, and Knutton and Silverdale. Closure of the coal mines in the area in the last two decades has had a profound effect on employment rates, job opportunities and the strength of the local economy. In a report on deprivation in Staffordshire, Knutton and Silverdale and Cross Health were highlighted as the most deprived wards inside Newcastle-under-Lyme and among the 10% most deprived in the country. Rates of welfare benefit receipt are relatively high, and in 2009–2010 around 10% of 16–18-year olds in the wards were not in employment, education or training. Long-term energy literacy engagement in the two areas by the project's investigators alongside preliminary observations and data collection suggest that there is a

lower level of interest in environmental issues generally in K & S & CH than in the Shrewsbury wards. Whereas Shrewsbury has several civil society organisations devoted to environmental change (for example, Friends of the Earth, the Marches Energy Agency and a Transition Towns Network) operating across the town, there is far less association activity around environmental issues in Newcastle, particularly in K & S & CH.

Governmental and non-governmental activity in K & S & CH has been largely focused on addressing fuel poverty. For example, Newcastle Borough Council has worked in partnership with Scottish Power, the National Grid, Warm Zone Ltd (run by National Energy Action) neighbouring Stoke on Trent City Council in the North Staffordshire Warm Zone, a £15 million scheme which targets assistance to private homes covered by the scheme. Warm Zone has been very successful but has had its central government funding discontinued. Another key actor in the area is Beat the Cold, an independent charity offering advice and support to people living in fuel poverty. However, its focus is not to promote community renewable schemes. Where solar thermal and PV in the area has been installed, this has been led by the local authority and housing associations. Few individual households and no community groups have started their own renewable schemes. With high levels of deprivation and social exclusion as well as low levels of energy literacy in the wards (the latter evident from community work into the issue undertaken by two of the authors over the previous few years) it is unlikely that the majority of people in these communities would be able to come together to take advantage of schemes like BSC (or the community-based elements of the Green Deal) without significant intervention and support. Not only would there likely be a low level of interest, but the kinds of networks, skills and expertise that are necessary to access key resources relating to energy do not currently exist. The relatively low level of community associational activity does not seem to us to be the result of the state "crowding out" alternative forms of delivery but is the long-term consequence of socio-economic disadvantage and social exclusion. The rhetoric about community empowerment and "self-supporting trust networks" that pervades ResPublica's vision seems far removed from the real life conditions of this locality and no doubt many other local places across the UK.

This "reality check" resonates to some extent with what several researchers with an eye on "the justice dimension" of energy localism have observed. For example, Middlemiss and Parrish (2010, p. 7560) criticise Defra and others for being naively over-optimistic about the role of community groups in helping to meet environmental targets. They argue that this "optimistic view of the potential for grassroots involvement in sustainability assumes first that community groups *want* to be a vehicle for government policy . . . . Second, it assumes that community groups have *the capacity to instigate* change in communities" (Middlemiss and Parrish 2010, p. 7560; emphasis added). There are three key components to the reality check, and all have to do with understanding community capacity. First, an analysis of social context is important in avoiding making potentially inaccurate and dangerous assumptions about communities. A context-specific or situated understanding of communities should take stock of the social capital available (the networks and relationships), as well as highlighting where people "have limited power, resources and ability" to engage in environmental initiatives (Middlemiss and Parrish 2010, p. 7561). Power and ability should be seen as key resources alongside material wealth, and they typically go hand-in-hand. Such insights are often missed by projects that promote negative forms of localism.

Next, it is important to understand the structural/economic obstacles and "rate-limiting steps" that get in the way of initiatives that might involve energy or carbon reduction. For people in deprived communities, even if there was a high level of concern about climate change, for example, the ability to make changes in everyday life is limited by lack of

money and not owning their own dwellings. Considering such economic and infrastructural practicalities, Walker (2008a, p. 4515) observes that "a significant proportion of people on low incomes and at risk of fuel poverty are not homeowners and are therefore dependent on their landlord for the systems through which they access energy". And third, it should go without saying that for people living in poverty in deprived areas, personal responsibility for carbon emissions may be the furthest thing from their minds. Middlemiss and Parrish (2010) make a valuable point about the cultural capacity for change within communities, the way values and identity may affect the legitimacy of energy reduction schemes in the eyes of community members. They may have more pressing concerns and a different set of priorities altogether than forming ResPublica's "local trust economies" with power companies they fundamentally do not trust.

The point here is that there is a need to understand not just the factors which lead community energy projects to get off the ground but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, why they *do not* happen: we need to understand the factors contributing to a social gap between need, interest and action at the community scale for action on energy (either generation or demand reduction). Considered more holistically, it is not just about lack of access to sufficient amounts of energy or fuel, but also about a lack of social capital (Putnam 2001) and, more broadly, "community capacity" (Middlemiss and Parrish 2010). This point goes to the heart of our argument in this paper, which is that people in some places are unable to marshal the necessary resources – material, social and personal – to become self-organising and self-reliant, much less to become social entrepreneurs who can build their own collective, profit-making energy businesses (see also Park 2012). Based on our preliminary work in K & S & CH, we would argue that much more need to be done to understand – and redress – the social-structural, economic and cultural factors that prevent greater start-up of community renewable energy projects to produce more "balanced" forms of energy transition. To do this, negative localist approaches are insufficient – central and local government must continue to play a key role (as ResPublica have acknowledged, at least partially).

Discussion: falling into local traps

A key rationale underpinning BS localism is its presumption that the local scale is both inherently more democratic, just or more effective than other scales of governance. Such thinking falls into what Purcell (2006) and Purcell and Brown (2005) (see also Marvin and Guy 1997) have termed the "local trap" and what we referred to above as a "negative localism" approach. The local trap leads politicians and analysts to make the generalisation that simply because a project/process/movement is local or decentralised, it is somehow clearly "good", "more just", "more democratic" or "more sustainable". Furthermore, Purcell (2006, p. 1924) argues that such thinking often conflates local-scale community as place with broader normative notions of "community", which operate across all geographical scales. This perspective cautions against projects which seek to separate out particular scales and treat them as though they operated in isolation of other scales. The community-local scale – like other scales – is socially constructed and there is no guarantee that simply because any project of localism is focused on the community-locality, it will necessarily be more just, democratic, effective or even "local" (Devine-Wright and Wiersma 2013). This is not to claim that the local is not an important scale of governance with potential for empowerment; our point here is to argue that political projects such as BS localism draw upon notions of community that articulate agendas as though they were emancipatory simply because they are local, without regard to the distributional impacts such projects have.

In this way, it can be seen as part of a broader campaign to hollow-out the functions of the state and promote "rolled-out" neo-liberal forms of development and sustainability (Peck and Tickell 2002). This roll-out will not flatten inequalities – quite the reverse is potentially the case. While more organised groups and communities will potentially benefit from schemes such as BSC (and even the revised feed-in tariff) and will pursue community energy schemes, the communities which are not well resourced or "self-activated" may slip even further behind (see also Park 2012). With local authorities and housing associations – who have been active in trying to pursue a variety of energy schemes for deprived communities – finding their funding situation deteriorating and with changes to the feed-in tariff discouraging investment on behalf of vulnerable communities, there could emerge what Walker (2008a, p. 4515) termed as an "energy underclass". We argue that the potential for BS localism to exacerbate "energy inequalities" raises serious concerns over distributional justice. Localist policies can only work within the context of broader structural changes in the allocation of resources across society. In his aforementioned 2009 lecture, David Cameron spoke positively of Wilkinson and Pickett's (2009) *The Spirit Level* and the need to reduce inequalities in society. As Toynbee (2009), Dorey (2010) and North (2011) have observed, Cameron seems to have only partially (or selectively) understood the extensive resource redistribution required to achieve the changes he aspires to: "Cameron's vision of the Conservative future for poverty policy is an airy construct of gossamer words, good people, good intentions – but no word of money" (Toynbee 2009). Mobilising collective action in deprived communities cannot operate in a vacuum. While the government has talked of addressing fuel poverty, there are worrying indications that it is reducing the level of support directly targeted at poorer communities. As noted above, BSC has the potential to open up a niche in the energy market but greater attention needs to be given to seed-bedding in the most deprived communities (of the type initiated by the previous Labour government in its final years in office). In the absence of systematic collective action on the part to hardest-to-reach, we argue that housing associations and local authorities are often best placed to direct these efforts. The direct intervention we are defending can be dismissed as paternalism or statism but it is hard to see how the emergence of an "energy underclass" can be avoided in areas like K & S & CH through market mechanisms and incentive schemes that benefit fast movers (who tend to be wealthier) and where the local authority and other charitable organisations in the area finding their budgets reduced.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. It should be noted that this paper refers to UK policy but essentially deals with the approach of UK central government. Due to limitations of space, we are unable to examine the experience of devolved administrations in the UK.

2. It should be noted that in the period up to November 2011 only 0.5% of solar PVs installed under the feed-in tariff scheme were defined as "community" schemes with 98.1% defined as "residential"(Ares *et al.* 2012, p. 10).
3. While the Green Deal will be mainly focused on the scale of individual households, DECC (2011d) has indicated the potential for neighbourhood-level delivery and forms of community partnership.
4. Due to limitations of space, our focus here is restricted to wards in Newcastle-under-Lyme.

References

Amin, A., 2005. Local community on trial. *Economy and Society*, 34 (4), 612–633.
Amin, A., Doreen, D., and Thrift, N., 2003. *Decentering the nation: a radical approach to regional inequality*. London: Catalyst.
Ares, E., Hawkins, O., and Bolton, P., 2012. *Feed-in tariffs: solar PV review*. London: House of Commons Library.
Bache, I. and Catney, P., 2008. Embryonic associationalism: new labour and urban governance. *Public Administration*, 86 (2), 411–428.
Bergman, N. and Eyre, N., 2011. What role for microgeneration in a shift to a low carbon domestic sector in the UK? *Energy Efficiency*, 4, 335–353.
Big Society Capital, 2012. *Big society capital: vision, mission and activities* [online]. Available from: http://www.bigsocietycapital.com/pdf/BSC%20Vision,%20mission%20and%20activities.pdf [Accessed 15 April 2012]
Blond, P., 2010. *Red tory: how left and right have broken Britain*. London: Faber and Faber.
Cameron, D., 2009. *'The Big Society' The Hugo Young Lecture* [online], 10 November 2009. Available from: http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2009/11/David_Cameron_The_Big_Society.aspx [Accessed 20 March 2012].
Cameron, D., 2010. *Big society speech, transcript of a speech by the Prime Minister on the big society* [online], 19 July 2010, Liverpool. Available from: http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/big-society-speech/ [Accessed 20 March 2012].
Catney, P., *et al.*, 2013. Community knowledge networks: an action-orientated approach to energy research. *Local Environment*, 18 (4), 506–520.
De Phillippis, J., Fisher, R., and Shragge, E., 2010. *Contesting community: the limits and potential of local organizing*. New Brunswick, NJ: N.J.L Rutgers University Press.
Department of Energy and Climate Change [DECC], 2009a. *Amendments to the carbon emissions reduction target: consultation proposals*. London: The Stationary Office.
Department of Energy and Climate Change [DECC], 2009b. *The low carbon communities challenge*. London: The Stationary Office.
Department of Energy and Climate Change [DECC], 2010. *The green deal: a summary of the government's proposals*. London: The Stationary Office.
Department of Energy and Climate Change [DECC], 2011a. *Evaluation of the community energy saving programme*. London: The Stationary Office.
Department of Energy and Climate Change [DECC], 2011b. *Planning our electric future: a white paper for secure, affordable and low-carbon electricity*. London: The Stationary Office.
Department of Energy and Climate Change [DECC], 2011c. *Feed-in tariffs scheme: consultation on comprehensive review phase 1 – tariffs for solar PV*. London: The Stationary Office.
Department of Energy and Climate Change [DECC], 2011d. *Local authorities and the green deal*. London: The Stationary Office.
Devine-Wright, P. and Wiersma, B., 2013. Opening up the "local" to analysis: exploring the spatiality of UK urban decentralised energy initiatives. *Local Environment* [Early access]. doi:10.1080/13549839.2012.754742
Dorey, P., 2010. *British conservatism: the politics and philosophy of inequality*. London: IB Taurus.
Ellison, N., 2011. The conservative party and the "big society". *In*: C. Holden, M. Kilkey and G. Ramia, eds. *Social policy review 23: analysis and debate in social policy 2011*. Bristol: Policy Press, 45–62.
Friends of the Earth, 2011. *Electricity market reform*. London: Friends of the Earth.
Friends of the Earth, 2012. *Time to give power to the people* [online]. Available from: http://www.foe.co.uk/news/respublica_communityenergy_34875.html [Accessed 9 April 2012].

Fudge, S., *et al.*, 2011. Risk, governance and community: a "reinvention of politics" or political opportunism, Paper presented at UKERC 'energy and people' conference, 20–21 September 2011. Oxford: Oxford University.

Gamble, A., 2011. Project Cameron. *Public policy research*, 18 (3), 173–178.

Geels, F.W. and Schot, J., 2007. Typology of socio-technical transition pathways. *Research Policy*, 36 (3), 399–417.

Giddens, A., 1998. *The third way*. Cambridge: Polity.

Goodall, C., 2012. *The energy company obligation: a pittance that will worsen the finances of the most poor* [online], 3rd January 2012. Available from: http://www.carboncommentary.com/2012/01/03/2230 [Accessed 19 April 2012].

Helm, D., 2004. *Energy, the state and the market: British energy policy since 1979*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hickson, K., 2009. Conservatism and the poor: conservative party attitudes to poverty and inequality since the 1970s. *British Politics*, 4 (3), 341–362.

HM Government, 2012. *Social justice: transforming lives.* Cm 8314. London: The Stationary Office.

House of Commons Energy and Climate Change Select Committee [HoC], 2011. *Solar power feed-in tariffs* [online]. Available from: http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmenergy/1605/160504.htm [Accessed 14 April 2012].

Ipsos-Mori, 2009. *The big energy shift: report from citizens forum*. London: Ipsos Mori.

Julian, C. and Dobson, J., 2012. *Re-energising our communities: transforming the energy market through local energy production*. Lincoln: Respublica.

Marvin, S. and Guy, S., 1997. Creating Myths rather than sustainability: the transition fallacies of the new localism. *Local Environment*, 2 (3), 311–318.

Massey, D.B., 2004. Geographies of responsibility. *Geografiska Annaler B*, 86 (1), 5–18.

Mawhood, C., 2012. *Feed-in-tariff scheme October 2007 – October 2011: lessons for the future*. London: Department of Climate Change and Energy (online). Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/48487/6124-feedin-tariffs-lessons-for-the-future-report.pdf [Accessed 24 January 2013].

Meredith, S. and Catney, P., 2007. New labour and associative democracy: old debates in new times? *British Politics*, 2 (3), 347–371.

Middlemiss, L. and Parrish, B., 2010. Building capacity for low-carbon communities: the role of grassroots initiatives. *Energy Policy*, 38, 7559–7566.

Mitchell, C., 2008. *The political economy of sustainable energy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Monbiot, G., 2012. The green deal is a useless, middle-class subsidy. *The Guardian*, 13 January 2012 [online]. Available from: http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/georgemonbiot/2012/jan/13/green-deal [Accessed 19 April 2012].

National Council for Voluntary Organisations [NCVO], 2012. *Charities hit by triple whammy of financial pressures during the recession* [online]. Available from: http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/news/civil-society/charities-hit-triple-whammy-financial-pressures-during-recession [Accessed 16 April 2012].

Norman, J., 2010. *The big society: the anatomy of the new politics*. Buckingham: Buckingham University Press.

North, P., 2011. Geographies and utopias of Cameron's Big Society. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 12 (8), 817–827.

Park, J.J., 2012. Fostering community energy and equal opportunities between communities. *Local Environment*, 17 (4), 387–408.

Peck, J., 2010. *Constructions of neoliberal reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Peck, J. and Tickell, N., 2002. Neoliberalising space. *Antipode*, 34, 380–404.

Purcell, M., 2006. Urban democracy and the local trap. *Urban Studies*, 43 (11), 1921–1941.

Purcell, M. and Brown, J., 2005. Against the local trap: scale and the study of environment and development. *Progress in Development Studies*, 5 (4), 279–297.

Putnam, R., 2001. *Bowling alone*. London: Simon and Schuster.

Rathouse, K. and Devine-Wright, P., 2010. *Evaluation of the big energy shift: final report to DECC and sciencewise-ERC*. St Albans: Kathryn Rathouse Social Research and Placewise.

Rogers, J.C., Simmons, E.A., Convery, I., and Weatherall, A., 2012. What factors enable community leadership of renewable energy projects? Lessons from a woodfuel heating initiative. *Local Economy*, 27 (2), 209–222.

Rose, N., 1999. *Powers of freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rose, N., 2000. Community, citizenship and the third way. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 43 (9), 1395–1411.

Taylor, M., 2011. *Public policy in the community*. 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Toynbee, P., 2009. David Cameron, social policy butterfly. *The Guardian*, 10 November 2009 [online]. Available from: http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/nov/10/david-cameron-hugo-young-welfare [Accessed 12 April 2012].

Walker, G., 2008a. Decentralised systems and fuel poverty: are there any links or risks? *Energy Policy*, 36, 4514–4517.

Walker, G., 2008b. What are the barriers and incentives for community-owned means of energy production and use? *Energy Policy*, 36, 4401–4405.

Walker, G. and Cass, N., 2007. Carbon reduction, "the public" and renewable energy: engaging with socio-technical configurations. *Area*, 39 (4), 458–469.

Walker, G. and Devine-Wright, P., 2008. Community renewable energy: what should it mean? *Energy Policy*, 36, 497–500.

Walker, G., *et al.*, 2007. Harnessing community energies: explaining and evaluating community-based localism in renewable energy policy in the UK. *Global Environmental Politics*, 7 (2), 64–82.

Walker, G., *et al.*, 2010. Trust and community: exploring the meanings, contexts and dynamics of community renewable energy. *Energy Policy*, 38, 2655–2663.

Wenger, E., 1998. *Communities of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Westwood, A., 2011. Localism, social capital and the 'big society'. *Local Economy*, 26 (8), 690–701.

Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K., 2009. *The spirit level*. London: Penguin.