1 # Negotiating energy democracy in practice: a critical analysis
2 # of the governance processes in community energy projects
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Negotiating energy democracy in practice: a critical analysis of the governance processes in community energy projects

Abstract

There is a growing 'energy democracy' movement which regards the transition to renewable energy as an opportunity for socio-economic transformation, as well as technological innovation. The literature on energy democracy tends to associate greater democratic control of energy systems with increased community control over the means of energy generation and distribution. Nonetheless, this literature often *assumes* rather than *demonstrates* that the forms of governance it promotes are more democratic than the status quo.

This analysis contributes to the emerging field of energy democracy by assessing the complex and varied ways in which communities in Scotland practice energy governance. By focusing on three key governance processes (decision-making, accountability and dispute resolution) this paper shows the importance of local contexts for the establishment and negotiation of democratic practices. This local specificity, however, also raises further questions regarding the universal applicability of the energy democracy concept.

Key words

Energy democracy; community governance; inclusivity; energy governance; Scotland

Introduction

There are growing signs that a global energy transition is underway, with renewable sources gradually replacing fossil fuels. In 2014, renewable energy accounted for 19% of global final energy consumption and this percentage continues to grow (REN21 2016). Previous energy transitions (waterpower to coal, and coal to oil) show that broad social and geographical change underpin major changes to energy systems. These potential transformational impacts of the current energy transition have, however, thus far received relatively little attention (Bridge *et al.* 2013; Sovacool 2014). This is, however, beginning to change. More recently, researchers and practitioners have begun to

73 emphasise the role of social, economic and political power in energy transitions, most
74 explicitly expressed through concepts of energy justice and energy democracy (Weis,
75 Becker, and Naumann 2015).

76

77 The notion of 'energy democracy' has become a focal point for civil society groups
78 involved in disparate struggles around energy issues (Angel 2016). While there is no set
79 definition, civil society organisations use the term 'energy democracy' to link
80 decarbonisation with changes to who controls the means of energy production and
81 distribution (Strachan *et al.* 2015). These organisations see the decentralised nature of
82 renewable energy technologies as an opportunity for 'genuine popular control over
83 energy choices' (McHarg 2016, p.313). For many in this civic movement, this 'genuine
84 popular control' takes the form of greater community control of resources (e.g.
85 Giancatarino 2012, Cumbers *et al.* 2013, Vansintjan 2015). They consider community and
86 cooperative energy groups as the 'ideal organizational entities' (Carrilho da Graça and
87 Gomes 2016, p.3) in which 'individuals participate actively in decision-making' (REN21
88 2016, p.135). As such, advocates for greater energy democracy see community action as
89 an opportunity to tackle energy issues in ways that meet communities' needs and
90 enriches them (Giancatarino 2012; Weinrub and Giancatarino 2015). Thus, proponents
91 of community ownership envisage it as a 'third way', an alternative to both

92

93 *'… public ownership, with its highly attenuated (representative) democratic*
94 *control over arm's-length and centralised public corporations, and privatisation,*
95 *with its illusory promise of individual empowerment through shareholder*
96 *democracy and consumer sovereignty'* (McHarg 2016, p.16).

97

98 There is a tendency, however, to assume rather than demonstrate that community
99 projects are more democratic or just (McHarg 2016). In other words, there is a risk that
100 advocates fall into what Purcell (2006) has labelled the 'local trap', with generalisations
101 made about the quality of projects based on their scale. Additionally, it risks perpetuating
102 the notion that community organisations are willing and able to provide the democratic
103 functions expected of them (Little 2002).

104

105   Recently, calls for energy democracy through greater community control have begun to
106   transcend social movements, gaining the attention of policy makers (e.g. Labour Press
107   2016, Powell 2016) and researchers (e.g. McHarg 2016, Angel 2017). A more critical
108   analysis of the assumptions underpinning the calls for greater energy democracy is
109   therefore very timely. This research does this by demonstrating how community energy
110   (CE) groups establish and negotiate democratic processes. It focuses on three key
111   processes deemed critical to democratic energy governance but for which limited
112   empirical evidence is currently available: decision-making (Farrell 2014; Kunze and
113   Becker 2014), accountability (Chavez 2015; Weinrub and Giancatarino 2015) and dispute
114   resolution (McHarg 2016). I have chosen the community-level focus because the
115   apparent democratic nature of CE groups needs to be better understood before their
116   potential to contribute to the democratisation of the energy system can be considered.
117   This research highlights that CE projects can contribute to greater democratic
118   governance of energy resources, but that they also experience barriers and tensions that
119   need overcoming when seeking to achieve greater energy democracy.

120

121   **Energy democracy – an opportunity for more just outcomes?**
122   The emerging body of literature on energy democracy frames discussions around energy
123   resources explicitly as social struggles (Weis, Becker, and Naumann 2015). Invoking
124   participatory notions of democracy (Somerville 2005), advocates present community-
125   level governance of energy resources as an opportunity not just to produce clean energy
126   or deliver social benefits (e.g. Walker *et al.* 2007, Warren and McFadyen 2010, Seyfang
127   and Haxeltine 2012, Walton 2012, The Scottish Government 2015b), but to
128   fundamentally reshape the social, economic and political relations embedded in these
129   Megawatts. Schlosberg (2013) refers to such notions of participatory, sustainable
130   resource governance as sustainable materialism: addressing environmental conditions
131   as the basis for social justice. The sustainable materialist view seeks to not just resist, but
132   to reconstruct practices of production and consumption, and to (sustainably) rebuild the
133   material relationships we have with resources we use (Schlosberg 2013). The energy
134   democracy movement echoes these sentiments:

135

136   *'[The] vision of a democratized energy future includes an informed and*
137   *conscious community that understands the **right** relationship of people to*
138   *natural resources and the need to live in ecological balance'* (Weinrub and
139   Giancatarino 2015, p.4 - emphasis added by the author)

140

141   Thus, it shifts the focus away from individualist responses to climate and environmental
142   issues to a collective focus on the rethinking and redesigning of processes and institutions
143   connected to meeting basic needs (Schlosberg 2013).

144

145   Advocates often consider direct involvement of communities and other civil society
146   groups in energy governance a key part of this process. Proponents argue that, through
147   greater community participation and control, participation in decisions around energy is
148   more inclusive (Kunze and Becker 2014), ensuring decisions are more representative
149   (Vansintjan 2015), and with greater opportunity to hold decision-makers to account
150   (Duda 2015; Weinrub and Giancatarino 2015). In other words, it sees local, collective
151   action as an opportunity for co-operation through which shared values can emerge (Tam
152   1988). The emergence of such shared values are in turn deemed to contribute to a 'more
153   sustainable relationship between just communities and a working environment'
154   (Schlosberg 2013, p.49, also Weinrub and Giancatarino 2015).

155   ***Democratisation through decentralisation?***
156   By framing discussions around energy as social struggles with the aim to disrupt the
157   relations embedded in current energy systems, the energy democracy movement
158   presents itself as deeply political. Nonetheless, the view with which it is associated – of
159   community-level governance as morally virtuous – appears more closely aligned with
160   orthodox communitarians' views of communities as having a natural, dominant moral
161   voice which ensures they do the 'right' thing (Little 2002; Taylor Aiken 2015). Scholars,
162   however, have critised this notion of these 'mythic communities' (Agrawal and Gibson
163   1999, p.638) of homogenous populations where locally evolved norms and collaborative
164   processes help to manage resources (more) sustainably and equitably (also: Dalby and
165   Mackenzie 1997, Featherstone *et al.* 2012, Taylor Aiken 2014). As Taylor Aiken (2015)
166   also observes, 'community' has come to imply both a normative good and a direct
167   correlation of 'green'. This is also evident among energy democracy advocates who, while

168 seeing them as part of larger political struggles, frame communities themselves as
169 apolitical.

170

171 However, key political theorists have critised the assumption that community action
172 creates desirable outcomes(such as McConnell 1966, Young 1990, Edwards 2009).
173 Recent empirical work that has considered the role of communities in energy and
174 sustainability governance also questions this (for example Walker *et al.* 2007, 2010,
175 Creamer 2015, Taylor Aiken 2015, Simcock 2016). Those who have cautioned against the
176 presumption that decentralised, community action equals democratic or just processes
177 and outcomes have often done so for two key reasons: difference and inequality. I
178 consider these two in more detail below.

179

180 Scholars have often deemed shared interests essential in the successful development of
181 CE projects (Islar and Busch 2016; Haggett and Quiroz-Aitken 2015). In their pursuit of
182 common interests communities can, however, (inadvertently) create an atmosphere of
183 conformity and homogeneity that stifles dissent (Young 1990, Little 2002). Others have
184 therefore advocated for an 'agonistic pluralism' that legitimises dissent and debate in
185 (community) governance, arguing that the democratic qualities of civil society are rooted
186 in social mobilisation and contestation as well as in cooperation and civicness (Mouffe
187 2000; Anderson *et al*. 2016; Islar and Busch 2016). For these authors, difference or
188 dissent is not simply to be ignored, overcome or stifled through consensus (Anderson *et
189 al*. 2016), but to be recognised, validated and, from there, possibly negotiated.

190

191 Islar and Busch (2016) have suggested that negotiating differences in CE governance
192 requires an open and inclusive process. Others have warned, however, that we should not
193 assume decentralised governance will be more inclusive or equal. Rather, community
194 groups can be 'arenas for personal ambition and power as well as sacrifice and service'
195 (Edwards 2009, p.44). For those sceptical of the links between forms and norms of
196 governance, community governance simply signifies a change in scale, with the *local*
197 distribution of power determining the outcomes of material and symbolic contests
198 among actors (Lane and Corbett 2005). When seeking to develop an inclusive community
199 project it is therefore important to consider the patchwork of concerns and interests that
200 exist within a place, and the power relations between them (McMorran *et al.* 2014,

201 Creamer 2015, Grossmann and Creamer 2017). This is pertinent to CE groups, who might
202 manage and distribute substantial sums of money (Bristow, Cowell, and Munday 2012;
203 Walker *et al*. 2010). While thus framed as an opportunity for disadvantaged communities
204 (Weinrub and Giancatarino 2015), findings from research on community energy and
205 environmental projects show that participation is often limited to those in higher socio-
206 economic groups (Angel 2016; Grossmann and Creamer 2017). Kearns (1995) has
207 described this as the conundrum of democratic governance: the more participatory
208 democracy becomes, the more it risks exacerbating existing inequalities.
209
210 To ensure that existing differences and power relations are not simply reproduced, it is
211 therefore important to consider community governance institutions and practices.
212 (Kearns 1995; Simcock 2016). This research seeks to analyse three related practices of
213 democratic governance to understand how these intersect with difference and inequality
214 in community-led projects. The understanding that ideology or institutional features
215 (structures, rules and laws) affect, but do not necessarily determine or guarantee, good
216 practice has informed my focus on democratic *practices* (Fox 1992; Edwards 2009). A
217 greater consideration of governance practices enables an understanding of how different
218 individuals and groups negotiate relationships, and how contradictions and tensions
219 emerge and are possibly overcome (Young 1990; Edwards 2009; DeFilippis, Fisher, and
220 Shragge 2006).

221 **Community energy in Scotland**
222 The empirical setting for this research is Scotland, which I chose for several reasons. First,
223 energy democracy is becoming an increasingly important issue in Scotland. The Scottish
224 Government has set targets to generate 100% of electricity demand from renewable
225 sources by 2020 (The Scottish Government 2011b). Through the introduction of various
226 support mechanisms since 2002 (The Scottish Government 2006, 2013), CE in in Scotland
227 is overrepresented compared to other parts of the UK (Bomberg and McEwen 2012).
228 Furthermore, in 2016 the Director of Energy and Climate Change at the Scottish
229 Government, announced that the future for renewable energy in Scotland is 'localised,
230 democratised and mutualised' (Stark, 2016). This is the first time it has incorporated the
231 notion of 'energy democracy' in official government discourse. Again, this stands in
232 contrast to the UK level, where the idea has not (yet) gained traction in official

government discourse. While there is a well-established energy democracy movement in Germany (see for example Kunze and Becker 2014, Weis *et al.* 2015, Angel 2017), evidence regarding the forms, practices, and outcomes of energy democracy outside the German context is currently limited. The focus on energy democracy in Scotland – not a pioneer such as Germany, but one where the concept of ED *has* transcended social movements to become recognised by government officials – therefore offers the opportunity to enrich the evidence base and evaluate how the notion of ED is translated into new national contexts.

Additionally, CE in Scotland is also part of a broader trend of decentralisation and community-led development in Scotland (The Scottish Government 2011a, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, van Veelen 2017). According to one civil servant, the growing role for, primarily place-based, communities has been based on the belief that such communities need to balance competing demands, and their resource management practices therefore inherently benefit the general good of the people in that area (private correspondence, 2015). Again, these (presumed) links between community-level action and improved outcomes warrant further investigation.

Finally, Scotland makes an interesting case study due to the diverse forms of CE in Scotland (van Veelen 2017; Table 1). This diversity of approaches and associated legal and organisational models stands in contrast with the universalist claims made for community governance – as shown above. Using Scotland as a case study therefore enables an analysis of this issue of local particularity versus universal democratic claims in greater detail.

Methods

Research reported here is part of a larger project that examined the governance of CE in Scotland. To capture the diversity of the sector this research adopts a broad approach, engaging with 15 community groups across Scotland (Table 1). I selected groups to represent the five different types of CE groups in Scotland identified by van Veelen (2017). In total, I conducted 39 in-depth interviews between 2013 and 2016.

Community group	Year founded	Technology	Scale [2]	Type (based on van Veelen 2017)
CG1	2005	Biomass (completed); hydro (under consideration)	medium	Community Developers
CG2	2010	Hydro (joint venture); wind	medium	Community Developers
CG3	2006	Wind	medium	Cooperatives
CG4	2010	Solar	under consideration	Transition Towns
CG5	2009	Wind	small	Small is Beautiful
CG6	2002	Wind (joint venture); biomass, hydro	medium	Community Developers
CG7	2004	Wind	large	Community Developers
CG8	2013	Solar	under consideration	Small is Beautiful
CG9	2013	Hydro	small	Community Developers
CG10	2008	Hydro (completed); smart grid (under consideration)	small	Innovators
CG11	2013	Wind	medium	Cooperatives
CG12	2005	Wind	large	Community Developers
CG13	1999	Wind	medium	Community Developers
CG14	2000	Wind; smart grid (under consideration)	small	Innovators
CG15	2008	Hydro; wind	medium	Community Developers

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Table 1: Overview of the community groups included in this research.

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In most groups (CG4-15), I interviewed one or two employees or voluntary board members, but I conducted more extensive case study research with CG1-3. In these three

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[2] 'Scale' refers to the size of the technology that is community-owned. For joint-ventures, the proportion owned by the community, rather than total size, has been reported. To help ensure the anonymity of these groups the following categories for installation size have been used: micro <15kW; small 16-100 kW; medium 101- 1000 kW; large > 1000kW.

270   cases, I interviewed a greater number of community group members, as well as local
271   residents not actively involved in the projects. I conducted thirty-one interviews face-to-
272   face, and eight by phone. Interviews varied in length between 30 and 150 minutes. I
273   transcribed the interviews verbatim and analysed them through thematic coding in
274   NVIVO. Documentary analysis of planning applications, news reports and community
275   groups' websites, supplements the interview data. Due to the sensitive nature of some
276   responses, I have removed all identifying features.

277

278   I chose the mixed approach of breadth and depth for two reasons. The choice for breadth
279   was important because this research explores the varied experiences of democratic
280   governance across different types of CE. In doing so, it complements previous research
281   (e.g. Simcock 2016) which has provided a rich and detailed account of decision-making
282   processes in a single case study. The larger number of cases enables this research to
283   highlight the breadth of experiences and identify common features and challenges. This
284   research also recognises, however, that governance is a complex process, and that
285   interviews with community leaders alone only paints a partial picture. Therefore, I
286   selected three groups for further research with a greater variety of stakeholders.

287   **Results**
288   The community groups included in this study, despite their different focuses, generally
289   have similar organisational arrangements in place. Approximately half the groups in this
290   study rely solely on volunteers. In those cases, the voluntary governing body (such as a
291   board of directors) are responsible for both strategic governance and day-to-day
292   decision-making. The other half have at least one paid staff member responsible for day-
293   to-day decision-making, with the governing body responsible for strategic governance. In
294   both cases, the wider membership of the organisation forms another pillar of governance,
295   to which the governing body is accountable. Participation in organisations' governance
296   by their wider membership generally takes three forms: participation in an annual AGM
297   (including the election of members of the governing body), community ballots on key
298   decisions, and informal engagement. A governing document defines the relationship
299   between members and the governing body. Despite commonalities in organisational
300   structures, I identified significant differences in governance practices. The following
301   three sections will explore in more detail how communities shape democratic

302 governance, and the relation between the different pillars of governance. It will do so by
303 focusing on three governance aspects: decision-making practices, accountability
304 procedures, and dispute resolution.
305

306 ***Inclusivity in decision-making: 'local leaders' versus broad engagement***
307 Scholars have attributed the potential of community–owned energy projects to
308 contribute to greater energy democracy primarily to their potential for influencing
309 decision-making, where ideally 'the greatest number of people directly affected by a
310 project should hold as large a power of [...] decision-making as possible' (Kunze and
311 Becker 2014, p.9). However, as this analysis shows, active participation is often limited,
312 raising questions about leaders' representativeness of the wider community.
313

314 Many of the community groups included in this study aspire to broad-based participation
315 and engagement in decision-making. However, for practical reasons, most groups mix
316 representative forms of governance with participatory ones. These groups have two key
317 moments when the wider membership can have their say on proposed developments:
318 during a community consultation and a ballot. Although an important part of the
319 development process, community groups often set up these engagement opportunities to
320 gauge or gain support for a project, rather than influence its details:
321

322   *'The community were consulted at length regarding the permissions to develop.*
323   *They weren't consulted regarding the structure of the finance [...], which does*
324   *come back and hit us.'* (CG9, employee)
325

326 Some interviewees felt this set up worked best for everyone and that community
327 members seem to have no desire to be consulted more often. Instead, members are often
328 content to leave staff and directors of the community organisation *'to just get on with it'*
329 (CG2, general member). Groups' reports of low attendance figures at their AGMs and their
330 difficulty in attracting new Directors appear to confirm this assertion that many members
331 have no desire for greater involvement.
332

333 Reliance on a small number of people can be a double-edged sword. Both interview
334 respondents and the literature (van der Schoor and Scholtens 2015; Martiskainen 2017)

335 often attribute the successful development of a project to having 'local leaders' (CG3,

336 board member) involved in projects' governing bodies. Interviewees indicated that

337 having confident and competent community leaders was essential to successfully

338 managing complex CE projects, but also for convincing the wider community of the

339 feasibility and importance of the project.

340

341 Nonetheless, interview responses indicated that there might be (hidden) barriers to

342 participation, which reinforce existing community relations and hierarchies. Especially

343 in rural areas, it is an often-heard complaint that it is '*always the same people'*, or '*the*

344 *usual suspects'* who are involved in community governing bodies (CG1, employee; CG2,

345 board member; see also Creamer 2015 and Simcock 2016). The frequent involvement of

346 a small number of people in community projects can also raise concerns regarding these

347 leaders' representativeness of the wider community, not least because community

348 leaders often were similar in age, gender and/or socio-economic background. While some

349 interviewees deemed the continued reliance on a small group of local leaders a necessity

350 or an inevitability, others were more critical. These critics argued that a lack of diversity

351 not only affects governing bodies' ability to represent the diverse interests of the wider

352 community, but that this could also be detrimental to the quality of decisions made:

353

354 *'The minute we [the first female Board members] went in there we started*

355 *bringing up different issues. You could see on the faces of the other board*

356 *members that they were like 'oh, we never thought of that'. Literally things that*

357 *were just rubber stamped [...] This is what we talk about, when we talk about*

358 *diversity. That people are willing to challenge things without first subscribing to*

359 *the, what's the word, groupthink.'* (CG3, board member)

360

361 Some CE groups recognised that their approach of 'passive inclusivity' (Grossman and

362 Creamer 2017) did not necessarily break down participation barriers. In response, these

363 groups have become more proactive in their recruitment to encourage a more

364 representative governing body:

365

366 *'[The] board was of an age, and of a particular gender. That was recognised, and*

367 *we needed to do more. We just had an open evening, a bit of a social evening, it*

368 *was an open invitation to anybody, but we also specifically targeted folk to come*

369 *by and try and break down the barriers of maybe some of the assumptions of*

370 *what it was like to be a director of a charity.'* (CG13, employee)

371

372 This pro-active approach takes various forms, depending on local circumstances and

373 priorities. Some groups have set quotas, for example to ensure that the directors reflect

374 either the age or geographical distribution of the wider community. Others have tried to

375 improve their diversity through more informal means, for example by proactively asking

376 women or young members to join the board. It is, however, interesting to note that many

377 groups who have started to take active measures to improve the diversity of their boards,

378 have only begun to do so after their energy projects were built. As one board member

379 said, her fellow board members care about issues of diversity and representation in

380 principle, but in practice, they often deem them of secondary importance:

381

382 *'[The issue of representation and diversity] does come up, but... it's considered as*

383 *an add-on. [...] they don't really look at the leadership and themselves, in my*

384 *opinion, enough. People don't really want to challenge themselves, do they? And*

385 *they're quite comfortable in what they're doing. That's a very natural position*

386 *probably, but it's not... It's not, diverse, is it? It's not representative. It's not very*

387 *proactive in changing anything for the better.'* (CG3, board member*)*

388

389 Furthermore, groups that have begun to address the issue of access to decision-making

390 procedures (labelled 'external exclusion' by Young 2000), may find that internal forms of

391 exclusion continue to persist. These may include an unwillingness to speak in meetings

392 due to (perceived) power differentials or not having one's opinion considered. One

393 interviewee gave the example of their participation in another co-operative where a

394 female board member had tried to challenge the other, male, committee members:

395

396 *'At that time the group board was quite traditionalist. They had somebody there*

397 *who was a senior person, who was a very good businessman, it was quite difficult*

398 *challenging all of that. And she challenged it in a very simplistic way and she was*

399 *just...with humour actually. And that wasn't thought well of.'* (CG3, board

400 member)

401

402 Nonetheless, this interviewee felt that a continuing focus on inclusivity and diversity may

403 slowly erode internal forms of exclusion.

404

405 To summarise: groups often desire inclusive participation and open exchange. Although

406 some are taking active steps to achieve this, others see it as something of secondary

407 importance. Secondly, as the latter part of this section shows, even when attempts that

408 include a greater diversity of members in the governing body occur, this does not

409 guarantee barriers to inclusive participation have been overcome. Internal forms of

410 exclusion may persist.

411

412 ***Accountability of decision-makers***

413 The previous section showed that a small group of people made most of the decisions in

414 these CE groups. It is therefore important to consider how these decision-makers are held

415 to account. To ensure that decisions are made in the best interest of the community and

416 the influence of individuals is kept in check, the groups in this study have adopted

417 procedures to ensure accountability both towards community members, but also

418 towards outside bodies such as funders. My focus in this article is specifically on internal

419 responsibility towards members, rather than outside agencies.

420

421 Interviews showed that groups pay varying degrees of attention to accountability and

422 oversight procedures. While most have received advice about legal forms and decision-

423 making and accountability procedures, this may have been many years ago. Groups'

424 circumstances and activities often change over time, with the result that, to a greater or

425 lesser extent, communities *'figure out'* governance and accountability procedures *'as we*

426 *go along'* (CG 13, employee; CG9, board member). This, however, has the effect that, even

427 if official accountability procedures are in place, they are not always followed.

428 Interviewees gave three explanations for this: a lack of active members with sufficient

429 time and knowledge, pressure to meet tight deadlines, and the increasing complexity of

430 projects and organisational structures.

431

432 As the previous section noted, a small number of volunteers run many CE groups. These

433 volunteers – especially in the small rural communities where many projects are based -

434   are often also involved in other community affairs. One example included in this study

435   concerns an island with approximately 60 adult residents. Around twenty of these are

436   actively involved in local community groups, of which there are five. Many active

437   residents are therefore involved in multiple activities and governing bodies, in addition

438   to their day job. Similar situations were observed in other rural communities. One staff

439   member of a CE group noted that, despite board members' best intentions, it is not always

440   possible for them to invest the time needed to oversee the development of lengthy, and

441   increasingly complex energy projects:

442

443   *'Part of it is lack of understanding that it is their role [to set the guidelines], but*

444   *a lot of it is lack of capacity to do it, because they're actually the core of the*

445   *economy here, and they can't run their own businesses and run as volunteers a*

446   *very demanding business that is doing ambitious and innovative things as well.'*

447   (CG10, employee)

448

449   This lack of time, and possibly understanding can, inadvertently, risk undermining a

450   group's efforts to successfully establish energy projects. In two cases included in this

451   study, individuals felt compelled to make key decisions with little oversight. As they

452   deemed their projects' completion to be at risk they took decisions without their group

453   boards' knowledge or approval:

454

455   *'[The Board's] conclusion was, that this is too risky. [...] I just ignored the board's*

456   *decision and carried on working on it, getting an agreement in place that*

457   *protected shares, that protected investors. A month later I said to the board: 'I'm*

458   *going to explain to you why you can't stick to the decision you made last time'.*

459   *So, we had another meeting and they were kind of 'alright, okay, we've been*

460   *fools'. We were then going again, but in that month, I had been completely*

461   *ignoring what my board had said, and carrying on regardless.'* (CG10,

462   employee).

463

464   *'To tell you quite bluntly… I have lied to people [...] in order to take a calculated*

465   *risk. Because, if I'd said to people, we may have to pay all this money back, they*

466   *wouldn't have gone ahead with the project.'* (CG9, board member)

467

468   In both these cases the individuals involved attributed their decision not only to what
469   they saw as a lack of understanding on the Board Members' behalf, but especially to the
470   time pressure they, as project leaders, were under to complete their projects. Some felt
471   that they had no choice but to make decisions without gaining their board's approval first,
472   to meet external deadlines:

473

474   *'When you work on such tight timelines and people are volunteering, it needs*
475   *one person to try and hold everything together. [...] There is a very clear route*
476   *to get this done. And... if anyone questions that, messes anything up, that could*
477   *destabilise the whole thing.'* (CG9, board member)

478

479   Respondents indentified the increasing complexity of projects, and organisational
480   structures, as a third reason for a possible lack of accountability. Particularly,
481   organisations which have taken on additional responsibilities or established multiple
482   energy projects, often find their governance structure to be increasingly complex,
483   involving one or more subsidiary organisations. This growth in institutional complexity
484   brings with it new challenges, especially for those with a small local population to draw
485   volunteers from. Groups require knowledgeable volunteers with sufficient free time
486   available, while also broadening participation and limiting conflicts of interest, which can
487   be a major issue in small communities (CG16, employee).

488

489   Interviewees indicated that this increasing institutional complexity is not always
490   immediately accompanied by the implementation of new accountability procedures.
491   While advice from external organisations is available, groups often learn about good
492   governance as they go along. It can be a steep learning curve, sometimes risking a project
493   or group's survival altogether. In one case, the increasingly blurred boundary between
494   the voluntary community group and its trading subsidiary (which owned the energy
495   development)

496

497   *'... caused a lot of issues with regards to governance, because it was almost like*
498   *the tail wagging the dog. Trying to employ people within the Trading Subsidiary*

499   *to run the Trust. It became problematic. In fact, it was on the brink of failure.'*

500   (CG13, employee)

501

502 Although there are support organisations who offer 'governance health checks',

503 interviewees indicated this does not change the nature of the problem: that they are

504 reliant on a small number of volunteers to develop a growing number of increasingly

505 complex projects, often under significant time pressure.

506

507 This section, and the previous one, showed that it can be difficult for community groups

508 to negotiate tensions around how to be inclusive and representative of the wider

509 community while meeting *'very, very, very tight deadlines'* (CG9, board member),

510 primarily resulting from changes to funding mechanisms, affecting how much

511 communities will earn from their projects. As a small number of individuals make many

512 decisions around the details of CE projects it is important that the membership can hold

513 them to account. Interview data shows, however, that individuals driving a project

514 forward do not always follow accountability procedures because of a lack of sufficient

515 time and knowledge, a pressure to meet tight deadlines, and the increasing complexity of

516 projects and organisational structures. A (perceived) lack of representativeness and

517 accountability from local leaders are challenges in themselves, but can also be a source of

518 disagreement in communities or impede the satisfactory resolution of disputes. The final

519 section will consider this in more detail.

520

521 ***The challenges of dealing with disagreement***
522 Interviewees agreed that differences of opinion are a normal part of community life. They

523 therefore did not think the presence of disagreements were a cause for concern, but did

524 indicate that *'[t]he strength of a community depends on how you solve those disagreements.'*

525 (CG2, board member)

526

527 These interviews show, however, that some CE groups struggle to deal with disagreement.

528 One factor that respondents highlighted is the blurred personal/professional boundary

529 that employees or volunteers in these projects can experience. Respondents often

530 attribute the strength of community-level action to the close connection between those

531 actively developing the project and the wider community. However, some of the staff and

532 volunteers interviewed, especially those in small rural communities, reported that 'being
533 embedded' in the community can also make it difficult to separate their professional from
534 their personal lives. The ability of residents to interact informally with local leaders can
535 be positive aspect of CE, but it also means that disagreements and differences of opinion
536 are not only expressed in formal settings, such as groups' meetings, but also in informal
537 local spaces. For some, the only way to deal with this, is to retreat from community life:

539 *'I tend to work from home and isolate myself so I don't have to deal with*
540 *some of the negativity. It can make me feel miserable.'* (CG10, employee)

542 This reluctance to confront, often ongoing, criticism is very understandable. However, as
543 the experience of CG2 shows, this could have unintended consequences and contribute
544 to a downward spiral in community relations. This group reported similar difficulties,
545 with some local residents opposing a proposed CE project. Opponents' objections were
546 not only concerned with the proposed wind turbine, but also with the anticipated income
547 from the project, and who would decide what it would be spent on. One local objector
548 admitted that his disagreement with the group over the turbine had '*nothing to do with*
549 *energy, but everything to do with community*' (CG2). While arguments against CE projects
550 are often made on technological or environmental grounds, this can mask the social and
551 power struggles behind such disputes. In this case, community leaders viewed this
552 detractor's arguments as simply the latest chapter in the historically antagonistic
553 relationship with the group's leaders. Nonetheless, some people in the community
554 viewed community leaders' reluctance to engage with this, and other, detractors'
555 arguments as an attempt to silence alternative voices.

557 While many groups reported experiencing some vocal opposition within the community,
558 this often fades over time. In the case of CG2, however, a court case was necessary to
559 resolve the dispute around their community wind turbine. Although the Court ultimately
560 permitted the project to go ahead, it did question the group's handling of discontent.
561 Particularly, as prior to the case the community group had written to local objectors,
562 stating they would be held liable for all legal expenses were the group to win. The Court
563 questioned why the group had sought to 'stifle the expression of objections' (anonymised
564 Court quote).

565

566   This example shows the importance of arbitration in cases of community disputes. As a

567   staff member of another community group noted: *'There is often the assumption that a*

568   *community are working as one, but this is not the case.'* (CG10, employee). Differences and

569   disagreements are part of community projects as much as any other (energy) projects,

570   but can be difficult to handle. The blurred personal/professional boundary that many

571   community leaders experience can partly explain this, and is further exacerbated by the

572   pressures described in the previous sections. Due to the pressure to deliver timely

573   outcomes, respondents often saw engaging detractors as a distracting and time-

574   consuming process that can sap the energy from staff and volunteers.

575

576   Nonetheless, as the Court decision above indicates, allowing objections to be vented may

577   help to combat a lingering sense of grievance towards a group and its activities.

578   Additionally, in this case these objections not only delayed the project's development, but

579   also resulted in a significant legal bill. Considering the time and financial pressures

580   groups are under, this is something many can ill-afford, and which early intervention may

581   prevent.

582

583   **Concluding discussion**

584   In this article I have sought to challenge the 'romanticised narrative' that CE groups can

585   always be considered "democratic" (Simcock 2016, p.475; see also Walker *et al.* 2010,

586   McHarg 2016) while also being empathetic towards the challenges communities face.

587   Supporting earlier research (Simcock 2014; Johnson 2004), this research shows that

588   while respondents deem inclusivity to be important, the ideals of inclusive decision-

589   making and robust accountability procedures can be at odds with the practicalities of

590   meeting them. It also shows that the nominal inclusion of (previously) underrepresented

591   groups in decision-making does not automatically guarantee a transfer of power, as

592   internal forms of exclusion may remain (Young 2000). Finally, perhaps somewhat in

593   contrast to Islar and Busch (2016), the findings on dispute-handling show that, while

594   many communities seek to govern based on cooperation and consensus-building,

595   agonistic processes of contestation and negotiation are also part of the day to day reality

596   of democratic governance. Combined, these findings demonstrate the varied ways in

597   which communities establish democratic rules, and the different ways in which these

598 rules are followed, negotiated, and at times subverted. Although energy democracy
599 advocates often present community as apolitical, this may indicate that the community
600 sphere is in fact politicised through community-level action, as these groups are required
601 to engage in decisions around key issues of democratic governance – such as
602 representation, participation and accountability – which are equally relevant to
603 governance processes beyond the community scale.

604

605 This research builds on earlier, in-depth, case study research (e.g. Simcock 2014, 2016),
606 by adopting a broader approach, involving fifteen different community groups. Due to the
607 limited availability of existing research on how CE projects enact governance, this
608 approach furthered an understanding of which practices or experiences were commonly
609 experienced or unique to a single case. This approach also has limitations, particularly
610 around how representative the views of a single interviewee are. I have sought to mitigate
611 this by carrying out three in-depth case studies. This highlighted the issue of internal
612 exclusion, which can often be subtler in nature and will not be universally experienced or
613 recognised (Young 2000). Further extensive in-depth qualitative research, in particular
614 participant observation, could offer additional insights on this matter.

615

616 ***Beyond Scotland and beyond energy – the wider applicability of these findings***
617
618 Community energy is now an internationally recognised concept (REN21 2016), and the
619 language of energy democracy is also gaining ground in numerous countries, especially
620 Germany (Weis, Becker, and Naumann 2015; Angel 2016). While Scotland is not a
621 frontrunner in the CE or energy democracy movements, it can be considered part of the
622 next wave: there have been government support mechanisms for CE for over fifteen years,
623 and recent government discourse has incorporated the notion of energy democracy. The
624 findings in this paper thus offer insights into how the concept of ED spreads and
625 translates into new national contexts, and highlight the role of specific geographic and
626 material contexts on how energy democracy is enacted.

627

628 For example, unlike in most countries, where energy co-operatives are the dominant
629 form of CE (Haggett and Quiroz-Aitken 2015), the majority of CE groups in Scotland do
630 not distribute income from their energy development to individual group members, but
631 use their income solely to fund community development projects. CE groups therefore

632 not only experience challenges and disagreement regarding the development of their
633 energy project, but also regarding the governance of subsequent income streams; an
634 issue which gets to the heart of whose vision(s) for the future of a community prevails
635 (van Veelen and Haggett 2017). It is therefore during this post-installation phase that
636 some community groups began to address the issue of diversity, to ensure that the
637 income from the energy project is managed in a way that is representative of the needs
638 and wants of the community. Thus, while Angel (2016) and Grossmann and Creamer
639 (2017) have also highlighted a lack of diversity and inclusivity in community initiatives
640 in other European contexts, this research shows that the nature of Scottish projects
641 means these are perhaps more likely to become points of contention.

642

643 This finding is interesting in light of previous research which considers the question of
644 who is part of the "democratic public" (Walker 2009; Simcock 2014; Marres and Lezaun
645 2011). It highlights that the question 'who is affected?' not only has a geographical
646 dimension (Simcock 2014, 2016), but also a material one. Here, ideas of inclusivity and
647 the notion of who should be included in decision-making changed after the energy
648 technology was installed. Rather than being characterised by its *technological* dimensions,
649 it is now characterised by its *socio-economic* ones instead. This finding thus resonates
650 with Chilvers and Longhurst's (2016) argument that participation is 'both shaped by and
651 actively construct[s] human subjectivities, objects of concern, and models of participation'
652 (p.590). The complexity of the material dimensions of CE may play a particularly
653 important role in shaping participation during the development phase. For example, I
654 showed it to pose specific accountability challenges, with voluntary board members
655 reportedly lacking the necessary skills (and time to acquire them) to oversee every aspect
656 of a project. The nature of the Scottish CE sector – with many groups located in small,
657 rural communities – also contributes to this problem. Further research into different
658 national contexts with different models of community energy, and the impact of the
659 material dimension on participation in decision-making, including different
660 understandings of 'who is affected' in relation to negative impacts (visual, noise) versus
661 positive impacts (financial gain), could provide valuable further insights.

662

663 Finally, this research asks 'what is democracy, to whom?' I show that community
664 governance practices are based on both local and extra-local considerations. The

665   importance of local contexts was particularly noticeable in relation to inclusivity, with
666   several groups seeking to enhance inclusivity and diversity in their decision-making
667   bodies in different ways. Others adopted a more 'passively inclusive' approach, but may
668   risk (inadvertently) reproducing pre-existing power relations by relying on 'local leaders'
669   to take projects forward (Young 2000; Grossmann and Creamer 2017; Simcock 2016). At
670   the same time, external factors and actors also shape internal CE governance. While this
671   is not unique to community *energy* (see for example Creamer 2015), there is some
672   evidence that suggests this is exacerbated by the extensive interactions between CE
673   groups and other actors. This research shows that the importance of meeting externally-
674   set deadlines (for example due to changes in funding) can have unintended consequences
675   for governance practices. Additionally, other research has shown that intermediary
676   organisations have played a particularly important role in developing CE across the UK,
677   including in shaping community governance (Hargreaves *et al.* 2013, Parag *et al.* 2013,
678   Parag and Janda 2014). Not only do intermediaries offer governance 'health checks' or
679   mediation, but sometimes also prescribe the parameters for participation. This raises
680   both practical and normative questions: how are different meanings and practices of
681   democratic governance translated through these governance networks and whose
682   meanings prevail? Is, or should, democracy be perceived as a set of locally-situated
683   practices or universal principles? The emergence of energy democracy in different
684   national contexts, and involvement of different actors at different 'levels' of government
685   thus raises the question of how to reconcile potentially different visions of democracy.
686   This research should therefore constitute one necessary step towards an emerging
687   evidence base seeking to understand the complex dynamics of energy democracy.
688

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