Introduction

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The climate challenge is above all a challenge for governance. Fossil fuels have been for two centuries or more the invisible currency of everyday life. They are deeply implicated in the complex patterns of modern living. How we live, how we work, how we eat, how we get around: all depend intimately on access to high quality energy sources. This means primarily a dependency on the consumption of fossil fuels. And that in its turn has led to carbon emissions at levels which are now clearly recognized as unsustainable. Shifting those patterns, weaning ourselves from carbon dependency, is more than just a technological task. It calls on society to untangle the structures of provision and build new, more sustainable practices, infrastructures and forms of social organization. Governance is key to this endeavour.

The challenge of climate change for governance is, in part, a challenge about scale. ‘Think global, act local’ emerged in the 1990s as a familiar axiom in response to global environmental challenges like climate change. The new millennium brought a dawning realization of how difficult this exhortation was to follow. Global challenges demand global responses. International climate policy claimed centre stage in environmental politics through the Kyoto Protocol. And yet achieving the goals of the Protocol proved elusive. A part of the reason for this was the failure of Kyoto to create a global emissions cap. But even the playing out of reduction targets to the national level turned out to be no recipe for success.

The limitations of top–down national governance in addressing the urgency of climate change are vividly illustrated in the UK during the 1990s (Harding and Newby, 1999). Energy privatization had resulted in a ‘dash for gas’ and a contraction of the coal industry. As a result the UK’s greenhouse gas emissions appeared to decline during a period in which climate change started to become a growing international concern. This structural shift enabled the Labour Government of 1997 to set out an early target of a 20 per cent reduction in the UK’s CO₂ levels by 2010 according to 1990 baseline levels – more demanding even than the Kyoto target.
But the rather more complex nature of the issue soon became apparent when emissions began to rise again during this time, mostly due to continuing growth in road transport and air travel (Royal Commission, 2000). There was also mounting evidence to suggest that there would now have to be a more direct connection in policy initiatives to household energy demand – responsible for as much as 40 per cent of the UK’s CO₂ emissions total (Jones et al., 2000). Critics pointed out that this was evidence that policy initiatives needed to be much more flexible if they were to be effective in addressing climate change.

The reality is that governance itself becomes ‘stretched’ by the demands of climate change. It must reach upwards to the world stage; downwards to regions, local communities and households. Global targets must mean something to households. Global initiatives must resonate at the local level. Communities must play a crucial part in the protection of the global commons.

In the UK, this dynamic has begun to evolve into a complex, multi-level political structure; demonstrating many of the hallmarks of what Hooghe and Marks (2001) have described as a system of ‘multi-level governance’. The UK’s climate change policy framework exemplifies this shift. Decision-making and implementation are coordinated through a complex network of intersections within and between national, international and local levels. The loci for decision-making have become dispersed across a variety of institutional structures.

The importance of the local level in this complex ‘political triad’ has become particularly significant in recent times, where a focus on the behavioural and social changes which will be needed to adapt human society to the constraints of the planet has become increasingly apparent. This recognition has increasingly informed government policy and academic inquiry during the last decade (Jackson, 2005, 2008), and has provided the impetus for a diverse range of emergent ‘grassroots’ initiatives (Church and Elster, 2002; Jackson and Michaelis, 2003).

Perhaps surprisingly, this emphasis on local initiatives for social change draws strength from a long intellectual pedigree. At its broadest level, casting the climate action in terms of behavioural change suggests a particular manifestation of a perennial social issue. As Gardner and Stern (2002) have pointed out, it is essentially the problem of ensuring that behaviours which threaten the well-being of the social group are discouraged and that those which promote long-term well-being are encouraged. In other words it is quite precisely the problem of coordinating individual behaviour for the common good.

Ophuls (1973) argued that, from time immemorial, there have only ever been a few basic methods – written about by philosophers and employed
by societies – for achieving this. Specifically, the four ‘solution types’ are (Gardner and Stern, 2002, p. 27):

1. government laws, regulations and incentives;
2. programmes of education to change people’s attitudes;
3. small group/community management; and
4. moral, religious and/or ethical appeals.

For the most part, modern governance has tended to favour the first two strategies, although there is evidence of a returning allegiance to moral exhortation (for instance in the UK Government’s Act on CO₂ campaign). Gardner and Stern (2002) call community management the ‘forgotten strategy’ because of its prevalence in early forms of social organization and relative absence in modernity. There are of course some clear reasons for this shift, not the least of which is that community itself has become a casualty of increasingly globalized economies (Putnam, 2000; Jackson, 2009).

Nonetheless, in recent years the UK Government has been particularly keen to emphasize the important function that local government and communities can – and should – perform in galvanizing action towards household carbon reduction. The recent publication of the Low Carbon Transition Plan (DECC, 2009) confirms the importance of this agenda. A whole chapter of this latest energy White Paper is devoted to the significance of ‘transforming our homes and communities’ as part of an integrated effort towards meeting the UK’s legally binding target of at least an 80 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions below 1990 levels by 2050. Prior to this, many UK local authorities had already begun the process of both encouraging and introducing community-oriented projects, focusing on changes that individuals and households themselves could make in order to save energy and reduce carbon emissions. During the same period, several ‘non-state’ community projects responded independently to the pressing urgency of directing society towards more sustainable ways of living, again keeping a focus on the important contribution that groups of people – and alternative social and economic arrangements – can make towards enabling a lower carbon future connected with more sustainable lifestyles.

Again the rationale for these initiatives is well established. What makes community management systems work, according to Gardner and Stern (2002), is a combination of participatory decision-making, monitoring, social norms and community sanctions. Interestingly, sanctions and penalties for non-compliance are not the most important element in ensuring compliance. Rather, the effectiveness of group management comes from
the internalization of the group’s interest by individuals in the group. Gardner and Stern suggest that there are several reasons why people internalize group norms. In the first place, they have participated in creating them. In the second place, they can see the value of these norms for themselves in preserving and protecting the interests of the local community and themselves as members of that community.

In addition, these group norms become a part of the shared meaning of the community and contribute to the social well-being of the group, not just through the protection of resources but through the development of trust, collaboration and social cohesion. Sanctions may be necessary to protect the group from those tempted to violate the collective good for individual interests, but the main reason people accept and act on social norms is that doing so cements social relations, signals membership of the group and contributes to a sense of shared meaning in their lives (Jackson, 2005).

This is not to suggest of course that community-based strategies are without drawbacks. In fact, as some of the contributions in this volume highlight, even the matter of defining and working with communities is far from straightforward. It is clear that society is decreasingly made up of integrated, geographically based communities in a way that it once was (Bauman, 2002) and is increasingly made up of numerous diverse communities – communities which often overlap and sometimes exist in complete isolation from one another.

In today’s increasingly technically oriented system of networked communication, one person may well engage in a variety of different communities simultaneously. In the UK this has taken on further complexity due to the shifting role of local government over the last two decades, encouraged by political devolution. The relevance of all these issues in terms of coherent strategies for action and effective engagement means that there is clearly no one approach or project which is necessarily going to reach ‘the community’ and, by extension, the issues within it. As policy makers and practitioners are now acknowledging, a diversity of tools and approaches is required.

Here then lies both the opportunity and the challenge of community-based action on climate change. On the one hand, it offers a meaningful way to achieve global targets and an avenue for renewing social relations at the community level. On the other, it challenges fundamental aspects of social organization in the modern economy and sometimes runs foul of wider structures and constraints. These are the issues which this book sets out to explore.

The first section of the book provides a series of theoretical and intellectual understandings of communities and social change supported by
insights from a range of empirical research studies. In Chapter 1, Peters provides an introductory overview of how the term ‘community’ has been conceptualized in sociological literatures, noting that there remains considerable uncertainty with regard to the way in which communities could or should be defined. The chapter examines the salience of underlying concepts of social organization that can shape and influence the extent to which programmes of engagement are likely to be successful. Drawing on recent empirical work some of the key opportunities and challenges for local government in translating the concepts into practice are considered.

The inter-play between individuals takes on particular significance when considering the role of ‘intentional communities’. Evans (Chapter 2) takes a fresh look at the processes that lie behind the evolution of values and how these play out in community life with regard to people who choose to identify themselves as living sustainable lifestyles. His ethnographic fieldwork points to the importance of moral regulation; a property of the community concept that goes beyond emotional attachment and identification with others. It is suggested that individuals who are attempting to live sustainably move between attachments to various collectives and a sense of detachment in order to pursue the multiple agendas that a (sustainable) lifestyle demands in the modern world.

It is often pointed out that a clear shortcoming of many community-based programmes of engagement and intervention (both state and non-state led) has been their failure to establish, from the outset, rigorous monitoring processes. As Abrahamse (Chapter 3) points out, this is crucial for the proper evaluation of such efforts. Assessing the role of group membership, social norms, social identities, threatened identities and social comparison processes as potential motivators for change, this chapter provides an overview of theoretical approaches to social change. This is complemented with a critical review of several intervention studies that have tried to make use of group dynamics in order to encourage change towards a lower carbon future.

In Part II, attention is turned to challenges for local level climate policy in supporting the transition to low carbon economies. Consideration is given to alternative models of local level governance, decision-making and economic frameworks. In Chapter 4 (Fudge) the development of environmental policy in the UK from the post-war period is examined, drawing attention to the substantial changes that have occurred over the last fifty years and the range of influencing factors that have impacted upon and modified the formation of nation-state politics in this period. The chapter considers how national policy agendas are increasingly contextualized in relation to European legislation, international agreements and local ascendancy. The targeting of individuals and behavioural change
necessitates local government and community-led action as a central facet of the political process.

This theme is picked up by Roberts (Chapter 5), who provides an investigation of the potential extent of local authority influence in galvanizing community action on climate change with particular emphasis on key issues for practitioners. The chapter explores the circumstances under which effective engagement and action might be realized and the comparative advantage associated with a variety of approaches being used in attempts to establish these conditions.

The focus for Chapter 6 (Spinney) is on partnership working and green alliances, highlighting some of the tensions encountered between non-governmental organizations and local government in operationalizing cycling as a sustainable mode of urban mobility. Particular problems associated with working in a low carbon policy community are highlighted, noting that certain stakeholders are in fact excluded and transformed through the multi-faceted process of partnership working.

The transformation of lifestyles in pursuit of a sustainable society connects closely with intellectual investigation in the field of sustainable consumption. In Chapter 7, Seyfang presents an holistic ‘New Economics’ agenda for sustainable consumption which involves new ways of working, redefining the measurement of value and progress, new uses for money and expressing ecological citizenship. Applying these ideas to practice, the chapter presents examples of complementary currencies (time banks and local money systems) and critically assesses their potential as tools for carbon reduction and sustainable development.

The question of whether current forms of organizational structure and governance are capable of supporting and encouraging more sustainable lifestyles at the regional and sub-regional level is explored by Cox and Johnson (Chapter 8). Here, attention is drawn to the inter-connectedness of the economy, environmental constraints, societal values and global interdependence. It is argued that a first and necessary step to decarbonizing local economies lies in the recognition that it is possible to change and re-engineer the economy to better serve societal goals at the national and local level. The chapter sets out a novel range of propositions for an effective approach in support of communities making the transition to low carbon, ‘high well-being’ lifestyles.

The final section of the book, Part III, incorporates a variety of models and case studies, showcasing the opportunities and challenges for community-focused action in a diverse range of settings and contexts. The first example given (Gerrard, Chapter 9) is the Community Carbon Reduction Project (CRed) – one of the more established carbon reduction programmes in the UK. The project tracks and monitors progress of
participants along carbon reduction pathways related to home and work life, encouraging them to do more. CRed’s ethos is that small things do add up and that ‘we are all in this together’. Periodic evaluation seeks to establish the reality of community carbon-saving, providing important evidence into the progress made by individuals as a contribution to meeting the challenges of climate change.

Davidson (Chapter 10) outlines Global Action Plan’s (GAP’s) EcoTeams programme, including evidence gathered from participant feedback and measured savings. The programme is assessed with reference to current behaviour change literature, highlighting the underlying basis of GAP’s methods and drawing attention to implications for the wider field and the role of government.

The sort of positive progress that can be realized through a pragmatic climate change strategy in local government and effective communication of climate change messages to the public is illustrated by the example of Woking Borough Council. In Chapter 11 (Curran) Woking’s approaches are considered, exploring a range of techniques and initiatives pursued and established by the Council, including the formation and activities of its energy and environmental services company Thameswey Ltd.

Ecovillages and transition towns are examples of local community initiatives for carbon reduction and climate change action that continue to make progress without specific prompting or assistance from government agencies or policy. Lockyer (Chapter 12) describes the types of activities being undertaken in these communities and considers their effectiveness within the context of the challenges posed by climate change. The author also explores participants’ motivations for engaging in these initiatives and investigates the policy obstacles and opportunities that they have faced along the way.

In Chapter 13, Bushay describes the Energy Conscious Households in Action (ECHO Action) project – a novel 2 and-a-half-year initiative which ran from 2006 to 2009 and was part-funded through the European Union under the Intelligent Energy Europe Programme. Its underlying aims and approach are set out and findings to have emerged from two London-based groups and other European partners presented. The chapter articulates how progress made by ECHO Action fits into the context of similar models of community engagement for improved household energy and environmental performance, including an assessment of participant profiles. Attention is drawn to the problem of broader community engagement beyond enthusiastic, already ‘pro-environmental’ individuals.

The issues of sustainability and quality of life in rural communities are addressed in Chapter 14 (Lee and Taylor), which takes a close look at the activities of a recently established low carbon community initiative in the
village of Hadlow, Kent. A unique feature of this case study is the collaboration between members of the village community and the local college of further and higher education (Hadlow College), where the project’s inception and development began. The chapter demonstrates how self-motivated communities can conflate reduced fossil carbon emissions with access to sustainable supplies of energy, food and water. The process of empowering project participants to embrace positive action has facilitated a range of additional benefits including improved mental and physical well-being.

Another, quite different, rural community case study is presented in Chapter 15 (Cardona). Here the author describes how the reaction of a small farming community in Malta to an imposed radical land-use change by the Maltese Government has resulted in a socially cohesive drive towards new opportunities for sustainable agriculture and locally sourced products. The restoration of previously inaccessible archaeological and historical buildings and monuments has been integrated into the project with a view to encouraging the general public to appreciate the natural beauty of the surroundings as well as agricultural life in the area.

In summary, the contributions to this book highlight both the promise of community-based action on climate change and some of its limitations. It is clear immediately that collective action at the local, community level provides many opportunities for contributing to and enabling the transition to a low carbon economy. This potential is not always straightforward – partly because of the eclectic nature of community configurations and partly because of the existence of wider constraints on community action. But it remains worth pursuing as an integral facet of a more cohesive drive towards sustainability.

When it comes to overcoming those wider constraints, there is a clear need to think ‘outside the box’ and consider the potential for alternative and imaginative models and approaches to connecting with individuals. For example, exciting new possibilities emerge around alternative currencies and the re-engineering of local economies.

Although many local authorities across the UK have been slow to take up the challenge of community engagement in practical ways, the evidence in this book suggests that they have an increasingly important and influential role to play, in their capacity as an interface between citizens and government policy. An emerging – and growing – body of evidence demonstrates that the relatively small numbers of ‘best practice’ cases are in fact making some noteworthy progress that might usefully be replicated, with suitable modifications, on a broader scale.

In the final analysis, communities come in many forms – a mixture of policy tools and practical ‘handles’ which people can identify with and
latch on to will be essential. Community action is about collective endeavour towards a common goal – a better future. It is the antithesis of isolation and individualism.

REFERENCES
