

## Lessons from local action for national policy on sustainable development

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Thousands of community-focused programmes and projects are working across the UK to create a better quality of life for local people. Many are in areas suffering from deprivation and exclusion. They are working on issues such as food, health, waste and recycling, transport, conservation and community development. A report by Chris Church and Jake Elster for the Community Development Foundation looked at the impact of local activity and the lessons it has for national policy-makers. The study found that:

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-  **Although the direct impact of most local projects on resource use and the natural environment are limited and are mostly restricted to improvements in their own localities, the collective impact of such projects on national targets may be significant. Their numbers are growing, and with support could grow more.**
  
-  **The socio-economic impacts of such projects are frequently more immediately apparent and quantifiable. These include job creation, training, community development and capacity building.**
  
-  **Local projects have important effects beyond their immediate impacts. One of the most important is in building awareness of and engagement with environmental issues, and supporting individual and collective environmental action.**
  
-  **While there is much talk of partnership, relationships between local projects and larger organisations take many different forms: true 'partnership' seems rare.**
  
-  **Integration of work on environmental and socio-economic issues happens in many different ways, but faces a range of obstacles including poor policy level support. If the role of local action in sustainable development is to increase, the researchers conclude that these obstacles need to be tackled through:**
  - more supportive policy frameworks;
  - changes to funding mechanisms and support structures;
  - greater recognition of the value of community-focused local action.

## Introduction

Local action to protect and improve the environment has been part of British life for over thirty years. Activities such as local conservation and clean-up projects have been joined by community recycling projects, which in turn generated composting and furniture repair programmes. More recently health and environment, food and community-car-sharing projects have emerged. Such projects may often be stereotyped as the concern of middle-class green activists, yet many are in and are run by communities suffering from exclusion.

### Local action – does it matter?

This research shows that local projects can have important impacts, such as providing jobs, reducing waste and improving neighbourhoods. So far the contribution of much of this work to sustainable development has gone unrecognised. This study suggests that well-run local action can deliver:

- practical local improvements that meet local needs;
- more individuals taking action to change their lifestyles;
- the achievement of local targets that complement national ones;
- removal of hostility to environmental change;
- support for national policy changes leading to sustainable development;
- advice (if it is asked for) on how external support could help maximise local contributions to national sustainability targets.

Good projects deliver many of these outcomes: many more could do so if they were adequately supported. The next few years will see major environmental challenges where significant lifestyle changes will be necessary. Local action can engage people and show that change is possible and desirable.

### The case study projects

The case studies examined ranged from a project to reclaim derelict land and integrate a new Hindu Temple into its local community, to a project offering human-powered 'rickshaw' bicycle taxis to offer mobility to the older people of a neighbourhood. Projects were chosen on the basis of combining environmental and social activity, but there was wide diversity amongst the case studies in relation to their position on the 'environmental/social spectrum'. This diversity was also evident in the size and scope of their operations, their geographical coverage, their lead organisation, and the nature and depth of community involvement in their leadership or activities.

Six general categories of action were identified within the projects selected (see Table 1).

However, these 'types' were by no means absolute: there was often substantial overlap and almost all the initiatives studied had secondary impacts in addition to these primary activities.

### Environmental impacts

Each project or programme had direct environmental impacts. Although these were usually limited (even in the context of the project), their collective impacts may be significant. Some 350 projects are linked to the

Table 1: Types of project

<i>Type of project</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Community/social enterprises with an environmental theme, offering training, employment and personal development to local residents who are unemployed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Heeley City Farm</li> <li>• Vines Centre Trust</li> </ul>
Projects using community development and local action to engage communities with wider natural environment or sustainable development issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Redbridge Community Agenda 21</li> <li>• Renfrewshire Sustainable Communities project</li> <li>• West Devon Environmental Network</li> </ul>
Projects employing environmentally friendly solutions and tools to meet local need.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sheffield Green Estate project</li> <li>• Downham Cycle Taxis</li> <li>• Ashley Vale Action Group</li> <li>• BioRegional Development Group</li> </ul>
Projects working to promote, and raise awareness of, ecological environment or sustainable development issues to local communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wai Yin environmental vision project</li> <li>• Wiltshire Agenda 21</li> <li>• Balaji Temple</li> </ul>
Projects where local people are working to improve their local environment as part of improving their local quality of life or regenerating their area.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SESKU environment group</li> <li>• Hartcliffe Health and Environment Action Group</li> <li>• Balmoral Estate Good Neighbour Agreement</li> </ul>
Projects that are primarily working to address local needs/issues but that are having some linked, albeit limited environmental impacts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• St Anne's estate Monday Club</li> <li>• Calstock Development Trust</li> </ul>

national Community Recycling Network, for example, and there are a further 300 or so furniture recycling projects. Similarly, about 250 groups are registered with the UK Food Poverty Network, many of which have emerged in the last two years.

### Socio-economic impacts

The projects also had significant social impacts. These included:

#### *Creating jobs*

Heeley City Farm and linked organisations employ 60 people, a significant number for a low income area, and the Renfrewshire programme has helped 35 people into jobs or training. In other projects, staff numbers were small but even amongst those relying on volunteers, several were supported by a paid worker, often employed by the local authority.

#### *Training and other experience*

Many projects helped people gain qualifications. Heeley City Farm provides vocational training; West DEN's Ley of the Land project provides training in countryside management, while Calstock Development Trust took 100 people through one-to-one IT training. About twenty 18- to 25-year-olds are going through the New Deal Environmental Task Force route at the Vines Centre at any one time.

Projects also helped develop skills in other ways: most projects work with volunteers who gain confidence and experience in this way. One interviewee summed it up by saying "People don't feel intimidated by trees". Volunteers may not receive formal qualifications but they make an important contribution to local action.

#### *Conventional economic activity*

Some projects had a significant presence in their local economy: more than 100,000 people have visited Heeley City Farm annually making it a major visitor attraction. It also runs many successful training courses. Other projects support mainstream economic activity: the BioRegional Development Group, for example, works on charcoal production with B&Q. Others again sell goods and services specifically for local people: St Anne's runs a stall passing on school uniforms at low cost. The Vines Centre recycles furniture and computers and promotes credit unions.

#### *Community development:*

Other socio-economic impacts include community and personal development and the strengthening of community pride.

### Engaging and involving people

Local projects have another important role: they are often the means by which previously uninterested people first become involved in environmental action. There are many different approaches:

- Renfrewshire has engaged communities, individuals and schools with action on community gardens

alongside social events including line-dancing evenings.

- SESKU has built strong community involvement in work on new public green spaces.
- The Green Estate project is engaging people from low-income estates in work on recycling.
- The Wai Yin project works with the Chinese community in Manchester to raise awareness of energy efficiency and recycling.

The projects suggest some common ways forward:

- start where people are, start simple, and build on success;
- make raising environmental awareness a defined work area for the project;
- help provide accessible and sustainable solutions to identified local problems;
- engage policy makers through positive local action to build support.

### Partnerships and relationships

All the projects had relationships with others through which they provide and receive support and information: these were often a key to success. However, although such relationships are commonly described as 'partnerships', the research suggests that this conceals a much more complex pattern of relationships. Partnership implies a roughly equal relationship, yet most do not have that equal standing: rather, there seems to be a hierarchy of relationships.

- Smaller projects are frequently in a **client** relationship, depending on support from a local authority or another larger body.
- As projects develop so they acquire a degree of self-reliance. They may still be **supported** by the larger body but will be broadening their horizons. They may have a greater social identity and be less keen to be guided.
- As they grow a more balanced approach emerges: they can develop work in **co-operation** while maintaining their own identity.
- **Partnership** in the sense of some equality of stature and a formalised working agreement seemed to be the exception rather than the rule in these projects.

### Support for local action

Most projects received some external support, often through 'intermediary agencies' such as issue-based networks (e.g. the Community Recycling Network). However, as new projects emerge, sometimes outside existing structures, they may be unaware of such support at times when it might be most helpful. Moreover, smaller projects described how involvement in networks helped give them new insights, but said that networking takes time and resources that puts extra pressure on those involved.

Local projects relied heavily on personal contact. The 'core supporter' of a project – perhaps a community development worker or council environmental co-ordinator – is often a source of

advice and inspiration but such staff have reported lacking up-to-date information to help them advise on possibilities for action. As projects grew, new challenges emerged and local councils and intermediary agencies might no longer be able to support the size and scale of operations underway. This is a particular area of concern if initiatives are not to be stifled.

### Problems and barriers

Several obstacles were cited. The most common problems are funding related. These include:

- obtaining funding for development work;
- difficulty in accessing sources of funding;
- a lack of understanding of sustainable development by funders; and
- dealing with funding paid in arrears.

This suggests that lack of funding guidance and support may be an important barrier to the growth of projects.

Other issues raised were:

- area-related problems such as vandalism, racial tension, dispersed rural populations, and differing local needs;
- organisational problems such as the need for specialist skills and problems of partnership working;
- a lack of political commitment to and understanding of sustainable development.

### Conclusion

Integration of environmental and social agendas is happening in many ways and there are lessons for policy-makers at every level. The researchers conclude that there is still a need for better integration across sectors and disciplines and for local, regional and national government to:

- recognise the full value of community-based local action;
- address the underlying barriers facing this work, such as poor policy support;
- develop working structures that enable intermediary agencies to link in to regional and national organisations;
- develop support and information networks that genuinely meet local needs for information where it is needed.

Funding systems also need reviewing if they are to:

- ensure that these support integrated sustainability-based programmes;
- value soft outcomes as well as traditional outputs;
- make grants more accessible to smaller groups;

- free long-established well-run projects from excessive bureaucracy;
- provide more secure core funding for the most effective groups.

National voluntary organisations need to review their work with local communities, in order to provide more effective support, and local community-based organisations need to:

- promote their own work more effectively;
- work to tackle the institutional barriers to effective local action, and
- develop joint strategies to tackle those barriers.

### About the project

Seventeen projects were selected from a 'long list' of 63 initiatives using criteria including location, project size, income and innovation. Case studies were based on extended semi-structured interviews key actors including project staff, steering group members, and community activists. The researchers also interviewed representatives of a range of national organisations.

### How to get further information

CDF is taking this work forward, firstly with a series of regional seminars and events across the UK. CDF is happy to discuss this work with anyone interested: for details please contact: Chris Church, CDF, 60 Highbury Grove, London N5 6AG Tel: 0207 226 5375, email: [chrisc@suscom.org](mailto:chrisc@suscom.org), [www.cdf.org.uk](http://www.cdf.org.uk).

The full report, **Thinking locally, acting nationally: Lessons for policy from local action on sustainable development** by Chris Church and Jake Elster, is published for the Foundation by YPS as part of the Reconciling Environmental and Social Concerns series (ISBN 1 84263 066 0, price £12.95).