

Community number capture

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How do you measure environmental change?

‘**T**here’s this really poisonous relationship at times’, sighed a volunteer. One of the paid staff tried to explain: ‘It just feels like what we all loved doing has become our job and it carries all that job stuff with it’. Others were more passionate: ‘We’ve been usurped!’, ‘this funding scheme has taken over’, ‘it’s ruining what we set out to achieve’.

I was researching community environmental activism, and had seen this group morph from a motivated ‘can do’ collective of inspired and inspiring individuals, via becoming a successful small organisation winning relatively large government grants, to the position it was now in: with tensions over the group’s purpose, vision and strategy, and even tensions with each other *inside* the community. By the time I was conducting these interviews and focus groups the volunteers had become exhausted, drained and fed-up.

What had happened here? This practical, passionate group - set up to cut carbon at a community level - had within a few years become the darling of a government-funding scheme. Its volunteers had worked hard. They had invested so much time, energy, enthusiasm and talents. Now I found its activists jaded, and some seemed bitter and burnt-out. What had gone wrong? Where did the negativity come from, when all had seemed so hopeful before?

This article is part of my efforts to find the answers to these questions. In the end I came to believe that what had happened to their community was that it had been transformed through numbers.

Getting sucked into the numbers game

The group was formed when a number of activists came together in an Edinburgh suburb in 2008. They had no specific plan, and only vague notions about what they would do, but they were aware that a number of local residents were concerned about environmental issues. Climate change was increasingly in the news, and some also wanted action on ever-lengthening commodity supply-chains and our over-reliance on supermarkets. One local resident, wanting to 'do something' about all the issues that kept cropping up, organised a well attended meeting, and from this a core group formed to meet more regularly.

Together, this community decided to adopt the increasingly popular Transition Towns model. Someone had brought along a *Guardian* article about Transition, and another had heard inspiring things from Toines, where Transition started. The group's aims fitted with Transition's three-fold concerns: climate change, local resilience and peak oil. This newly emerging community were captivated by the grassroots 'do it yourself' attitude in Transition's blogs, books and guidance.

Activists threw themselves into tasks with gusto. The issues were pressing and the group enjoyed working together. They organised 'green drinks' in the pub to attract folk with similar interests, started plans for a community orchard on unused land nearby, and held regular film screenings. Each event was free, but required lots of collective effort. The group grew, and felt they were doing something useful. The initial group had just over a year later grown to include around twenty regular participants.

In 2009 the group became formally part of the Transition Towns movement. They became what Toines HQ called 'mullers' - groups who are considering becoming an official Transition Town, and representing their area. The group decided to apply for funds from the Climate Challenge Fund (CCF), a new scheme set up by the Scottish government to assist local communities to reduce carbon. This was part of the SNP's attempt to rebrand Scotland as green, ethical and low carbon. Alex Salmond was talking of Scotland as 'the Saudi Arabia of renewables'. The policy was also influenced by an increasing emphasis on local communities taking responsibility for their own carbon lives, rather than leaving it to governments or businesses. The only formal application qualification was the existence of a community dimension, and recipient communities had to be able to demonstrate

their ability to cut carbon.

This policy was both top-down and bottom-up: the state was passing on its responsibility and agency for carbon to local communities, but it was also enabling local desire and activism from the grassroots. The group began to imagine what they could do with more money: more projects and less need for fund-raising coffee mornings, or begging and borrowing essential things: printers, projectors and meeting spaces.

The funding bid was successful. All were delighted! Their efforts were being recognised formally. So they employed two full-time staff workers, hired consultants, and trained volunteers in energy efficiency measures and behaviour change techniques. They felt amazed that the group were being funded to do the things they wanted to do anyway: the money would give them increased profile, and take the strain off their emotionally drained volunteers.

But key to the funding was the need to *demonstrate* that they were doing what they were doing: it was not enough just to do it. An important distinction. How much carbon had they saved? At first it was strange to think about people's environmental relationships in terms of demonstration - people either 'got it' (the environmental challenge humanity - including their neighbourhood - faces) or not. But, as requested, they drew up behaviour change pledges, and worked out how much each technology installed would save. They ran a series of courses where local residents could gather and talk regularly about their environmental impact (*Carbon Conversations*). For each project they counted the carbon saved. Gathering this information was hard work, but their funding conditions stated they had to be able to demonstrate the carbon saved and the effectiveness of government money.

At first there were only small hurdles to becoming a 'proper' community group. A bank account was opened relatively easily, though the constitution took more time and discussion. But things were all relatively straightforward for the group, which was largely comprised of the well-resourced - people with time, skills, jobs, enthusiasm and experience. These were the kind of people seen by John Mohan of the Third Sector Research Centre as the 'civic core', demographically disposed to volunteering, often middle-aged, female, faith-based and well-off. The group were amazed at what resources they found in their neighbours. Government funding provided the increase in profile, scope and scale that some had wished for. Newspaper articles helped attract new volunteers, and the local MP came to one

event wishing to encourage 'genuine community action'.

But slowly doubts began to creep in, and some long-term volunteers admitted to feeling dissatisfied. After a year of funding I spoke again to those involved. The group was transformed. Some volunteers were now paid staff. The group had shifted away from its pool of relatively cash-poor volunteers, and relied on a small number of time-starved paid staff and interns. The paid workers felt drained, and that they were expected to carry out most of the tasks. Meanwhile volunteers were less forthcoming: 'why would I help when there's someone paid to do it?' The group's sense of togetherness had shifted. This was partly because of increased scale, but something else about the group's composition and the relationships within it had also changed. Volunteers struggled to name or describe what had happened.

Numbers and community

The Climate Challenge Fund scheme was a crucial initiative for the Scottish government's ambitious carbon-reduction targets (42 per cent by 2020, 80 per cent by 2050). It distributed £37.7 million in grants between 2008 and 2011 (the period during which I carried out this research), and the scheme was subsequently extended to March 2015, with a further £10.3 million annually being made available. The awards made between 2008 and 2011 ranged in value from £7000 to £650,000, with 331 awards being made to 261 'communities': community continues to be central to the Scottish government's carbon emissions reduction programme.

Only communities can apply for Climate Challenge Fund for funds - NGOs such as Friends of the Earth are excluded from applying. Its aim is to 'empower' communities to act on climate change, and its funds allow local communities 'to take control of their future'. Running through the policy is a belief not only that community is a 'Good Thing', but also that getting people into communities means they will consume and pollute less: i.e. behave better.

A second key aspect of the scheme, though it is not immediately apparent, is that it is based on numbers. Funding bids required numbers: the quantity of carbon dioxide applicants would save, per person; the number of people in their neighbourhood or 'target community'; and a neat breakdown of how funds would be spent. The collection of these numbers was hard work for the volunteers. In particular, as we have seen, it could be difficult to demonstrate that carbon had been

saved. But in order to demonstrate that someone on a *Carbon Conversations* course had transformed her environmental behaviour, numbers needed to be generated - and this meant that participants had to be given a questionnaire, and asked to fill it in to show their 'before and after' carbon footprint. Behaviour change pledges, such as promising not to fly, became part of counting the carbon saved. Lots of boxes to tick and numbers to fill in.

The numbers were needed by the government for a range of reasons. Categorising each project by the percentage of carbon saved per person made them more comparable; it was easier to evaluate how efficient and effective the spending of government money had been. Numbers were seen as more objective, and as therefore removing any civil servant preferences or favouritism. There is now a widespread belief that numbers are transparent, public and objective. And at first glance numbers do seem clearer and transparent. If one project can cut carbon by 5 per cent and another by 7 per cent then surely the second one is 'better'. Or at least it provides more value for money.

But numbers only tell part of the story. At the beginning of this funding scheme, one family was chosen to highlight the benefits of low-carbon living. Their house was retrofitted, fully insulated and the latest eco-efficiency technology installed. The carbon savings were quite large, and the house was showcased as demonstrating the potential of targeted funding. The family was pleased too - they had also saved a lot of money on energy bills. However, when asked what they would do with the financial savings, they talked excitedly, and with no hint of irony, of flying to visit family almost 10,000km away. Of course these flights didn't make it into the carbon reduction figure.

This story is an illustration of the Jevons Paradox - that increases in energy efficiency tend to lead to increased energy consumption - and it highlights the problem of seeing things only as numbers. Insulating your semi-detached may save 2 per cent of your carbon footprint (alongside saving money), but this slack is often taken up through increased carbon 'expenditure' elsewhere - possibly on a warmer house or more flights. But this is only a paradox if it is accepted that environmental relationships can be numerically defined in this way. Being moved to tears by the plight of the snow leopard, or concerned about the traffic pollution that exacerbates your child's asthma, are experiences that are not easily reduced to numbers.

By definition these qualitative factors cannot be accounted for - in the Jevons

paradox or any other equation - but they are often what motivates people to commit to the long haul and hard work of grassroots environmental action. Numbers often achieve their seeming clarity by removing the surrounding messy context. Yet more often than not concerns for environmental justice or climate change emerge from the messiness of life, not a list of clean-cut numbers.

It is context that gives numbers meaning. Thus much of the recent reduction in the carbon emissions of western states has only been achieved through the outsourcing of factories, heavy industry and production of consumables to China and elsewhere. The surface number says Scotland has reduced its carbon footprint. The messy context has more to do with unseen emissions outsourced and shifted offshore.

Lorenzo Fioramonti has shown how numbers are used to reinforce the grip of global markets, through means such as credit ratings and statistics on GDP or inflation.¹ But numbers are also increasingly common at a grassroots level. They can mediate individual relationships and shift the focus, attentions and energy of community groups. ACORN statistics classify where we live. MOSAIC defined each UK household into 67 'habitus types'. There is also an increasing metrification of everyday life: exam grades rather than more capacious understandings of intelligence, benefits claims rather than poverty - and carbon footprints rather than connection with environmental others.

In our world of commodities numbers most often measure price. But what's the price of a landscape? How can you value an extinct species? How can we put a number on a changed culture?

Ends and means

The funders' focus on numbers as a means of monitoring the group's activities, effectiveness and utility subtly shifted and twisted the group's aims in two ways: first, there was a shifting of the relationship between means and ends, and second, the bringing in of market principles into the community.

Central to Transition Town projects is the linked nature of means and ends. The ultimate destination or end is a 'resilient relocalised community'. People get there through 'community action', as a 'community movement', and 'taking responsibility

for our local community's resilience'. Community is means and end. But the group I studied gradually shifted from being one where means and ends were united, to become one in which means were only seen as useful if they served specific quantifiable ends.

Michael Sandel has shown the connections between ends and means in everyday events, in activities such as paying your child to write thank-you letters for birthday gifts, or hiring professional speechwriters to draft your best man's speech.² In these examples the desired end is impaired by the means: children very quickly learn to churn out short, tokenistic letters. They follow the incentive to the letter rather than its spirit. Relationships like friendship cannot be bought: 'somehow, the money that buys the friendship dissolves it, or turns it into something else' (p94). We could substitute community here for family. Intuitively we recognise that community feeling is as affected by money as is friendship.

Sandel draws on many examples to insist that money and numbers, whenever they are introduced, transform relationships:

... friendship and the social practices that sustain it are constituted by certain norms, attitudes and virtues. Commodifying these practices displaces these norms - sympathy, generosity, thoughtfulness, attentiveness - and replaces them with market values ... A bought apology or wedding toast, though recognizable as something akin to an authentic one, is nevertheless tainted and diminished. Money can buy these things, but only in a somewhat degraded form' (p117).

The growing marketisation of everyday life means that money and numbers increasingly intervene to transform relationships, as well as ideas about belonging and moral duty.

Community projects, community action and community belonging are forms of togetherness that are seen as 'part of what it is to be human' by Transition Towns; they are constituted by certain norms, attitudes and values, rather than for purely instrumental aims such as CO2 reduction. Paying someone to belong to a 'community' or deploying 'community' to reduce carbon subtly alters the motivation for carrying out the task:

When people are engaged in an activity they consider intrinsically worthwhile,

offering them money may weaken their motivation by depreciating or 'crowding out' their intrinsic interest or commitment. Standard economics theory construes all motivations, whatever their character or source, as preferences and assumes they are additive. But this misses the corrosive effect of money (What Money Can't Buy, p122).

Community activists and policy-makers take note: environmentalists are very often intrinsically motivated, feeling obliged to act for deep ethical reasons. These motivations are not only more effective and long lasting than those arising from financial incentives: they also firmly link means and ends without the need for any intermediary money.

Tom Crompton has also emphasised that intrinsic motivators are more effective, long-lasting and deeper motivations for action than extrinsic payments or targets.³ The manner in which an activity is encouraged (staff salaries, targets) becomes separated from the original goals. Tracing the ways in which means and ends are linked to extrinsic and intrinsic motivations helps explicate the effects of market mediation, money and numbers on community enterprises.

Iris Marion Young has eloquently argued that neoliberalism, individualisation and the marketisation of everyday life can compromise community and collective activism from within. In my case study I saw how this could happen through separating out means and ends, the use of number intermediaries, and other market processes: these then come between individual relationships. Volunteers in the group began to adopt instrumental and individual attitudes, for example asking whether a staff member 'provides value for money'. In *Soundings* 54 Doreen Massey discussed the way in which we have been enjoined 'to become consumers rather than workers, consumers where we were passengers' (p9). In a similar way, members of this group were being encouraged towards a general mood of thinking about their activities in terms of the market.

Ismail, a character in the Wu Ming collective's novel *Alai*, concluded: 'Over the years I've learned that the means change the end'.⁴ And this is what happened in this group. Once accountability and numbers became a core means, the end of a community of belonging, togetherness and living justly with environmental others was sidelined. Banal, everyday activities like using numbers to justify or demonstrate a group's effectiveness can crowd out the pursuit of the 'good life' and spill over into changing community relationships.

Conclusion

Neoliberalism has been commonly held to be a form of free market fundamentalism, and to involve the rolling back of the state, leaving 'natural' markets to arrange our lives. Two things in the last few years have challenged that. First, the huge state bailouts of failed banks and the billions spent in government stimulus packages and quantitative easing - characterised by many as corporate welfare - have shown that it is only some kinds of state intervention that contemporary capitalism holds in disdain - otherwise neoliberalism would have started dying the moment the UK treasury stepped in to guarantee Northern Rock. Secondly, as Michel Foucault's work such as *Society Must Be Defended* (2003) has shown, the neoliberal project is a thoroughgoing constructivist project, that seeks to rebuild society from top to bottom on the model of competition, through disciplining people to accept this as the natural order.

The government scheme in a small northern European nation that I studied was focused on the nicest of nice policy wonk's favourite subject: community. But in fact it is an example of how the neoliberal worldview fundamentally intervenes in the relations between us, at a grassroots level. The CCF may have been dreamt up with the best of intentions. Those working for it, and with its funds, are not the 'bad guys'; they are hard-pressed volunteers badly wishing to do something for the much-needed environmental challenges facing Scotland. Yet its success as government policy is possible only because it is faithful to the core of the neoliberal agenda: it foists competition and marketisation onto people - despite its rhetoric about community and togetherness. And it may well be that this rhetoric is precisely the reason that it is able to achieve this. A cloak of 'community' is used to further the restructuring of society and everyday life along competitive and individualist lines. Other people become competitors instead of potential friends, who might be offering a learning experience full of promise. Whatever community means - and it has been used in a wide variety of ways - it is here being used to smuggle in the dissolution of what many would consider its synonyms: solidarity, collectives, association, belonging and togetherness.

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Soundings

Notes

1. Lorenzo Fioramonti, *How Numbers Rule the World*, Zed 2014.

2. Michael Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits to Markets*, Allen Lane 2012.

3. Tom Crompton, *Weathercocks and Signposts*, WWF 2008; and *Common Cause*, WWF 2011.

4. Wu Ming, *Altai: a novel*, Verso 2013.