

Participatory Climate Action: Reflections on Community Diversity and the Role of External Experts

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Submitted: 31 January 2024 **Accepted:** 20 May 2024 **Published:** 17 July 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Transformative Local Governments: Addressing Social Urban Challenges by Bringing People and Politics Together” edited by Jua Cilliers (University of Technology Sydney), Ana Maria Vargas Falla (Lund University), Gareth Wall (University of Birmingham), and Paula Barros (Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.i345>

Abstract

Academics have often contributed to designing, running, and evaluating participatory events with publics on climate action. Whilst climate assemblies are perhaps the most well-known of such events, there is also a proliferation of smaller and more local projects suggesting scope for reflection on the role of academic researchers in this evolving space. We deploy an experimental methodology that blends personal reflections with group discussion amongst the authors to help unpack the lessons learned from a project led by the local council, where we facilitated the involvement of local people in decision-making around climate action. Reflecting on our individual and academic positionalities, we question the extent to which we are well placed to build, maintain, and sustain trust, which requires spending time in place, continuity, and ceding power. As “outsiders” with “elite connotations,” our role as actors in this space is open for discussion. Indeed, our involvement could be perceived as a missed opportunity to retain more money and knowledge locally by ceding more responsibility to grassroots organisations. Our experience also suggests that framing public participation in terms of design and facilitation deficit is somewhat misleading. It is not just a process that needs to be attuned to diverse communities, but an ongoing relationship that needs certain enabling conditions to flourish, including conducive funding frameworks and a willingness to address incumbent power differentials between state and non-state actors.

Keywords

action research; climate governance; deliberation; local authority; local government; place-based; public participation; reflexivity; sustainability; transformation

1. Introduction

In the context of (the need for) climate action in democratic societies, universities have been key sites for building our knowledge base on the causes and impacts of anthropogenic climate change; making the moral and business arguments for early climate action; the identification of vested interests, barriers to change, and the risk of “unjust” transitions; the nurturing of environmental citizenship; and the development and deployment of skills for effective public engagement on this huge societal challenge. Academics have played prominent roles in designing, running, and evaluating many deliberative events with publics on climate action, reflecting the dual needs for democratic renewal and transformative governance. Probably the most well-known, emblematic, extensive, and expensive of such events are Climate Assemblies (Andrews, 2022; Shehabi & Al-Masri, 2022; Wells et al., 2021). But there is also a proliferation of smaller and more local projects, events, and initiatives involving academics, citizens, and local government, suggesting there is scope for reflection on the role of academic researchers as actors in this evolving space, e.g., on what we do well, should avoid, or could do better, and to what extent this aligns with our multiple identities (e.g., thematic experts, engaged citizens) and our positionality as non-residents and as income receivers (i.e., recipients of [state] funding to undertake this project).

In this article, we seek to shed more light on these (self) critical questions by deploying an experimental methodology that blends personal reflections with group discussion among the authors. This helps us to unpack the lessons we learned from a project with a local council (grant holders) who partnered with us to help them undertake local public engagement activities around climate action. The project did not involve formal data collection for the purpose of research. Perhaps it could be labelled as “action research,” although there is no universally agreed definition for this term (Altrichter et al., 2002). Thus, we draw on the interpretation of Winter (1998, p. 53) who suggests that: “Action research is about seeking a voice with which to speak one’s experience and one’s ability to learn from that experience.”

There is clearly scope for qualitative researchers to reflect on our own voice, as much as on our ability to capture and represent other voices (O’Sullivan, 2015). Indeed, doing so is vital in a participatory project such as this where we seek to “comanage rather than dominate the local public sphere” (Chatterton, 2000, p. 179). Whilst some have reflected deeply on their own voice (e.g., Quayle, 2007), we found very few publications which presented the individual voices of multiple researchers (for rare examples see Donovan et al., 2011; Riecken et al., 2005). By its very nature, such an article requires flexibility in structure and format. We agreed to organise our thoughts and learning in this article as follows.

We start by reviewing literature on community diversity and external expertise in relation to public participation and providing a brief introduction to action research (note that it is beyond the scope of this article to explore whether public participation around climate governance is different to public participation around any other social issue, thus we point readers who are particularly interested in this question towards Howarth et al.’s [2023] report on enabling place-based climate action and Devine-Wright et al.’s [2022] paper on placing people at the heart of climate action). Next, we describe the project, the target communities, and what we did. We then introduce the co-authors and the reasons why we individually wanted to participate in this project and article. Next, we reflect on how the project worked out, split up into two major parts. The first part is an analysis of the differences encountered between the two communities where the project was executed. The second discusses the implications of these differences for external

experts, in other words, how the diversity of a local authority area presents challenges in practice for researchers trying to support local government climate action ambitions. After these two parts, we speak back to the themes of community diversity and external expertise through our individual reflections, before moving on to conclude by synthesising our findings, contextualising them within the existing literature, and discussing what contributions academia can (and should) make in supporting “transformative” climate governance at the local level.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Community Diversity in Public Participation

Research consistently highlights the prevalence of self-selection bias in public participation initiatives (including but not limited to those centred around climate action), which are more likely to attract people who are: middle age or older, have higher levels of education, higher household incomes, live in areas with lower levels of deprivation, are employed (or retired), and identify as being from white ethnic groups (Abas et al., 2023; Bobbio, 2019; Güemes & Resina, 2019; Pateman et al., 2021). Conversely, there is often a struggle to recruit people from lower-income communities (Bobbio, 2019), even though research suggests that, in some cases, these are the very people who have the most to gain from participation (e.g., in environmental citizen science; Pateman et al., 2021); and are most at risk from climate impacts (Benevolenza & DeRigne, 2018), implying that their inclusion in decision-making on this topic is also a matter of social justice (Clark, 2017). Meanwhile, “elite” and “special interest” groups are more likely to exert influence on participatory decision-making processes than less active community members, who often struggle to be heard (King et al., 2007). There are several factors that contribute towards social inequity in public and civic participation, including: unevenly distributed social and economic capital (Saltkjel & Malmberg-Heimonen, 2013); lack of alignment of projects with local needs (Galende-Sánchez & Sorman, 2021; Uittenbroek et al., 2019); power differentials between state and non-state actors (Barnes et al., 2003; Blanchet-Cohen, 2014); lack of trust in public institutions (Clark, 2017; Scottish Government, 2022); history of exclusion and marginalisation (Clark, 2017); and even social identity (Hafer & Ran, 2016).

It is unsurprising then that research suggests the need to tailor approaches to participation around the target community (Pateman et al., 2021). With regard to participant recruitment, research suggests that traditional approaches like the use of media channels and word of mouth are unlikely to reach beyond the already engaged (Pateman et al., 2021). Instead, when trying to recruit participants from relatively deprived communities (or when targeting relatively deprived citizens residing in relatively affluent areas), it is better to leverage the knowledge and networks of third-party organisations (Sorensen et al., 2019). Offering economic incentives can also help to boost recruitment in relatively deprived areas (Pateman et al., 2021). Research suggests the need to facilitate different activities depending upon the target community or group; for example, modular and one-off activities are well-suited for people who are time-poor (Pateman et al., 2021). Meanwhile, research consistently suggests that co-designing projects with local people can help to increase participation (especially from those who do not usually participate) by improving the “validity, salience, and communication of tangible benefits” (Mullally et al., 2022, p. 26) and ensuring that aims and outcomes resonate with the needs and aspirations of (otherwise) unrepresented groups: “[Successes] come from taking the time and effort to understand the needs, daily lives, and potential barriers to participation of a target community, and working with this community to co-design a project with mutual goals and appropriate methods” (Pateman et al., 2021, p. 11).

2.2. Issues With Outsourcing Public Participation to External “Experts”

External experts are increasingly involved in public engagement projects, including both academic researchers and community engagement consultants. Research suggests that local authorities who outsource public participation often do so in the belief that “expert” involvement will secure a greater number of participants (Levin, 2022). This implies two things: firstly, that the “success” of public engagement is often perceived by local authorities as deriving from the number of people who participate; and secondly, that the lack of participation from marginalised people and communities is a matter of design, of which experts have intimate knowledge and are thus able to overcome (Levin, 2022). Both have the potential to be problematic. A narrow focus on quantity of participation (i.e., degree of participation; Shirk et al., 2012) fails to give proper attention to the quality of participation; indeed, too much participation is likely to be a detriment to high-quality deliberation (Bobbio, 2019). Meanwhile, perceiving the recruitment of less-heard voices as simply a matter of design fails to acknowledge the many systemic inequalities that restrict marginalised people from participating in the first place (Blanchet-Cohen, 2014; Clark, 2017; Güemes & Resina, 2019).

It is perhaps unsurprising then that the expectations of local authorities can be at odds with the experts to whom they outsource public participation. For example, Levin (2022) reports frustration from community engagement consultants who perceived local authority expectations, combined with inadequate resources, as barriers to the recruitment of marginalised communities and individuals. According to Levin (2022, p. 98):

All [community engagement consultants] shared that change in the processes did not run as deep as they had hoped, especially regarding the participation of vulnerable communities. As they were expected to yield outputs within the shortest time frames possible, it was not feasible for them to reach out to citizens who thus far had been less heard.

Short time frames mean it is very difficult for external experts to build rapport and trust with target communities (Güemes & Resina, 2019; Yang, 2005). This is problematic as “trust is the missing link between dialogue and collaboration because trust is needed to move from a non-cooperative to a cooperative situation” (Güemes & Resina, 2019, p. 157). Research also suggests that long-lasting trust is a prerequisite for sustaining and maintaining community empowerment (Yang, 2005). In the absence of trust and power transfer, public participation can have the opposite effect, leaving those who took part feeling disappointed, alienated, and even cheated (Yang, 2005). This is especially likely to happen if participants feel that experts have been unfaithful in their translation of ideas into proposals (Rico Motos et al., 2021); or worse, when local authorities are perceived to have “cherry-picked” ideas and proposals that align with their own in-house preferences (Font et al., 2018; Rico Motos et al., 2021). Research suggests that such outcomes can be avoided by integrating formal review stages into projects, creating space for participants to query the legitimacy of translation (Rico Motos et al., 2021).

3. Positionality in Action Research

Clearly then, how public participation is designed and delivered is important. However, it is also important to consider the positionality of the “experts” who are responsible for project design and implementation. According to Adu-Ampong and Adams (2020, p. 583), the social sciences have broadly observed the growing

centrality of researcher positionality (i.e., the self) within methodologies in order to engage with concepts of “reflexivity, intersubjectivity, and the (de)colonisation of knowledge.” Beyond the introspective nature of this reflexivity, specific personal experiences and understandings are highlighted to aid in the interpretation of research findings (Adu-Ampong & Adams, 2020). This process, however, can be complicated when research takes place in environments and contexts which are considered as “home”; that is to say, where a deep level of connection and identity is associated with a geographical or cultural marker, such as a country of birth or native language. It is therefore appropriate for individual researchers to reflect upon their own (fluctuating) positionality, especially when conducting action research in places that resonate with “home.”

According to Kemmis (2006), action research must be critical; that is to say, it must search and be open to unwelcome and uncomfortable findings. By doing so, it contributes towards social and political conditions in which free and critical thinking, as well as courage and conviction, are nurtured within institutions. This critical dimension requires action research to look beyond the technical quality of research practice as defining the quality of the research, and instead to sharply focus on addressing important challenges in thought and action for the good of communities, persons, and societies. By taking this critical stance, action research is opened to its transformative potential, built upon “shared deliberation about important issues for our shared fate and future” (Kemmis, 2006, p. 471).

4. What We Did

We collaborated with a local authority and local consultancy firm as part of an Innovate UK competition funding programme. The project (April–July 2023) focused on engaging with local people and businesses to identify and unlock “non-technical” barriers (the funders’ term) restricting carbon emission reductions and co-benefits in two project locations in Scotland, namely Aberfeldy and Tulloch (Perth City). The ideas elicited from local residents and businesses served to inform and shape a much larger follow-up funding application to the same funder (Innovate UK), to actually implement climate action on the ground.

4.1. Target Communities

Aberfeldy (see Figure 1) is a rural market town in Highland Perthshire, Scotland, approximately 30 miles northeast of the city of Perth. Sitting beside the River Tay, it is a popular tourist destination for both families and adventure seekers. The population is made up of approximately 2,000 people, is largely white, and older (National Records of Scotland, 2011). According to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivations (Scottish Government, 2020), Aberfeldy is a relatively affluent area; however, its rural location means it suffers from transport challenges.

Tulloch (see Figure 2) is an urban neighbourhood in the north of the city of Perth, Scotland. It is situated within the busy A9, A912, and A85 roads and is home to St Johnstone Football Club. The population of the city of Perth is approximately 50,000, largely white, and is relatively younger than that of Aberfeldy (National Records of Scotland, 2011). The demographic makeup of Tulloch is largely similar to that of the city of Perth; however, due to a lack of more granular statistics, it is not possible to accurately report the exact demographic breakdown and population size (although it is likely to number the low thousands). According to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivations (Scottish Government, 2020), Tulloch is a relatively deprived neighbourhood.



Figure 1. Map showing the market town of Aberfeldy in Highland Perthshire, Scotland. Most of the housing stock is detached or semi-detached, and low density.



Figure 2. Map showing the neighbourhood of Tulloch, in the city of Perth, Scotland. The housing distribution is much denser than in Aberfeldy and includes a significant number of flats.

4.2. Approach and Methods

The project involved us co-designing, trialling, and evaluating participatory and deliberate engagement methods around climate action that could be utilised by the local authority after the project finished (see the Supplementary Material for a granular breakdown of our approach to the project including design, promotion, recruitment, activities, and exit strategy). We explicitly informed local people and businesses that the overarching aim of the project was to generate and prioritise proposals that could be included in a funding application (up to £5 million in total) to actually implement climate action.

The University of Edinburgh led on community engagement elements, whilst the local consultancy firm led on business engagement. The local authority acted as project manager and was responsible for communications and project promotion. Regular meetings were held between the partners throughout the duration of this short (3-month) but intensive project to coordinate activities and share learnings.

Drawing courage from compelling arguments that suggest community and indigenous knowledge can complement and contextualise scientific knowledge (Black & Tylanakis, 2024; Corburn, 2007; Restrepo-Mieth et al., 2023), we adopted an underlying philosophy that the people who live and work in a place know more about the challenges and opportunities than any council or university. In line with this philosophy, we integrated local voices into the project framing and research design and were transparent with communities about key aspects of the research. This included: transparency regarding our own research interests and our motivations for working on the project; our relationship with the project partners; information about the funders and aim of the funding; and how the data would be used. Furthermore, we leveraged both offline/online approaches to project promotion and the participatory activities themselves: “in recognition of the real and virtual as a connected and integral part of our contemporary social world with hybrid/online/offline communities and boundaries” (James & Busher, 2015, p. 1). Specifically, we integrated a mixture of individual (surveys and idea submission website) and group activities (school workshops, focus groups, and refinement and prioritisation activities), making use of modular and one-off events to encourage participation of the time-poor (see Pateman et al., 2021). Activities were scheduled at different times (morning, afternoon, and evening) and on different days (midweek and weekends) in another attempt to increase opportunities to participate.

Recognising that we did not have the time or resources to develop trusting relationships with local people for whom participating in a project like this was new, we sought to adopt a position of monetary incentivisation (£100+). However, it quickly transpired that there were tensions between our aspirations (i.e., the University of Edinburgh team), and what constitutes feasible practice to a local council. The incentivisation framework was therefore subsequently revised so that everyone who submitted an idea to the website would be entered into a draw for a £50 voucher, and focus group participants could receive a £25 voucher.

Taken together then, our approach and methods were intentionally participatory and inclusive, designed to foster reciprocal relationships with community collaborators. By actively involving the community in the ideation process, we attempted to foster a sense of ownership and empowerment, ensuring that the resulting proposals resonated within the local context and reflected the aspirations of the people they aimed to serve (Devine-Wright & Ryder, 2024).

4.3. Who We Are

Connor (early career researcher): To date, much of my research has centred around citizens' and key stakeholders' perceptions of diverse sustainability challenges and opportunities, and the subsequent implications for policymakers and future research. In contrast, this project presented an opportunity to collaborate with communities and a local authority to not only (co)produce and prioritise place-based climate action interventions, but also to try and secure the capital investment required to implement local people's ideas (up to £5 million in total). In that sense, it presented an exciting and, for me, novel opportunity to be part of a project that aspired to drive tangible change from the bottom-up, rather than contributing towards an evidence base to further inform top-down decision-making. Furthermore, having witnessed first-hand the ugliness of unjust and imposed transition (I was born and raised in an ex-mining community), my positionality on this matter is also explicitly normative: I believe it is right for people to have a greater say, individually and collectively, over their futures, especially younger people. My participation in the project meant that there was scope for me to try and bring my positionality to the team, emphasising the value of co-design, co-production, and inclusivity, and lobbying partners to ensure this was central to our approach.

Dan (professor): Being in a privileged position (permanent job, promotions completed) and recognising that my career has benefitted from projects in which citizens' voices and views were elicited, collected, and analysed, I was motivated to participate as a form of "giving back" as well as "doing my bit" (perhaps an academic variant of environmental citizenship?). I care deeply about the environment and society and was thus very keen to support the council, but I was also conscious that I was out of place (a flipside of international academic labour mobility) and out of my depth, in terms of practice-oriented knowledge. I doubt I would have signed up for this project without the enthusiasm of other team members (especially the co-authors) and my confidence in their ability to mitigate my above-mentioned handicaps. The project was too intensive and practical to be of conventional academic interest and the funding level was tolerable rather than attractive. That said, it did bring some other indirect and potential benefits. The funding allowed me to assemble a temporary team (associates, PhD students, academics) with interesting and admirable skills and experiences beyond my own. More speculatively, there are elusive institutional kudos: the potential to create "impact," which is valued in the REF research assessment framework to which all UK universities are subjected every seven years.

Finlay (PhD researcher): As someone growing up not too far away from our research location, with experiences of undemocratic and unjust economic transition, I'm motivated to centre the needs of local people; to have a local government body willing to trial this process was of great interest. Our role as academics, in some ways filling in capacity that the local government lacks to facilitate democracy, is one worth exploring further. I have some hesitations as to whether we are legitimate actors in this arena; after all, we are another outsider with elitist connotations, far removed from the communities and places we were researching. The research also allows us to engage with an ongoing tension in climate governance, as both economic austerity and strained public spending are widely accepted alongside plans for economic and social transformation in order to tackle climate change and environmental challenges.

5. Group Discussion

5.1. Reflections on Community Diversity

We found that the effectiveness of the project promotion strategy diverged significantly between places. This had severe implications for levels of participation. In Aberfeldy, where we observed greater social capital (characterised by familiarity with community governance structures, and a proliferation of community organisations), levels of participation were relatively high throughout the project period (over 100 participants). Perhaps due to many individuals' (observed) high social capital, many people managed to find time to participate in the project and clearly felt able to deliberate with others effectively. We observed that the existence of community groups and community governance structures meant that many individuals were largely familiar with the concept of participating in local decision-making, and from a normative perspective, felt it was legitimate and desirable. Meanwhile, these same organisations were well-placed to help promote the project, helping to increase overall levels of participation.

In Aberfeldy, trust was earned through clear expectation management and an explicit positionality that stated, "the people who live and work in a place know more about the problems and opportunities than any university or council," in effect demonstrating that the aim of the project was to empower, not to impose. This was further evidenced by the collaborative approach to project framing/problem setting, as well as the "end game" itself, namely applying for grant funding to implement the ideas prioritised by people and businesses. Resident feedback was largely positive: The diversity of activities employed was valued, especially group activities which allowed for a broader range of perspectives to be heard and deliberated. The variety in the timing of engagements, such as scheduling activities on different days and times (including weekends) and incorporating hybrid events, was also appreciated as it accommodated different schedules and preferences thus helping to increase opportunities for participation. School workshops enabled the integration of intergenerational perspectives which was perceived as vital by both the local authority and community collaborators alike; the feedback we received from the students' teachers suggests that they thoroughly enjoyed themselves and were excited to learn more in the future. We also received positive feedback from attendees at the idea refinement and prioritisation event who were pleased to see the communities' ideas showcased for all to see, and appreciated the opportunity to refine and prioritise proposals, working towards building consensus.

In Tulloch, where we observed significantly less social capital (characterised by the absence of community governance structures, and very few community organisations), the experience was starkly different. Levels of participation were disappointingly low (excluding school workshops, fewer than 20 residents participated in the project) and it was apparent that there was a lack of awareness; without existing organisations "on the ground" who were willing to help with project promotion and communication, it was an uphill task to get the message out to a large audience. The effectiveness of visiting the area to distribute information pamphlets and knock on doors was significantly hampered by the housing stock, with many of the homes being high-rise flats that proved difficult to access (unlike in Aberfeldy where most homes were houses and bungalows). Attempts to promote the project online through local authority communication channels and social media were also relatively fruitless; this was exacerbated by fraudulent sign-ups to focus group sessions following a paid promotion campaign. The school workshop revealed a lot about what younger people think of the place where they live, and how it could be improved in the future. However, this involved a somewhat captive audience; none of the students attended other project events when they were not part of scheduled school

days thus bringing into question the extent to which they found the process valuable or empowering. It is worth noting that the few people we did engage with during other project events were very positive about their experience. This even extended to people on the street who did not participate in any of the activities, but who spoke with the research team when handed a leaflet. The consensus was that people were pleased that the local authority was working to bring about impactful change in an area that they considered forgotten, or “left behind.”

We reflect that two very different stories emerged from the project locations. Community collaborators kept on telling us that Aberfeldy was Scotland’s first “fair trade town,” and that there were lots of community organisations in the area doing great work. This was often evidenced by people pointing at Feldy Roo, a community organisation whose founder was awarded an MBE in recognition for the work he and other local people did distributing food to vulnerable people during the Covid-19 pandemic (Barrie, 2020). Indeed, the recipient of the award explicitly stated that the MBE belongs to the town of Aberfeldy, not himself (Barrie, 2020). This appears to reinforce the narrative, shared by several community collaborators over the duration of the project, that Aberfeldy is a place where people get stuff done. In contrast, Tulloch felt like a place that stuff happens to; community collaborators, especially students in the school workshops, talked about Tulloch (and Perth City more broadly) in depressing terms: a place where people are always committing suicide, where it is not safe at night, and where there is not much to do. In their visions for the future, the emphasis was on safety and meeting basic needs. This reinforced a narrative of a “left behind” place, neglected by decision-makers who live in very different places, and whose lived reality is starkly different.

5.2. Implications of Community Diversity for “External Experts”

So how does the diversity of a local authority area, in this case the two distinct communities described in this article, present challenges in practice for researchers trying to support local government climate action ambitions through public participation and deliberation?

The challenges of a very demanding timescale proved extremely difficult in Tulloch. Without community groups “on the ground” willing to support and promote the project, we needed to spend much more time “in place,” developing relationships, building trust, and leveraging more organic (and possibly informal) engagements/interactions. This was not possible within the project timeline. The demands of the timescale were less impactful in Aberfeldy, where we benefitted from supportive community groups who wanted to help. Nevertheless, it may still have contributed towards the observed lack of participant diversity (i.e., first-time climate action participants) by, as with Tulloch, restricting the amount of time we could spend “in place.”

Our inability to offer significant monetary incentives to people in Tulloch also likely contributed towards low levels of overall participation. The much higher participation rates in Aberfeldy suggest that this was not as much of an issue here, but we reflect that it may still have limited our ability to hear from more people who were not already actively involved in community groups and local initiatives. However, due to the shortcomings of the project promotion strategy (particularly in Tulloch), it is difficult to know for certain; if more people knew about the project, and the £25 vouchers, then maybe that would have been enough to tempt them into getting involved.

(Lack of) continuity was less of a problem in Tulloch as there were fewer relationships to maintain after the project ended (i.e., due to disappointing levels of overall participation). However, in Aberfeldy, this proved challenging. Specifically, it was not possible to resource a formal review of the subsequent funding application to implement the prioritised proposals, resulting in a handful of particularly engaged Aberfeldy residents feeling let down. They felt that a key message (especially from the final activity, i.e., the proposal refinement and prioritisation event) was not properly represented in the funding application; namely, that there is already a lot going on in Aberfeldy, and that community organisations could do a lot more if they had greater financial support and power. This highlights that even if proposals taken forward by local authorities are supported with quantitative evidence (e.g., most votes at proposal prioritisation events), nuance can still be lost if communities are not involved in every stage of the translation process—to the extent that some people feel let down and disenfranchised. The lack of formal review of the funding application was compounded by a lack of expectation management; local people were not aware that they were not being involved until after the funding bid was almost ready to be submitted. Although the local authority went to significant lengths to patch up relationships with the handful of people who felt aggrieved, this shows just how easily hard-won trust can break down.

6. Research Team Individual Reflections

Connor: One year later, reflecting on this project, I have mixed feelings: On the one hand, it was a rich experience that provided plenty of opportunities for learning and personal growth; however, on the other hand, I'm left a little disheartened by how quickly some local authority–community collaborator relations broke down in Aberfeldy after the project ended. From my point of view, everyone who participated in the project, from the local authority to the people and businesses on the ground, had good intentions; they wanted to secure investment and make Aberfeldy a better place to live and work. The problem is, I don't know if my feelings are shared; too many people seemed mistrusting of the council, and the council itself seemed hesitant to hand too much power and responsibility to people and community groups. This speaks to both trust in (local) democratic institutions, and trust in local people (i.e., that trust goes both ways; Yang, 2005); I reflect that the possibility of nurturing each is weakened by funding crises, and that bringing in external experts to competitively chase limited funding does little to alleviate this. Trust takes time to establish, which short one-off projects are unlikely to afford. It needs to be maintained, which is predicated on continuity. And it needs to be sustained, which requires ceding power. External experts are not necessarily well-placed to do any of this. Meanwhile, the local authorities who are well placed (in theory) often lack the resources to meet this challenge in practice.

Dan: Reflecting on this project, I find myself asking if we (a university located outside the local area) are the ideal institution to play the role we played. It is a worthy cause and we learned from the experience, but is this the best way the money could have been spent, i.e., subcontracting a non-local university to deliver public engagement? If funding had been “won” to implement these proposals, this would have yielded direct community benefits and critical questions could have been more easily ignored. One of our interlocutors at the council indicated that it might be harder for them (than for a university) to pull together a new team on such short notice to deliver engagement. Nevertheless, critical notions of “outsourcing” spring to mind (e.g., Froud et al., 2017). Maybe it would be better if local grassroots organisations are (coached and) paid to undertake community engagement? This way money and knowledge are retained locally; this would have been relatively easy to achieve in Aberfeldy but would have been much more beneficial in/for Tulloch. There is of course

still plenty of scope for individual voluntary contributions from academics (“citizenship”); ideally, those who have directly useful expert knowledge and/or live locally (there are many existing examples, e.g., local Climate Commissions; see Creasy et al., 2021; Howarth et al., 2022). There are longer-term questions about the legacy of such projects; perhaps outside academics are more naturally suited to assess those.

Finlay: In reflecting on the pathway of this project, I think there are promising signs in the broad, albeit shallow willingness and engagement from participants to be part of a more demanding democratic process. Perhaps it was the pilot nature of the project, which meant that a lack of legitimacy was perceived by all parties and lasting impact was less than had been hoped for. As this project operated in a silo in relation to the UK’s general democratic governance systems and was in no way affiliated with structural change, I wonder whether people projected or sensed systemic inhibitors which ultimately reduced the potential of this project. What we do know is that wherever we went, even at the younger end of the participant spectrum in schools, people felt that places, spaces, and futures are not designed or run for or by them.

7. Synthesis and Conclusions

Despite the diverse positionalities within the research team, our individual reflections reveal some common ground, perhaps most notably around the question of what contributions academia can (and should) make in supporting “transformative” climate governance at the local level. The local authority’s decision to work with academics implies they see value in it, which we understood from conversations centred around (a) knowledge/expertise on climate action, (b) perceived legitimacy of the academic institution, and (c) fit and familiarity with this particular funding agency. However, on reflection, we asked whether, as “outsiders” with “elite connotations,” we are legitimate actors in this space and to what extent this was a missed opportunity to retain money and knowledge locally by ceding more responsibility (and power) to grassroots organisations. Each individual reflection implies that our (relatively privileged) positions as environmental citizens and academics do not necessarily sit easily with notions of more embedded local democracy.

Another key lesson derived from our experience is that knowing how to facilitate inclusive public participation in theory does not necessarily mean it is possible for external experts to succeed in practice, especially if operating within a demanding timescale and targeting low-income and marginalised communities:

- Before the project started, we recognised (a) that traditional approaches to promotion and recruitment were unlikely to gain traction in Tulloch due to the prevailing socio-demographics (Pateman et al., 2021) and history of marginalisation (Clark, 2017), and (b) that the project timeline was always going to restrict our ability to spend a significant amount of time in-place building trust (Levin, 2022; Radonic et al., 2021). However, we did not foresee that potential workarounds reported in existing literature—including co-designing the project framing/problem setting (Mullally et al., 2022; Pateman et al., 2021), leveraging the knowledge and networks of community groups (Sorensen et al., 2019), offering monetary incentivisation (Pateman et al., 2021), and canvassing neighbourhoods (Fagotto & Fung, 2006)—would be extremely challenging in practice as well.
- We also recognised the need to integrate diverse participatory activities into the programme: modular and one-off activities that were suitable for the “time poor” (Pateman et al., 2021); group activities to encourage deliberation and exposure to diverse perspectives (Bormann, 2022); as well as ensuring that the project operated virtually as well as physically (James & Busher, 2015). However, in practice, if

project promotion and participant recruitment fail (as was the case in Tulloch) then it matters little how inclusive and well-thought-through a programme of activities has been.

- Furthermore, we acknowledged that participants needed to be given an opportunity to review the translation of ideas into proposals to avoid accusations of “cherry-picking” and ensure nuance was properly captured (Font et al., 2018; Rico Motos et al., 2021). However, despite integrating this into the project design (i.e., the proposal refinement and prioritisation activity), external experts have little control over whether communities are invited to review future translations after “the project” has officially ended. In hindsight, we could have lobbied for the funding application to form part of the project itself, thereby involving participants directly in the process. Or at least built in space for formal review. However, this would have been very resource-intensive, and as noted by Pateman et al. (2021), approaches need to be balanced against other project aims. A cynical reader may see this as a textbook example of embedded power differentials (Blanchet-Cohen, 2014; Clark, 2017): a local authority unwilling to cede (too much) power to non-state actors. A more generous analysis is that local authorities are operating in an uncondusive environment, and they simply do not always have the capacity to work to best practice.

Taken together, our experience and reflections suggest that framing public participation in terms of design and facilitation deficit is itself a little misleading; it is not just process that needs to be attuned to diverse communities (design, promotion, recruitment, activities), but an ongoing relationship that needs certain enabling conditions to flourish (Restrepo-Mieth et al., 2023). Funding frameworks constitute one such enabling condition, as does an institutional culture that is willing to trust citizens and ultimately cede power. Without this, greater devolution of political power constitutes little more than another exercise in hollowing out the local state, and even the most grounded and well-thought-through project designs (which our somewhat uncomfortable reflections suggest this project was not) are unlikely to gain significant local support and secure transformational impacts. This speaks to reflections on whether community collaborators sensed systemic inhibitors and the extent to which this may have ultimately reduced the potential of this project. Thus, despite attempts to empower local people, embed co-design, and co-produce local climate action interventions, we walk away from this project feeling that our impact was limited; we know that people feel that places, spaces, and futures are not designed or run for or by them, yet we are still a long way from realising the enabling conditions that are needed to change this reality.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to everyone who participated in this project, especially the people, businesses, and community groups in Tulloch and Aberfeldy. We are also thankful to Perth and Kinross Council and Nicki Souter Associates for the opportunity to collaborate with them on local climate action. We would also like to extend our gratitude to Matt Lane (University of Edinburgh) who provided feedback on an earlier iteration of this article; and to the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive and helpful comments. We gratefully acknowledge funding from Place-Based Climate Action Network (PCAN; UKRI grant ES/S008381/1) which allowed us time to write this article, and from Innovate UK (Net Zero Living programme) who funded the project that the article is based on.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have no conflict of interests to declare but wish to explicitly stress that the article should not be read as a criticism of the project partners. Rather it is a critical reflection on the role of external experts who seek to support local authority climate aspirations.

Data Availability

A high-level overview of the original project from which this article is derived can be found at <https://www.pkclimateaction.co.uk/iuk>

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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