

# Mediating Sustainability: Growing Policy from the Grassroots

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## Growing grassroots innovations: exploring the role of community-based initiatives in governing sustainable energy transitions

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**Abstract.** The challenges of sustainable development (and climate change and peak oil, in particular) demand system-wide transformations in sociotechnical systems of provision. An academic literature around coevolutionary innovation for sustainability has recently emerged as an attempt to understand the dynamics and directions of such sociotechnical transformations, which are termed 'sustainability transitions'. This literature has previously focused on market-based technological innovations. Here we apply it to a new context of civil-society-based social innovation and examine the role of community-based initiatives in a transition to a low-carbon sustainable economy in the UK. We present new empirical research from a study of the UK's Transition Towns movement (a 'grassroots innovation') and assess its attempts to grow and influence wider societal sociotechnical systems. By applying strategic niche management theory to this civil society context, we deliver theoretically informed practical recommendations for this movement to diffuse beyond its niche: to foster deeper engagement with resourceful regime actors; to manage expectations more realistically by delivering tangible opportunities for action and participation; and to embrace a community-based, action-oriented model of social change (in preference to a cognitive theory of behaviour change). Furthermore, our study indicates areas where theory can be refined to better explain the growth and broader impacts of grassroots innovations—namely, through a fuller appreciation of the importance of internal niche processes, by understanding the important role of identity and group formation, and by resolving how social practices change in grassroots innovations.

**Keywords:** sustainability transitions, grassroots innovations, community energy, civil society, social innovation, niches

### 1 Introduction

A growing body of research claims that system-wide transformations are required to address the challenges posed by climate change and the move to a low-carbon economy (Foxon et al., 2009; Jackson, 2009; JERC, 2009; WSSD, 2002). In particular, the difficulty of overcoming path dependency and lock-in to unsustainable development trajectories is highlighted, with a growing focus on managing or triggering system-wide transitions (Kallis and Norgaard, 2010; Sartorius, 2006; Tucker and Butter, 2007). A second issue which is also attracting growing interest and mainstream support is the notion of 'peak oil' (the point beyond which oil production rates decline) and its transformative implications for fossil-fuel-based societal infrastructures (Heinberg, 2004; IEA, 2008; Sorrell et al., 2009). Given these twin concerns, and claims that radical system-wide transformations are required, it is pertinent to investigate potential trajectories and the possible roles of different actors.

An academic literature around coevolutionary systems innovation for sustainability has recently emerged as an attempt to understand the governance, dynamics, and directions of

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