Local Initiatives: Factors in and Lessons for Sustainable Development

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Hanna Leonardsson & Jean-Bosco Habyarimana

Hanna Leonardsson
Associated Researcher at The
Programme for Global Politics
and Security

Jean-Bosco Habyariama
Associated Researcher at The
Programme for Global Politics
and Security

Contents

Introduction

Nearly 50 years after the United Nations World Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm in June 1972, environmental issues and the ability of humanity to live sustainably within planetary boundaries is at the top of the global agenda. The world currently faces global challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss (IPCC, 2021; UNESCO, 2021), as well as economic and social issues such as increasing inequality and growing societal polarization (UNDESA, 2020). These issues, and others with them, emphasize the need for global action on sustainable development that incorporates economic, social and ecological sustainability.

Global conventions, declarations and agreements have emphasized the need for action on sustainable development. In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) report *Our Common Future* made the connection between development and environmental issues. In 2015, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda For Sustainable Development* established a people-centred development agenda that balances social, economic and environmental development in 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2015). Emphasizing the challenges ahead, UN Secretary-General António Guterres designated 2020–2030 the Decade of Action for the SDGs. Nonetheless, action is still deemed too little and too slow, in developed and developing countries alike (Bryan et al., 2019; Logan, 2021). In addition, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic are expected to reverse some of the progress made on poverty reduction in recent years (Mahler et

al., 2021). This accentuates the point that action on sustainable development needs to be stepped up, and such action must be undertaken by multiple actors, including but not limited to governments, companies, communities and civil society organizations (Guterres, 2019). At the same time, action on sustainable development must be both global and local, and emphasize global interconnections and the need to think and act globally to achieve a common goal, while also highlighting local responses to everyday challenges and implementing local change.

This paper pays particular attention to initiatives that aim to promote action on sustainable development at the local level. The ambitious societal transformations ahead mean that local and non-state initiatives present promising opportunities for sustainable development, and promoting alternative societal values as well as shifts in political and consumer values (Köhler et al., 2019; Sengers et al., 2019; Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2012). Local initiatives share four characteristics that make them a particularly interesting focus for sustainable transitions. First, local initiatives can trigger processes of change. By practising sustainability, such initiatives can identify the factors that promote change in a particular context (Castro-Acre & Vanclay, 2020). Second, by focusing on particular issues, local initiatives can speed up sustainable transitions. Whereas nation states and governmental actors initiate change through policy debate and implementation, which often take considerable time, local initiatives can act faster and are, in many cases, already thriving (Sengers et al., 2019). Third, by challenging the system through innovation, local initiatives highlight the structures in

societies that are inhibiting transitions, thereby identifying where change is needed (Sengers et al., 2019; Bradbury & Middlemiss, 2015). The changes needed might be directly related to the initiative or could be linked to wider societal changes, including cultural change. By responding to imminent societal needs, local initiatives can trigger adaptive responses to crises and thus also provoke changes to the system as a whole (Castro-Acre & Vanclay, 2020; Köhler et al., 2019). Finally, local initiatives help to democratize sustainable transitions. By promoting bottom-up initiatives on sustainability, local initiatives open up space for deliberation through their openness to pluralism and diversity. Such spaces for deliberation offer opportunities to challenge both dominant visions of development and patterns of authority (Smith & Sterling, 2018).

The field of sustainable transitions studies assesses the transformations required to address environmental problems such as climate change, biodiversity loss and resource depletion. Initially, studies focused on technological innovations in the energy and transport sectors. As the field has grown, however, it has increasingly emphasized the need to look beyond technology to investigate how social systems move towards sustainability, in relation to issues of social justice, poverty reduction and cultural change (Sengers et al., 2019; Köhler et al., 2019). The connection between environmental, social and economic issues makes it an appropriate field for studying sustainable development through a holistic lens. Inspired by the field of social movements, sustainable transition studies has studied grassroots mobilization

to promote more sustainable practices, norms, and cultural change (Seyfang & Smith, 2007; Sengers et al., 2019; Köhler et al., 2019; Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2012; Della Porta & Diani, 2015). Although research on local initiatives is booming, the field is comprised mostly of empirical studies of individual initiatives. While these studies provide important pieces of the puzzle, they fall short of developing a broader understanding of how local initiatives emerge and grow (Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2012). In addition, previous studies have claimed that for local initiatives to be integrated into a larger societal transformation, they will need to interact with and relate to other actors and activities on sustainable development (Sengers et al., 2019; Köhler et al., 2019).

This paper seeks to help to broaden existing knowledge on local initiatives on sustainability by exploring the important factors in how such initiatives succeed and become part of a wider societal transformation. It does this by reviewing the scholarly literature on local initiatives on sustainable development. We identify five factors of importance in how and why these initiatives succeed: capacity and learning; flexibility and profitability; solidarity and autonomy, support and access, and networks. We draw on these factors to engage with three lessons on how to learn from local initiatives on sustainable development to promote such development in society as a whole. These lessons are: first, understanding the interlinkages between local initiatives and the outside world; second, emphasizing that knowledge and different types of knowledge matter; and, third, that treating sustainable development

as social, economic and environmental is crucial to enabling initiatives to benefit from global debates on sustainability. However, such holistic approaches can become contradictory.

The paper first engages with definitions of the concepts "local initiative on sustainability" and sustainable development, emphasizing various views and defining the way we use the concepts in this paper. We then present a brief note on the methodology. Third, we present the results of the literature review, identifying five important factors in how local initiatives are sustained and become part of a larger process of scaling-up for sustainable development. Having introduced the factors, we discuss three lessons from the analysis of local initiatives that are important for wider societal transformation.

Sustainable development through local initiatives: working definitions

This paper reviews the academic work on local initiatives on sustainable development to contribute to the ongoing debates on how these initiatives come into existence, are sustained and succeed in their mission of societal transformation. The focus on local initiatives to deal with current challenges emerges from debates in the field of sustainable transition studies focused on innovation and experiments on sustainable transitions (Sengers et al., 2019). Such studies originally involved transitions to more sustainable sources of energy or to technological innovations with reduced environmental impacts. As the field has

grown, however, it has evolved to examine a range of initiatives, from technological innovations to social enterprises and grassroots initiatives, as well as a social economy as an alternative ideal for development (Sengers et al., 2019; Founddjem-Tita et al., 2018; Gaiger, 2017). These initiatives vary but include, among other things, community currencies, fossil fuel-free energy initiatives, sharing schemes for cars, tools and other resources, organic agriculture and food cooperatives, recycling and upcycling initiatives, and awareness-raising events, all of which aim to provide more environmentally, economically and socially sustainable ways to live.

Before introducing how local initiatives on sustainable development are sustained and the ways in which they contribute to achieving the goal of sustainability, a brief reflection on what constitutes a local initiative on sustainable development is useful. Local initiatives on sustainability are based on actions that satisfy local needs and promote alternatives to present day developments that are seen as disruptive and to compromise the goal of sustainability. The literature provides examples of such initiatives under different labels. In some instances, these are called niches, grassroots innovations or social innovations; other terms are social enterprises or the social economy. These initiatives are described as innovations, experiments, associations or community-based organizations, depending on whether the focus is on the practice or the actors involved. Despite these variations, the initiatives display a range of commonalities that guide our understanding of what they are. First and foremost, the initiatives are

bottom-up and needs-based. Thus, the initiatives that emerge answer to needs found in a local situation and aim to achieve common goals and desires (Castro-Acre & Vanclay, 2020; Sengers et al., 2019; Gaiger, 2017). Second, initiatives are based on actions and activities, which may include technological innovations, alternative economic arrangements or activities to promote sustainable lifestyles, to name just a few examples. What they all have in common is that they are practice-based activities that aim to promote change (Castro-Acre & Vanclay, 2020; Sengers et al., 2019; Anderson et al., 2019). Third, local initiatives also adhere to inclusive and participatory methods of implementation. Such methods aim to promote collective empowerment and democratic means of governance (Sengers et al., 2019; Gaiger, 2017; Castro-Acre & Vanclay, 2020). Finally, these initiatives put people and the environment before capital gain. While profit may be a consequence, it is a means rather than an end (Gaiger, 2017; Bradbury & Middlemiss, 2015).

At the same time, various differences highlight the variety of local initiatives. Local initiatives are generally small in scale but some scholars, particularly in the field of sustainable transitions, emphasize that these initiatives can be isolated and protected from the outside world. These scholars talk about niche innovations as spaces protected from incumbent regimes, or from formal and informal structures such as expectations, regulation or governance practices (Köhler et al., 2019). On the other hand, other scholars emphasize the integration of local initiatives into the wider world and working in relation to it. To some,

this divide represents different stages in sustainable transitions, starting small and eventually aiming to scale-up (Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2012; Sengers et al., 2019). For others – often those who analyse local initiatives in relation to poverty and development – the integration of initiatives into the outside world is seen as a prerequisite for the survival of the initiative and its participants (Gutberlet, 2021; Deka & Goswami, 2020; Foundjem-Tita et al., 2018). Based on the commonalities and differences identified above, this paper defines local initiatives as "needs-based, practice-oriented and inclusive initiatives that put people and the environment before capital gains". These initiatives might work in isolation to change particular practices, habits and norms, or aim for wider societal transformations and sustainable development for its actors and society as a whole.

In order to define local initiatives on sustainability it is first necessary to define sustainable development. The term first emerged in the Brundtland Report of the WCED in 1987, which defined it as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987: 43). Sustainable development is therefore seen as a concept that integrates three pillars: the environmental, the economic and the social (Sinakou et al., 2018). Whereas environmental sustainable development emphasizes the preservation of natural resources that assist the natural functioning of ecosystems and of nature in general, social sustainable development highlights solidarity and cooperation within and among communities. Economically

sustainable development focuses on quality of life issues through economic self-determination and self-development, for both individuals and societies, beyond income per capita or economic growth as development (Adesiyan, 2018).

The UN Agenda 2030 17 SDGs have 169 targets for achieving environmentally, socially and economically sustainable development. The UN emphasizes that the goals and targets announced in its General Assembly resolution A/RES/70/1 are: "integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental" (UN, 2015, paras 2, 5, 18 & 55). Some researchers are critical of the UN's aim to achieve a balance between the three pillars, arguing that the current SDGs "rest on wrong premises" and have ended up as vague, weak or meaningless "because they attempt to cover all that is good and desirable in society" (Holden et al., 2016, p. 214; UN, 2015: 2). By contrast, scholars in the Education for Sustainable Development field in particular have reinforced the three pillars by pushing for a holistic approach to the concept of sustainable development. They define sustainable development as "a change process in which societies improve their quality of life, reaching dynamic equilibrium between the economic and social aspects, while protecting, caring for and improving the natural environment" (Sinakou et al., 2018, p. 322). It is within this holistic perspective, which promotes a balance between the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, that we explore how local initiatives on sustainability are sustained,

how they are scaled-up and how we can learn from them.

Methodology

This research is a literature review based on peer-reviewed articles published between January 2015, the year in which the SDGs were formally adopted, and September 2021, when the literature search was performed. The literature was selected using searches of two databases of literature on the social and environmental sciences: the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS) and GreenFILE. To capture literature on local initiatives on sustainability in times of crisis, the database searches included terms related to sustainability (sustainable development, SDG, sustainability), local actors (local, local initiative, grassroots, bottom-up, community) and crisis (crisis, unrest, conflict, emergency), as well as terms related to lessons learned (practice, experience, lesson). This generated 147 hits. From the original 147, articles with a focus on the local from a top-down perspective were excluded, as well as business models, assessments of externally funded and run local projects and ecosystem assessments. We selected 71 articles focused on local initiatives aiming for sustainable development for further review. Our review of these articles identified common themes and concerns in the literature, which led us to focus our investigation on how local initiatives succeed and are sustained over time. The factors in sustaining local initiatives on sustainability were identified through a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clark et al., 2021). This approach involves a close reading of the articles and initial coding to identify the

issues described as important for the success of the local initiatives or in their continuation. Throughout this process, the issues were compared, synthesized and organized into the pairs of factors presented in this paper. The issues and factors were thematized using the computer software Nvivo.

Factors in the success of local initiatives on sustainability

As stated above, this paper explores local initiatives on sustainable development in order to understand more about how these initiatives succeed and sustain themselves. The diversity of local initiatives means that answers to such questions can be just as diverse. Nonetheless, drawing together the literature on local initiatives on sustainability, we can start to see common patterns of important factors in the success of these local initiatives that enable them to flourish over time. The factors we identify in this paper do not apply to all the initiatives. Nor are they mutually exclusive –sometimes they are even contradictory. This is therefore not a checklist for successful initiatives. However, they draw attention to some of the facilitating factors either inside the initiatives themselves or from outside actors and society.

Capacity and learning

The knowledge and capacity of local actors, as well as the ability to learn have been widely emphasized as crucial to the success of local initiatives on sustainability. Bradbury and Middlemiss (2015) call this "people resources". In their analysis of Green Action, a British student organization that focuses on promoting environmentally sustainable alternatives, Bradbury and Middlemiss explain that:

> the most important types of resources to this type of organisation are people resources (human resources). Grassroots associations help to connect different "types" of people who possess a variety of human resources, such as skills and knowledge, and who would not normally associate with each other (Bradbury & Middlemiss, 2015, p. 801).

Green Action also considers people to be the most important element in sustainability – for both the association and its mission. As these people come together with different skills and knowledge, they learn from each another, making possible the adoption of the required shared values. Bradbury and Middlemiss argue that in order to contribute to sustainability in terms of addressing sustainable development issues and sustaining themselves, grassroots associations like Green Action rely on an established "culture of education" that allows "the passing on of skills and knowledge" between newcomers and old-timers (Bradbury & Middlemiss, 2015, pp. 808–809).

Apart from a culture of learning, local initiatives also rely on different types of capacity and people resources. Deka and Goswami (2020) talk about the importance of the entrepreneurial skills of small-scale organic tea growers in India. It is crucial for farmers to be innovative and able to handle the risks involved in the transformation from traditional farming practices. Foundjem-Tita et al. (2018) similarly emphasize entrepreneurial and management capacities

in the success of community forests in Cameroon. Indigenous and traditional knowledge are also recognized as important. Anderson et al. (2019, p. 9) claim that; "Knowledge processes that respect and harness the knowledge of farmers, indigenous peoples, and other food producers—and especially the knowledge of women—are essential" to transformations to local, organic and sustainable food production. According to Anderson et al. (2019), local initiatives must be able to rely on existing and traditional knowledge, especially when initiatives such as sustainable organic food production are competing with dominant agricultural practices focused on monocultures, large-scale production and commercialization. In this context, capacity, knowledge and trust in that knowledge are essential if local initiatives are to act differently from existing mainstream practices.

The emphasis on capacity also highlights a process of learning within the initiative itself. To Bradbury and Middlemiss (2015), internal learning is essential to the ability to sustain an initiative. Using the example of Green Action, an organization active in universities which have heavy annual turnovers of members as students graduate and new students arrive, the authors explain:

> If a participant's knowledge has been passed on to other generations, then it remains in the shared repertoire of the community when they leave. The passing-on of knowledge, therefore, contributes to the association being able to sustain itself in the long term (Bradbury & Middlemiss, 2015, p. 804).

This underlines that the sharing of skills and knowledge among members of local associations is a means through which these initiatives sustain themselves over time. Gutberlet (2021) uses the example of grassroots waste picker organizations in Brazil to explain how local initiatives on sustainability contribute to capacity building, empowerment and gender equality. Learning in the initiative goes beyond recycling and environmental issues. As Gutberlet explains, the activities of the waste picker organization promote sustainable social and economic development by:

> increasing female membership and providing them with an income, [...] expanding the opportunities for women to build on their agency to empower themselves, to engage in capacity development and life-long learning, as well as by expanding their leadership skills that also help other women. (Gutberlet, 2021, p. 7).

Thus, processes of learning are part of the scaling-up of local initiatives, as the students who engage in Green Action take knowledge with them when they leave, and waste workers use their increased capacity to teach others about recycling.

Although local initiatives are by definition practice-oriented, it is worth emphasizing the role practice plays in learning and the success and development of the initiative itself. Some scholars highlight learning by doing in local initiatives for sustainability. For example, small-scale organic tea growers in India learn about what works and what does not work in pest control as they experiment with new organic alternatives

(Deka & Goswami, 2020). Similarly, the members of Green Action learn about sustainable food production through agricultural practices in the organization's allotment plot:

> The allotment is a resource that enables learning to occur. It brings people together as a community of practice in a place that has resources, such as land and artefacts (tools, seeds), that can be experimented with. The allotment, therefore, is "[an] educational thing that people get to engage with as an experience" (interviewee Rosanne in Bradbury & Middlemiss, 2015, p. 805).

In bringing together diverse initiatives on sustainability, this emphasis on practice illustrates the need to move beyond knowledge as theoretical, and the complex link between different types of knowledge and societal change. Recalling that sustainability is understood within the three integrated pillars of sustainable development – environmental, economic and social – or the holistic approach to sustainable development, Sinakou and her colleagues at the University of Antwerp demonstrate that contradictions between the knowledge in policy documents and the practice aimed at social change prevents both knowledge transfer and the practice of sustainability. Based on their findings, they argue that academics "who teach trainee teachers do not conceive of sustainable development holistically" (Sinakou et al., 2018, p. 328) and that:

> the way an academic teacher conceives of sustainable development (SD) will influence the selection, the interpretation and the way they approach SD and SD

> issues when teaching trainee students. (Sinakou et al., 2018, p. 329).

Thus, how sustainable development is perceived not only among different actors but also among similar actors influences how sustainability is learned and how it is practiced. Nonetheless, it should be noted that academic learning is just one part of learning, and that learning is also practical, emotional and embodied. Emphasizing learning through practice is essential for sustainability initiatives, as too much focus on theoretical knowledge can mean that "those who initially come to meetings […] drift away because the group is stuck in an "awareness-raising" phase and not attending to the needs of those who want to take action" (Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2012, p. 293). This emphasizes that knowledge of sustainable development should be phrased as knowledges in plural, as academic, practical as well as gendered, indigenous and traditional knowledge provides different possibilities for action (Anderson et al., 2019). Thus, the capacity of actors, knowledge about sustainability, and learning as individuals and as part of an initiative are closely interlinked with practices and acting on knowledge about sustainability.

Flexibility and profitability

How local initiatives learn and evolve is also linked to their need to be flexible and their shifting priorities over time. For an initiative to be sustained over time, it must be able to shift its focus as some needs are fulfilled and new ones emerge. Castro-Acre & Vanclay (2020) illustrate this with ADEZN, a network

of actors working for rural development in Costa Rica:

> the success of projects inspired individuals, communities, and other actors to conceive of new ideas, with changing interests, priorities, and projects over time. Social innovation changed the governance system, therefore the actions and strategies pursued by ADEZN needed to be revisited in order to continue to be effective. (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020)

This underlines that the effectiveness and sustainability of local initiatives are tied to their ability to revisit their strategies and actions in accordance with changing priorities, interests and dynamics. This does not mean, however, that all local initiatives are similar in all respects. Indeed, the local initiatives on sustainable development we surveyed for this paper differ from various angles. One of the most apparent is their views on profit-making, and what this means for supporting local initiatives. On the one hand, local initiatives are seen as an alternative to the market-based capitalist economy, and part of a solidarity economy and the development of "another globalization" (Gaiger, 2017, p. 2). According to Gaiger (2017, p. 2), local initiatives give "primacy to people over capital" and are not "primarily concerned with making profit". This view seeks to achieve societal change "in a way that does not contradict other values, such as for environmental integrity or social inclusion" (Smith & Stirling, 2018, p. 76). This is emphasized in approaches that perceive the need to break with the current economic system and capitalist way of life in order to achieve sustainable development (Gaiger, 2017).

On the other hand, local initiatives on sustainability can be perceived as a way for local communities to make profits, derive income and establish themselves as viable alternatives in a profit-driven economy. Examples of such initiatives are the waste picker organizations in Brazil, which make a profit from recycling materials and providing waste management services (Gutberlet, 2021), the organic tea growers in India who seek to make a profit from selling their products (Deka & Goswami, 2020), local communities that generate incomes from community-owned forests in Cameroon (Foundjem-Tita et al., 2018) or the networks of actors working to promote rural development in Costa Rica (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020). To these initiatives, profitability is essential to the implementation, success and broader impact of sustainable development activities. Profits are more than just a means of sustaining the initiative itself; they mean the possibility of improving working conditions, increased confidence in sustainable methods as a way forward and the ability of initiatives to combat poverty in people's everyday lives (Gutberlet, 2021; Foundjem-Tita et al., 2018; Deka & Goswami, 2020).

While some approaches turn away from economic theory as we know it to focus on people, other initiatives view profits as essential to inspiring and supporting more sustainable practices. This might be seen as contradictory, and as hindering the initiatives from achieving sustainability. However, a wider reading of the literature emphasizes the need to take context into account. Gaiger (2017) demonstrates how context shapes the main concerns of the

initiatives in his comparison of solidarity economies in North and South America. He claims that while in North America it is "a fight against social disintegration" by "countering the welfare state crisis, the lack of effective regulation and social protection mechanisms", in Latin America the main challenge is "in ensuring the material conditions required for the survival of people, [for] all those who have never become effectively integrated in the market economy", and therefore a "fight for integration" (p. 23). Thus, the controversy over profitability is not a controversy that determines the sustainability of local initiatives, but dependent on the needs of the initiative and its members, as well as its wider context. As Smith and Sterling (2018) note:

> whilst grassroots initiatives might be just as susceptible to social, economic and cultural constraints as the wider societies in which they operate, it is often precisely these constraining social structures that grassroots actions aim to counter with their innovative efforts. (Smith & Stirling, 2018, p. 76)

This adaptability to social constraints highlights the need for flexible and contextualized approaches that consider the current needs of the local initiative and the society on which it is acting. Nonetheless, contextualized approaches must be understood from the perspective that local initiatives on sustainability are also addressing issues of global significance, as defined in the UN SDGs, and in the mindset of acting locally while thinking globally. For example, when advocates of School-led Total Sanitation (SLTS) identify children as change agents and decide to involve them in

promoting hygiene in Ghana, they do so within the framework of articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Joshi et al., 2016). In addition to aligning their activities with the principles of the right of children to participate in development, SLTS designs operate under the SDG 6, which seeks to "ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all" (UN, 2015, p. 14). This illustrates that despite working through local actors, success is analysed in relation to global standards on the best interests of the child and sustainable sanitation. Here, the initiative on SLTS makes use of global discourses on sustainable development in localized action on sustainability.

Solidarity and autonomy

In addition to possessing capacities, being able to learn, being flexible and choosing to make a profit, local initiatives rely on internal solidarity and the autonomy of the initiative to be successful. Expressions of solidarity within an initiative are highlighted because local initiatives aim to provide better livelihoods for their communities. For example, solidarity is presented as key in waste picker organizations in Brazil:

> Cooperative members provide emotional support to others suffering from exclusion, discrimination, violence, substance dependence, sickness or depression (Sentama, 2009) and they support each other financially, as expressed by one of the members: "We had a member going through a situation with a sick son, she needed money to buy medication and food for home. We got

together and raised the funds to donate to her". (Gutberlet, 2021, p. 7)

For the local initiatives, this expression of solidarity means more than moral support:

> In spite of poverty they recognize themselves as a force capable of creating new situations and influencing local changes. This feeling is particularly favored when workers rely on their social relations. A metamorphosis turns personal ties into a properly enterprising and solidarity economy behavior, sustained by cooperative relationships. (Gaiger, 2017, p. 13)

The above extract from Gaiger shows how members of local initiatives, having come together, use their personal ties to support one another, resulting in the creation of new situations that lead to positive change. Thus, what begins as a need to address issues of daily life leads to cooperative relationships characterized by an enterprising spirit. From this perspective, while solidarity may be seen as an issue for local initiatives in situations of material scarcity, Smith and Stirling (2018) emphasize its importance in any initiative. Indeed, for local initiatives, solidarity is part of how initiatives use social relations to form an identity that is crucial for them to sustain themselves and attract new members (p. 83).

Forming a group identity is closely linked to a local initiative's need for autonomy. In the transitional studies literature this is phrased as niche developments acting in isolation from the larger regime (Sengers et al., 2019). However, the need for autonomy is both a need for isolation from the outside world to develop the initiative's own ideas, and

autonomy as a starting point and a sense of direction. The organic tea growers in India illustrate this point. As organic farmers, they recognize themselves as change agents and develop their self-efficacy through innovation, sometimes spending months experimenting on prospective products (Deka & Goswami, 2020). Furthermore, as the tea growers nurture their self-identity, they also develop "their social networks to create a wider platform to promote organic cultivation and tea manufacturing among the small tea growers in the region" (Deka & Goswami, 2020, p. 460).

Support and access

Thus far, the paper has dealt with factors mostly related to the internal workings of local initiatives on sustainability. However, local initiatives are also part of the outside world, and that world is part of how local initiatives manage to succeed and be sustained over time. The literature identifies support and access as important factors, emphasizing how they enhance local initiatives. One important aspect is supportive public policies, which could be regulations that recognize local initiatives on sustainability, such as the inclusion of waste pickers in the Brazilian classification of occupations and their recognition as receivers of recyclable materials from public institutions (Gutberlet, 2021, p. 2), regulations granting local communities the right to manage forests and forest resources for income in Cameroon (Foundjem-Tita et al., 2018) or the right to manage various types of ecosystem of importance for agroecological transformations worldwide (Anderson et al., 2019). This also includes supportive funding opportunities for

transformation, such as contracts with local government, national funding schemes or global REDD funding opportunities, as well as protected markets or subsidies for sustainable solutions (Köhler et al., 2019; Gutberlet, 2021; Foundjem-Tita et al., 2018). Although local initiatives are often perceived as self-initiated and run, this emphasizes the need for governance measures on sustainable action on and the scaling-up of sustainable societal change. As Köhler et al. (2019, p. 9) state, "the ideas [on sustainable transitions] are originally firmly rooted in the perspective that niches need to be nurtured and protected by public policy". However, the existence of support from government policies matters little if local initiatives lack access to the resources required. With agroecological transformations, this could mean access to land. As Anderson et al. observe:

> Secure land tenure and land reform, as well as access to seeds and other elements of natural ecosystems have long [been] shown to be vitally important for smallholder livelihoods and investment in sustainable agriculture, including agroecology. (2019, p. 7)

Thus, for local initiatives to be able to access supportive measures it is important to be vigilant about the regulation of resources, and how urban-rural conditions, the capacity of actors and power relations affect who has access and how (Anderson et al., 2019; Foundjem-Tita et al., 2018). Although Anderson et al. (2019) specifically analyse agroecological transformations, their insights on accessibility and fairness are relevant for local initiatives beyond food production. While emphasizing that systems of exchange, such as different types of

markets, barter or state provisioning are important enablers, "the extent to which these systems of exchange are accessible, fair, profitable, and fulfilling for food producers is critical" (2019, p. 10).

Networks

Last but certainly not least, our analysis identified networks as a further important factor in how local initiatives are sustained and scaled-up. Local initiatives use different kinds of networks to succeed in and maintain their activities. Initiatives use horizontal networks between similar actors to learn across initiatives, spread their activities and enhance their impact. For example, organic tea growers in India use horizontal connections to create a wider platform and promote organic agriculture (Deka & Goswami, 2020). Such connections matter because, as Anderson et al. (2019) point out:

> Supportive dynamics and conditions for the development of agroecological knowledge often exist outside of formal (educational) institutions in the networks, communities, and organizations of food producers. Horizontal processes of adult learning amongst food producers, often at a territorial level, have been central to the spread of agroecology. (p. 9)

In addition, horizontal networks provide local initiatives with stronger representation and leverage against outside actors; such is the case with the National Waste Pickers' Movement (MNCR) in Brazil, as "strong representation by the MNCR or regional networks empowers the waste pickers to negotiate contracts with the Government" (Gutberlet, 2021, p. 6). This brings us to the importance of initiatives to connect with

different actors. Anderson et al. underscore that "multi-actor networks are pivotal in strengthening community self-organization" (p. 12). Horizontal networks also underline that although local initiatives on sustainability gain from developing a sense of autonomy and self-identity, their connection to other actors is important for the development of their own initiative and for broadening the scope of its activities. Castro-Arce & Vanclay (2020) show how ADEZN uses dialogue and collaboration to bring actors together to promote sustainable urban development:

> ADEZN put sectors and political levels that were not typically involved with each other into dialogue and collaboration. [...] Without changing the formal planning structures, ADEZN provided a space in which public institutions collaborated with local communities, entrepreneurs and the academy. (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020, p. 53)

As ADEZN brings the institutions or actors into a relationship, it provides opportunities for multiple actors that otherwise would not have come together to collaborate on and efficiently implement their planned activities. Indeed, multi-actor networks can enhance capacities within the local initiative and compensate for missing resources, while also creating awareness of the needs and opportunities for sustainable development (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020; Sengers et al., 2019). Moreover, the collaboration between local initiatives and actors outside of their own initiative makes connecting with the government essential. Governmental actors are important to the initiatives' sustainability through the provision of long-term relationships, funding opportunities and

access to policymaking forums that influence local development (Anderson et al., 2019; Gutberlet, 2021; Gaiger, 2017; Castro-Acre & Vanclay, 2020). This includes the need for initiatives to learn the language of policy actors and move outside of their own spheres of interest, because: "Without learning to talk planning language, convincing local planning officials to take seriously a group of "amateurs" can be tricky" (Smith & Stirling, 2018, p. 68).

At the same time, however, engaging with mainstream language can also discourage local initiatives since the way issues are imagined and talked about also frames the alternatives for debate, policy ideas and actions on sustainability (Anderson et al., 2019). For example, Anderson et al. claim that language and imaginaries affect organic farmers by disempowering and demobilizing them, as they:

> attribute peasants, traditional rural communities, and traditional forms of agriculture with qualifiers such as "poor", "backwards", "ugly", "low quality", "inefficient", and "unproductive" [...], while presenting large-scale producers and industrial forms of agriculture as "modern", "productive", "tidy", and representative of "good" farming. (Anderson et al., 2019, p. 17)

In addition, by connecting to outside, possibly more powerful, actors, local initiatives run the risk of politicization and elite capture (Anderson et al., 2019; Castro-Acre & Vanclay, 2020). This highlights the need to acknowledge that different actors across scales and governance levels are not necessarily in agreement with each other regarding the direction of sustainable

development and the means required to implement it (Fowler & Biekart, 2017). However, in times of growing economic inequalities, it is also important to acknowledge the "increasing asymmetry in (types) of power and capabilities within and between stakeholders" (Fowler & Biekart, 2017, p. 86). In their analysis of sustainable development initiatives that involve multiple stakeholders, Fowler and Biekart (2017, p. 87) claim that: "Participation can be a power game in and of itself". Thus, connecting to elite actors can be both a blessing and a curse for local initiatives. Nonetheless, if initiatives aim to affect actors beyond their immediate surroundings, they must move beyond isolation. According to Sengers et al. (2019, p. 161), "too often, sustainability-oriented experiments are isolated events that fade into oblivion without any effect on incumbent regimes". While not forgetting the importance of autonomy and self-reliance, networking matters because, "when local-level initiatives become interwoven across geographical scales and political levels, social innovation can work towards systemic change" (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020, p. 46).

The need for networks and the complexities they entail for local initiatives highlight the interdependence between local initiatives and their surroundings. In analysing the future for local initiatives that imagine a different global economy, Gaiger (2017, p. 22) emphasizes that it is not only about creating an alternative but that "alternatives are embedded within the dialectics of the very system they fight against and try to overcome". In reflecting on how wind energy moved from being at the margins to become a mainstream technology for energy

production, Smith (2016, p. 487) echoes the importance of interdependence since: "Without the radical idealists, the appropriable novelties available to institutionally constrained business would be fewer; and without problematic co-options within the mainstream, the idealists would have no 'other' against which to innovate".

This section has identified capacity and learning, flexibility and profitability, solidarity and autonomy and support and access, as well as networks as important factors in the likelihood of local initiatives being successful and sustained over time.

Lessons from sustainability initiatives

Previous sections have shown how local initiatives succeed, sustain themselves and scale-up by enhancing capacity and learning, addressing flexibility and profitability, and implementing solidarity and autonomy, and support and access – as well as through networks. However, while some initiatives manage to have a broader impact on the societies in which they are acting, local initiatives often remain isolated, and societal and cultural changes beyond individual movements or activists are needed for sustainable alternatives to become the norm (Smith, 2016; Sengers et al., 2019). This section draws together a few lessons learned. Without claiming to present all the possible meanings that local initiatives have for sustainability and the SDGs, we highlight three lessons we have identified as important for wider societal transformation to sustainable development.

The first lesson we draw from the identified factors is that for local initiatives to succeed and scale-up, it is important to understand the linkages between the initiative itself and the outside world. This includes how initiatives use networking with both similar actors and heterogeneous networks to enhance capacities and create momentum for change beyond that initiative. It also requires that external actors support local initiatives financially, morally or through policy and regulation. At the same time, however, it requires an understanding of how such interactions can hinder sustainability initiatives and reduce their broader impact, for example, through elite capture or external actors steering the agendas of initiatives in a direction preferred by the more powerful – or the implementation of policies that prevent initiatives from forming and growing. How local initiatives are perceived by outside actors is also important to their ability to scale-up sustainable transitions. If local initiatives are talked about as viable alternatives to current mainstream developments, for example, their possible impact is reinforced, whereas their impact is reduced if initiatives are defined as "backward-looking" or "impossible".

This leads on to the second lesson learned from local initiatives on sustainability: that knowledge matters. We emphasize above that capacities and learning within local initiatives are important factors in how they succeed and grow. Furthermore, we discussed different types of knowledges and emphasized that the kind of knowledge revealed in larger transformations to sustainable development and whose knowledge this is crucial for scaling-up.

Whether western, science-based or corporate-led knowledge is seen as a driver of sustainability, or indigenous, traditional and cultural learnings are considered equally will shape how societal transformations take place and the type of sustainable development imagined. This highlights that "[k]nowledge and power are intimately linked" (Anderson et al., 2019, p. 8). Through a common acceptance of certain knowledge as the knowledge that appropriately influences transformations to sustainable development, this also highlights that whether local initiatives succeed in scaling-up is influenced by a political debate over values, the direction of development and practical implementation (Smith & Stirling, 2018, p. 65).

The contestations around knowledge and types of learning on sustainable development also highlights the third lesson we identify: that holistic approaches to sustainable development are at the same time both crucial and contradictory. That sustainable development is a contested concept has been highlighted by researchers before us. Some scholars argue that a sustainable development that rests on three pillars – the economic, ecological and social – is resting on the wrong premises, or is "weak", "meaningless" and "vague" (Holden et al., 2016, p. 214). Others have argued the opposite: that the three pillars are closely interlinked in both theory and practice (Berglund et al., 2014). Such debates highlight the contested nature of sustainable development as a concept as well as the complexity of the sustainability challenges before us (Köhler et al., 2019). Through our review of several local initiatives on sustainability, we argue that both

perspectives hold some truth. The above discussion has illustrated some of this complexity through, for example, the different meanings of money and profit, the simultaneous need for self-reliance and networking, and the need for capcaity building and to leave space for different types of knowledge. This review of different local initiatives on sustainability highlights that while not all initiatives manage to deal with sustainable development as a whole, a dependence on context and the adaptation of activities to the needs of that context will mean that the sustainable development performed by the initiative is the type of sustainable development preferred in that context and by the members of the initiative. Such "vagueness" may imply contradictory goals and achievements in relation to ecological, economic and social sustainability, but a holistic view of sustainable development means that local initiatives on sustainability can make equal use of a global discourse and encouraging the practice of sustainable development as promoted in international documents and the SDGs while implementing locally adapted solutions.

Conclusions

This paper takes as its point of departure the variety of ongoing activities and initiatives that are working to achieve sustainable development. The paper has shown that action on sustainability is already happening, and a variety of initiatives are taking action into their own hands to shape a sustainable future. By analysing local initiatives on sustainability, the paper identifies capacity and learning, flexibility and profitability, solidarity and autonomy, support, access

and networks as important factors in how local initiatives on sustainable development are able to succeed and scale-up. Thus, this paper contributes to a broader understanding of what matters to local initiatives to enable them to sustain themselves and grow. This understanding is important both to local initiatives themselves, and to other actors seeking to encourage future initiatives. There are multiple global challenges facing the world, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, increasing inequalities and polarization, and local initiatives present a way forward to achieve sustainable development. At the same time, joining those singing the praises of local initiatives for their ability to act could promote a false sense of security. Local initiatives present one alternative but, as we emphasize above, for sustainable development to occur, the link between local initiatives and other actors, as well as other levels of governance will be key.

To emphasize the necessary relation between local initiatives and other actors and activities, the paper presented three lessons on how local initiatives can become part of a societal transition to sustainable development: first, the importance of the linkages between local initiatives and the outside world; second, the importance of knowledge and different types of knowledge; and, third, the need to perceive sustainable development as both holistic and contradictory. All three lessons offer insights into how sustainable development through local initiatives is prevented from or encouraged to combat the global challenges we currently face. These lessons are important for all actors interested in understanding and actively engaging in a

broader societal transformation to enhanced sustainability.

This said, the paper does not give directions on the types of actions needed to achieve sustainabile development. Instead, the paper underlines the many different paths taken by the initiatives. As Smith and Stirling (2018, p. 91) claim:

> The search for good models and best practices in innovation [for sustainable development] needs to be subordinate to a need to look at interactions, flows and contestations between different approaches to innovation.

This paper offers some initial insights into how interactions, flows and contestation matter if local initiatives are to sustain themselves and remain part of promoting sustainable development for society as a whole. However, more research is needed to understand how local initiatives on sustainability can be part of promoting holistic sustainable development that ensures environmental, social and economic sustainability as a whole.

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