Community 21

Digital toolbox for sustainable communities

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Despite the ubiquitousness of the word 'sustainability', much of the public debate surrounding this issue only serves to alienate and demoralise individuals and communities. Sustainability is often perceived as conservation of species, the environment or the world. In rural areas, however, it is actual communities that are under threat. Paradoxically, despite the proximity to nature of rural communities, rural does not necessarily mean being 'green'. In fact, rural behaviours are disproportionately dependent on natural resources and, as a consequence, can be less sustainable.

This article seeks to unpack the term 'sustainability' and to explore the potential of 'self-sufficiency', which is a demonstrable concern of vulnerable rural communities, and has been the focus of much work on community engagement in the UK. Such a focus can arguably achieve as a by-product genuine, meaningful and measurable sustainable development.

The article describes an action-research project that aims to use web-based technology to help community groups in the rural UK counties of East and West Sussex to facilitate their own sustainable development. The project – known as 'Toolbox for the 21st Century Village' – arose from collaboration between two main parties with distinct expertise and insight into issues of sustainability which were thus able to offer different, but complementary, perspectives in relation to engaging communities. After discussing the term 'sustainability', the article will briefly introduce the two main parties involved in this project, together with their background and experience. The research contexts and practical agendas that the two parties have brought to the project have proved essential to its development and evolution to its current stage. The article will then go on to outline the design brief and design process and discuss the aims and challenges raised by the 'Toolbox for the 21st Century Village' project.

DON'T MENTION THE 'S' WORD

'Sustainability' has seemingly permeated every aspect of modern life and yet it remains a loaded and often divisive and polemical term. Despite being central to many campaigns and activities, to

use the term as a central point of principle in a positive way can lead to argument, demoralisation and negativity. Sustainability is often perceived as a type of utopia or absolute condition, and this perspective does not help to empower or encourage individuals or communities to take positive action, particularly if it requires a return to some sort of 'pure' existence that makes no impact on the planet. This is simply unrealistic, but can result in disempowerment and an individualised sense of 'so why bother trying?' Similarly, terminology such as climate change 'denier' or 'believer' is deeply unhelpful, serving only to divert attention from more nuanced and commonsensical concerns, while reinforcing and entrenching crude divisions.

The communication of sustainability issues in society through visual culture, the media and politics has also served to alienate, demoralise and disenfranchise many individuals and communities. Lowering CO_2 emissions and addressing climate change can be seen as defining missions for the sustainability movement, but the iconography of these issues is that of stranded polar bears on melting ice caps, desertification and mass starvation, rendering the scale and nature of these issues overwhelming and incomprehensible. For a small village to be able to consider its role within an abstract global mission to save unfamiliar creatures, eco-systems and landscapes is a very tall order.

> *Whilst effective images predominantly focus upon climate impacts, individuals tend not to relate to these personally with little knowledge of, or interest in, activities to mitigate climate change. Popular media representations of climate change reduce people's perceptions of the likelihood of adverse events, thereby reducing the likelihood that they will be inspired to take action* (Lowe 2006).

Therefore, any approach to sustainable development needs to provide more inclusive, tangible and accessible strategies for engagement and sustainable progress. Indeed, when we 'zoom in' from the global issues articulated above and look more locally at rural communities and their concerns, there is a shift of scale as well as a change in focus. Issues that we can define as relating to 'sustainability' are here too, but they are more relevant, immediate concerns of everyday modern rural life. Concerns are often about *self-sufficiency* or *self-sustainability*. However, unlike the apathy and disenfranchisement often shown towards irreconcilable, distant global issues, communities are frequently very motivated, empowered and productive when engaging or addressing these tangible local concerns, particularly when part of a community led planning process.

The misperception still exists that the countryside is a green and pleasant land, and that by living in close proximity to 'green space' or 'huggable trees' rural habitation is somehow more at one with nature. However, most villages in the UK are not actually wide-open natural playgrounds but detached, land-locked islands

often surrounded by industrialised farmland. In the UK, for example, the propensity to centralise many day-to-day servicing needs within metropolitan areas inadvertently results in much greater use of motor vehicles:

> *Rural households have higher CO_2 emissions per person than those in the city, thanks to their generally larger, detached or semi-detached houses, multiple cars and long commutes (cars are responsible for 12 per cent of carbon emissions in Europe – 50 per cent in some parts of the USA). The regions with the biggest carbon footprints in the UK are not the metropolises of Glasgow or London, but the largely rural north east of England, as well as Yorkshire and the Humber. In fact, the per-capita emissions of The Big Smoke – London – are the lowest of any part of the UK* (Smith 2010).

So devising sustainable development strategies for rural communities should be a priority and could have a disproportionately positive effect. For example, as part of a community led planning process in Barcombe, East Sussex, a recent survey asked: 'What sustainability issues concern you the most?' Despite a diverse demographic, the majority of answers from the 540 respondents were localised and introspective rather than global and apocalyptic in their concern. Their comments related to personal issues and experiences such as lack of village places to recycle cardboard, concerns about rural post office and shop provision, affordable local housing, bus service frequency, village hall maintenance costs, local oil prices, theft of stored domestic oil and loss of local dairy herds (Barcombe Community Action Plan Survey 2009). These concerns then formed the basis of actions in a community led plan, which are now being proactively addressed through an integrated approach to meeting needs and as essential elements of the natural development of the village in question. A new zero-carbon village hall has been designed and building is underway, with virtually zero running costs and the installation of cardboard recycling points. Other elements of this initiative include the development of a low-impact, affordable housing scheme and the implementation of local energy production and wildlife conservation projects.

This embracing of identifiable, localised and practical concerns, driven by community led planning, has the potential to generate numerous and relevant changes. This suggests that sustainable development might be best achieved as a natural inclination or via local agendas rather than by a 'higher' sustainability agenda or Kyoto targets. As Evans and Abrahamse note (Brahic 2009, p. 9), 'Sustainability can be a by-product of a lifestyle choice that may initially have nothing to do with environmental concerns. More than yoga teachers and hemp grocery bags, it is this that may prove to be the real key to Britain's shift to a more sustainable lifestyle.'

By communities being self-serving rather than altruistic, the result can be effective, more sustainable positive action.

Local, introverted and even 'nimby' (not in my back yard – a term describing anti-development tendencies within rural communities) concerns can indirectly drive community self-sustainability in a way that altogether bypasses the politics of belief and/or scientific fact versus fiction that characterises and constipates the wider global campaign.

BACKGROUND: THE COLLABORATING PARTIES

Across the UK, Rural Community Councils (RCCs) are charitable local development agencies, generally based at county level, which support and enable initiatives in rural communities. Altogether, there are 38 RCCs, which form part of the national Rural Community Action Network (RCAN), itself organised under an umbrella organisation called Action in Communities in Rural England (ACRE). Among the RCCs' broad range of activities, one of their core functions is to help with the development of community led plans (CLPs), which form part of the community planning approach now promoted at each level of local government in the UK. Community led plans are put together by the community through consultation, needs assessment, research and local agreement. The Parish or Town Council often takes a key role, but in many communities an action plan team, with representatives from across the community, is formed to take the process forward. Parish and Town Councils are the third level of local government in the UK with members elected by the community to represent the particular community to the higher tier authorities, as well as having some local responsibilities themselves for service delivery. Parish and Town Councils in the UK are distinct from parochial church councils, also sometimes called parish councils.

Action in rural Sussex (AirS) is the RCC covering the counties of East and West Sussex. Established in 1931, AirS has provided continual support to rural communities over the last 80 years. The priorities and services offered by AirS have varied over the years but central to the key services has been support for local communities to identify their own local action plans based on local consultation and needs assessment. AirS has then supported the Parish and Town Councils to implement the actions and continue to review and update the plan. The funding for this work has come from both central and local government sources and to some extent from the communities themselves. Methodologies have been developed and shared with the rest of the RCAN network so that community led plans have been similarly developed throughout rural England.

AirS provides its rural communities with advice about community led planning processes, as well as information about potential priorities, projects and solutions to the issues identified. A typical community led plan takes between nine months and two years to complete. In the last year this advice has included publications that provide community led plan teams with ideas about how to tackle concerns related to climate change, localism, self-sufficiency and resilience.

In 2007, AirS published the first incarnation of a 'toolbox' in the form of a printed poster, the central feature of which was an illustration of a 'typical' village (see Figure 1). The illustration used a local visual vernacular to depict a recognisable image of rural life, but with a diverse range of elements of sustainable development embedded within the normal everyday behaviour of the village. Solar panels on houses, community orchards, car clubs, community composting and recycling points were all elements intended to inspire and inform rural communities. This 'picture of sustainability' became a focal point of interest for local communities and community engagement organisations as something they could really relate to. The use of a familiar, everyday village that had integrated sustainability as part of its self-sufficiency and natural behaviour enabled individuals and communities to envisage and identify themselves and their role within a positive and integrated sustainable system.

Figure 1: First incarnation of the Toolbox for the 21st Century Village, utilising an illustration of a 'typical local village' with embedded aspects of sustainable development

This printed toolbox was the catalyst for AirS to engage with the Centre for Research and Development at the University of Brighton, UK, and in particular with Nick Gant at the centre. Nick's research and public life offers considerable experience in the mediation, communication and promotion of sustainability. Equally, the University of Brighton has developed a distinctive cluster of sustainability and sustainable design researchers and research agendas and a demonstrable body of applied practice work. Nick Gant's public role as a Parish Councillor has also added to his experience of the reality 'on the ground' when considering sustainability as a topic within a rural community.

The use of the printed toolbox demonstrated its potential in assisting community groups to identify their own priorities and possible projects. However, Teresa Gittins of AirS, who had led the development of the toolbox, also recognised the limitations of an

approach that relied wholly on a print medium. Discussions with Nick Gant led to the development of an idea that the original toolbox should be web-based and dynamic in its capabilities as an information management device and that this would broaden its appeal as well as provide a greater potential to incorporate more information and advice. This in turn led to further discussions about a more integrated project that could transform the whole community led planning processes and make them more accessible to a greater number of people. The development of a web-based networking opportunity for rural communities to engage among themselves, and with other rural communities, with the assistance of an RCC facilitator, was seen as a real chance to significantly improve the knowledge and outcomes for the individuals and groups involved. A system that provided data and evidence of need to service providers and public sector bodies would enhance the roles and reputation of RCCs and enable them to continue with their core task of promoting and facilitating local community development.

To date, the RCCs have been very successful in encouraging rural communities to take a much greater role in their own planning and in driving their community agenda. This engagement is based on comprehensive community involvement in the CLP process and collective decisions about the future actions that the community will take. Currently, 68.2 per cent of villages in East and West Sussex have completed a community led planning process, each undertaken over the last eight years (AirS 2010). It was felt that this impressively high level of involvement offered much scope for an informatics system such as the toolbox to both streamline and enhance the practical, largely paper-based process while also making it much more dynamic, accessible and shareable and therefore much more effective.

A steering group was formed to assist Nick Gant and Teresa Gittins with the initial design, development and blueprint of the system and its functionality. The group comprised university colleagues Peter Day and Gary Brooke who provided research and technical expertise in community information science, a respected community led planning expert Nick Wates and representatives from the community led planning team at AirS. The group represented a wealth of experience of community development techniques and methodologies and was receptive to and enthusiastic about embracing web-based technologies to also enhance and promote the existing CLP processes and the increased engagement of local communities. The group provided some early validation of some of the assumptions and aspirations of the system to be developed. From the group's discussions a design brief and an action-research project based on the initial design was developed. This design brief resulted in a web-based toolkit being piloted and evaluated by a number of individual communities with the intention of providing the basis for the final system.

At the time of writing this article, the blueprint of the website toolbox has been specified and analysed to ensure the best chance of functionality. The site is under construction and a pilot process of trialling will begin in January 2011 with selected communities who are undertaking a community led planning exercise.

The communities will be chosen firstly from within a cluster of communities that are geographically close and also from a selection of communities that are more remote and offer different demographics. The name for the project website is Community21.org and, assuming the pilot is a success and having now received support from the national RCC body, ACRE, the project team plans to evolve and grow the system to instigate its 'going live' and being utilised throughout the national network of RCCs. Results of the pilot exercise will be disseminated and will form the basis of further discussion and research and development.

THE DESIGN BRIEF

The context for the design brief is:

—to provide an updated and contextual basis for communities to undertake a community led plan while at the same time exploring issues of climate change adaptation, self-sufficiency, localism and community action

—to enhance (not replace) the face-to-face community engagement work that RCCs undertake so successfully and for the new toolbox system to, in its own right, also enable the facilitation and evolution of sustainable development

—to identify from AirS' point of view what shape community facilitation will take in a digital world

—to provide a system that can generate useful data summaries of the priorities and actions identified by rural communities.

The Platform Design

The focus was to design a bespoke content management system (CMS platform), which would see the inclusive nature and success of the original printed illustration developed as a digital interactive feature on the new internet platform, or toolbox (see Figure 2, overleaf). CMS platforms enable different information formats or content (text, pictures, movies, etc.), created by any number of different sources, to be uploaded to a website and stored, broadcast, exchanged, shared, linked, re-presented and managed dynamically. The first key feature of the Community21 system will use the aforementioned original illustration of the village that so successfully offered communities the opportunity to explore integrated sustainability through an identifiable image in paper form. As an interactive image map on the Community21 platform, the illustration can come to life with each element being linked to its own branch of continually updated information. Be it wind turbines, community orchards or low-impact, affordable housing, each interactive feature element can link off to information on local suppliers, grants and funding and, importantly, case studies of a community's own examples and experiences. These case

studies can be uploaded by the community itself, bringing greater diversity, authenticity and dynamics to the content. The case studies (as content) can then be managed in different ways. For example, case studies relating to creating village ponds can be accessed based on the locality of the person or community viewing the information. So the videos, pictures, instructions, discussion and critiques that form the case studies will be prioritised so that individuals and communities can link, network and engage with their neighbours based on shared knowledge and experience. This of course does not prevent a visitor to the website from seeing how a village in another county or even country has created a pond, hydro-electric power supply or communal bee hives, for example, but it enables a local dynamic of social networking and inter-community engagement to occur.

Figure 2: New website platform featuring interactive illustration of village with embedded data resource

This sharing of information and knowledge is valuable and the project team sees connective processes such as this as essential to positive, collective cultural change. 'The web matters because it allows more people to share ideas with more people in more ways. The web's underlying culture of sharing, decentralization and democracy makes it an ideal platform for groups to self-organise, combining their ideas and know-how' (Leadbeater 2008).

Of course this sort of management of content and networking is not a new concept – this toolbox design integrates thinking and systems that already exist in both social networking CMS websites, such as Facebook, and open source and/or *wiki* systems such as Wikipedia. Open sourcing and *wiki*, as styles of content management, offer opportunities when considering the

value of the community as a 'cloud', where multiple sources of information, opinion and good practice create effervescent live organisation. Open source systems originally emanated from technical communities of software designers and programmers who joined together to develop, augment and/or expand a particular piece of software. This practice has evolved to offer highly active, cooperative problem-solving potential, resulting in growing capacity and capability of the software for communal, democratic gain and exploitation. *Wiki* systems are generally websites that are easily interlinked and contributed to by a community – Wikipedia is a great example of this. In both open source and *wiki,* the collective contribution becomes a live and dynamic manifestation of knowledge and skill that finds solutions to collective problems. The skills and knowledge are in turn perpetuated, shared and disseminated widely for communal benefit. It is hoped that in the toolbox scenario the communal building of experience and information will spread best practice behaviour as well as identify failures and lessons learned as communities work toward self-sustainability. The *wiki* and open source culture, by enabling communities to have a voice and the tools to enact their own planning and development that can be disseminated and shared, could enable/encourage progress and self-sustainability through mutual dialogue and layered knowledge:

> *People want meaningful opportunities to participate and contribute, to add their piece of information, view or opinion. They want viable ways to share, to think and work laterally with their peers. They are searching for collaborative ways to get things done. When these three come together – participate, share, collaborate – they create new ways for us to organize ourselves that are more transparent, cheaper and less top down structures* (Leadbeater 2008).

The platform design integrates the notion of collective sharing of knowledge, ideas and action facilitated by a common goal (self-sustainability). It is envisaged that rural community councils (RCCs) will manage the system and provide professional support and supervision to communities, helping them to identify and act on their needs, based on nuanced local demands (see Figure 3, overleaf).

AirS and the other rural community councils are increasingly aware that there is both potential for much of their information packs and guidance to be web-based and increasing interest from community representatives and participants in web-based processes. Such a development could help to transform the whole community led planning processes. Instead of relying solely on evening meetings, events and paper-based consultations and surveys, which by their nature attract a particular level of community engagement, the use of new technologies will engage a broader and greater proportion of the local population. It is part of the role of AirS to develop and introduce new ideas,

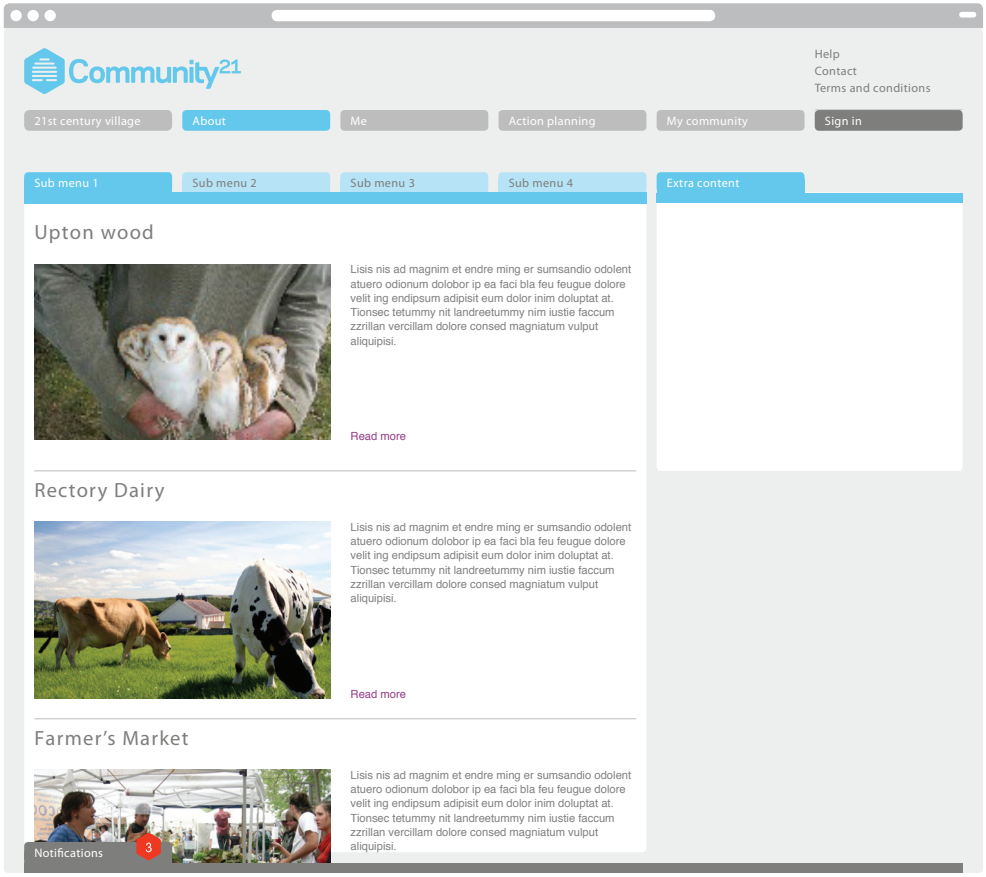

Figure 3: Image of website platform demonstrating case studies of village actions entered by the communities themselves

concepts and techniques and this project has the potential to both transform and reinvigorate the development and implementation of local community led plans. Putting aside the current (hopefully transitory) issues about accessing broadband and adequate connection speeds within rural communities, the platform will build on existing trends and behaviours that many people are engaging with at a personal level and transpose these to work for the benefit of the whole community.

Community development has a history of adapting and embracing new technologies, techniques and methodologies because to be successful it needs to relate to how individuals and society as a whole interact and engage at any point in time. IT-based technologies bring opportunities that cannot be ignored, especially if traditionally hard to reach groups and individuals are to be engaged. Each community will still need to be sensitive to the need to engage with the non-IT community, but then the techniques and methodologies for this already exist.

As part of the design stage, further exploration of existing technology for social networking occurred, to see what other opportunities there were for RCCs to act as community facilitators online. This led to the development of the Community21 website offering the opportunity to 'mash up' with other services, which essentially means the website will integrate or share elements from other software or websites such as Twitter and Facebook, to enhance or combine the service. The toolbox website will be able to engage with communities that already exist on these social

networking platforms, which could include large proportions of younger and notoriously difficult to reach members of a community.

The second key element of the platform design is the formation of a section entitled 'your community'. This will form the basis for community led planning (CLP) that importantly uses a recognisable image of the users' actual community as the central interaction and interface with the community data developed through the CLP process. The image of the community is generated by 'mashing up' with the Google maps software. One key advantage of the smooth interface of this software is that on entering the 'your community' page on the website, the user can be taken on a visual journey from space, viewing the earth as a whole and then zooming in to their actual geographic community. It is hoped this will help form a more literal, visual and perceptual connection between the user and the bigger context of their community. Once zoomed in, past the patchwork of regional and neighbouring communities, the image of the user's community is 'real' and identifiable in all its detail.

The community led planning process undertaken by RCCs such as AirS often starts with a community 'mapping' or audit exercise. This is where key information such as demographics and the number of businesses, faith groups, societies, clubs, etc. is collated – the 'Your Community' aspect of the website is designed therefore to enable the community to map this information onto the image of itself within Google maps using tags.

The system allows community planning teams and RCC users to augment the image of the community with interactive tags which, when clicked on, reveal detailed information about the community (see Figure 4, overleaf). The community generates this information itself as part of the initial community audit exercise. The image of the community as an interface becomes alive with detailed content representing that community, its unique features, characteristics and personality.

Each individual tag forms a link to an individual page with content applied to it – so the church is tagged and can have its own page, formed from templates, which contains information relating to its strategy for sustainability and pledges for change, alongside its profile and any general information. Equally, local business and service providers can advertise and promote themselves as part of the local economy.

The collective data accrued by the system is stored and managed and can be re-presented publicly through the 'front end' of the system (public user interface) or presented dynamically according to different criteria in the 'back end' (limited access or management interface) for strategic use by the CLP team and/or other local, regional or national strategic planning authorities.

Community led planning is to be further integrated into the system design by offering the opportunity for online community consultation – traditionally done via community

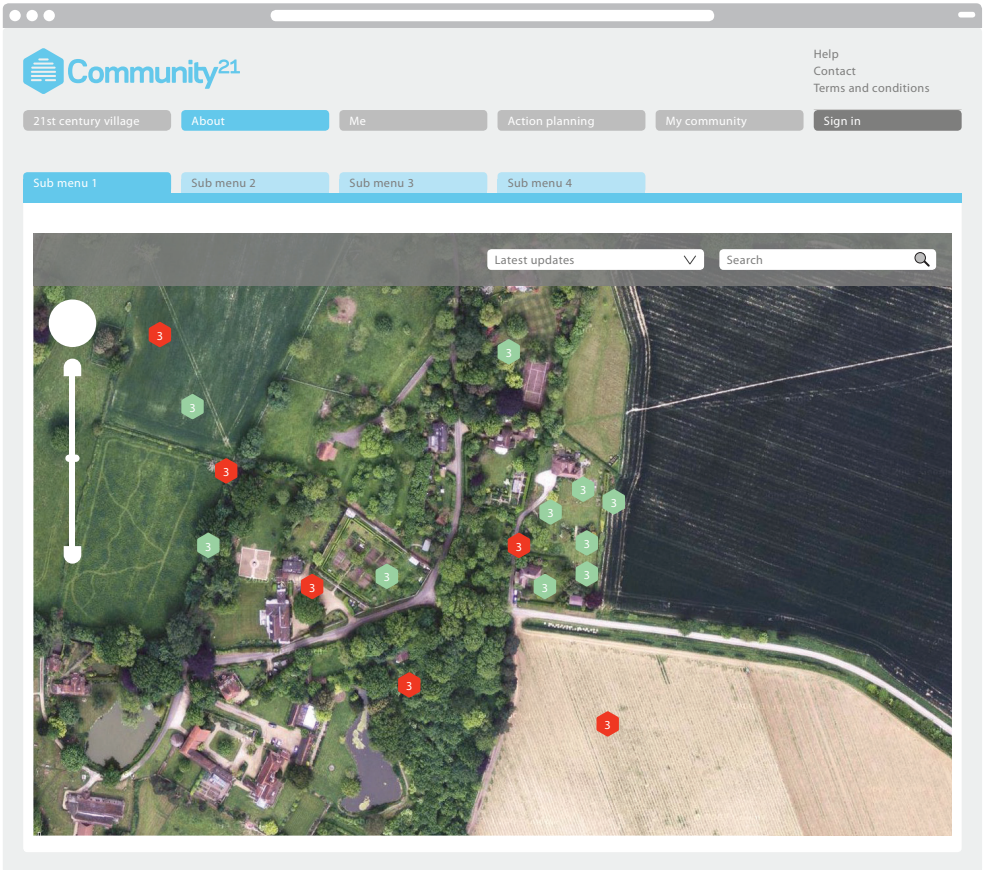

Figure 4: Website platform featuring Google map image of community augmented with 'data tags'

meetings and printed questionnaires. Online questionnaires can draw on the knowledge and experience of previous work while having the ability to be specifically customised to suit individual communities. Not all community members are keen or able to attend village meetings for a variety of personal or political reasons or practical constraints. The opportunity for community members to engage with the CLP process and fill in questionnaires online not only saves on paper, ink, onerous processes of survey delivery and collection and very lengthy data compiling, but is also quick and easy to do – which in turn is likely to result in greater participation. Whilst not intended to entirely replace the traditional processes of engagement, the system pilot will test the efficacy of submitted survey results being digitally compiled 'live' and presented transparently back to the community through accessible graphics and data presentation pages.

The CLP process often has to confront and deal with highly divisive issues and subjects within a community. Of interest to the project team is how being able to view the results of community members' responses to questions around these contentious issues as they come into the system could potentially create a provocative situation and political dynamic that may attract greater interest, engagement and responses from members of the community. The 'live' presentation of responses and blogs which enable ongoing communal commentary on the results, as they emerge, may also create a more modern sense of broadcasting and vibrancy around the event. The advantages technology offers should permit a more accurate polling of opinion on key issues with much greater levels of interactivity and visualisation possibilities. Data can still be

entered manually on behalf of those who want to use a paper-based system, but for the increasing majority of internet users, the system should provide greater transparency and accuracy and a more inclusive means of engagement with the CLP process and interpretation of collective opinions. Once individuals are registered in the system, other community members, planning groups, strategic authorities and local government can facilitate an ongoing dialogue with individual members, providing a very direct link, through one system, to large proportions of the population in a dynamic and efficient way – something the more traditional routes do not offer.

The 'Multi-local Society'

On a micro level, a community framing its own concerns and aspirations, and envisioning itself, its problems and responses as part of a larger system of neighbouring communities, can be positive in itself. But using a CMS platform such as the proposed Community21 system as an integrated part of the long-established and successful process of CLP that the RCCs already facilitate, the combined information in turn should have relevance, value and use beyond the immediate community.

The hoped-for result of any CLP process is a range of actions that the community agrees as items they want to address and act upon. These actions are not only the practical agenda items for the community, but authentic representations of its aspirations, concerns and responses. It is hoped that the Community21 platform will be able to take this information/CLP process a step further. By zooming in and enabling the system to gather and compare this detailed, localised and idiosyncratic data across a network of communities that have undertaken the CLP process, a range of interested parties, including the community itself, could then 'zoom out' and build a picture of a whole range of valuable perspectives relating to trends, commonalities as well as differences, and idiosyncrasies. By programming the system to view, compare and contrast information in a range of ways, agencies charged with strategic and economic planning could be greatly assisted. The new network of community users could be used to poll opinion or trial policy. While zoomed in on a local level, a shop owner and farmer could see that their community would like access to more locally grown produce or a Parish Council could see that a community would like to establish a managed woodland for fuel. But also by zooming out and viewing collective actions, a bus company could access data demonstrating that four neighbouring villages want better local transport provision and could engage in a collective dialogue with them regarding a solution – perhaps polling the community through the system to comment on a proposed scheme. Conservationists could view the local pond project and link it to a network of ponds or initiatives across a region. Local authorities and energy companies could see that communities in a region want locally, sustainably sourced power and respond accordingly. Beyond the

obvious value of shared authentic information and best practice between communities, the collective body of real case studies and information generated by the communities themselves could lead to collaboration and joined-up thinking on bigger issues. The communities would be acting for themselves but would also be part of a visible, active and tangible *patchwork* of interlinked communities, forming a much bigger *fabric*, all progressing and integrating their natural propensity to survive and be more sustainable. In the UK all of this is congruent with the aspirations being developed under Prime Minister David Cameron's 'Big Society' proposal.

This emergent collective picture that captures key aspects of local communities and their self-sustainability progress would hopefully be a vibrant and live illustration of action and progression, which could be viewed in detail or monitored on a wider scale. The website has the potential to capture change and progress in a meaningful, positive and accurate way. The active dynamic is formed from local planning and a social network of interlinked communities that forms a much larger organism – a digitally enabled *multi-local society* which, according to Manzini (2007), is 'a network of interconnected communities and places, at the same time open and localised. Small is not small and local is not local.'

> *Contrary to what was thought in the past, the joint phenomena of globalization and increased connectivity have given rise once again to the local dimension. By the expression 'local' what is meant now is something very removed from what was understood in the past (i.e. the valley, the village, the small provincial town, all isolated, relatively closed within their own cultures and economies). The new local combines the specific features of places and the communities with the phenomena generated and supported worldwide by globalization and by cultural and socio-economic interconnections* (Manzini 2007).

Questions and Challenges

The project/initiative is not without its challenges. One issue is managing anxieties communities may have about the adoption of another internet system. This might also be compounded by the concerns over information sharing generally within social networking systems. Additionally, communities may not want to engage with what might be seen as comparable or even competitive services or systems to those that communities already use or have developed for themselves. The way to overcome this is to embed the whole package within the facilitation role provided by the RCCs – the system is there to augment what is already working successfully as well as building opportunities for communities who do not have such services. The other main barrier for some communities would be the quality of the broadband connections in rural communities in the UK. This is variable and could inhibit, at least initially, individuals and communities actively participating.

There is also a degree of cultural change to be tackled in rural communities. The individuals leading community led planning initiatives are often more used to the traditional means of communication – public meetings, exhibitions, leaflets, paper-based surveys. Changing over to – or supplementing with – more digitally based systems will take time, but will offer demonstrable value. Both systems will need to work in parallel if the aim of engaging with the whole community is to be achieved.

While the ideas behind the system embrace the philosophy of, and provide a mechanism and process for, managing both the 'Big Society' agenda and addressing climate change issues, the resources required both to develop the system beyond pilot and, more importantly, to actively engage and provide support to communities in it are not necessarily in place or clear. The pilot will enable the formation of the full system specification for the next phase of operation, as well as an opportunity to build a business model based on trials of various models for paid services and functions by community and commercial users within the pilot. Some of these will model shared income streams for RCCs and communities. Proving whether the system can sustain itself will be vital in engaging further partners, funders and users.

CONCLUSION

Despite the concerns that communities may have inhibitions when moving towards an online facilitation system such as Community21, the prototype system was formally presented at the AirS annual conference, Rural Futures 2010 Policy and Practice, in September 2010 and it received resounding support from a range of governance and community engagement agencies, with over 20 communities committing to be part of the pilot trials. The national rural community council umbrella organisation, Action for Communities in Rural England, has also endorsed the development of the system and the aspiration to form a fully integrated national system for the benefit of RCCs and communities across the country.

The functional prototype system will be used with communities across East and West Sussex as part of the trial pilot in January 2011. The various proposed business models that might be applied to facilitate the growth of the system will each be trialled to form variable income possibilities.

The ambitions of the project team are to see the community facilitation services and tools deployed by RCCs become more relevant, progressive, valued and functional. By developing the pilot through local established networks that form part of a linked national system it is hoped the agendas of sustainable growth, self-sufficiency and resilience can be achieved in a meaningful way that will further empower communities to make their own decisions and take positive action for themselves.

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