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Title: Collaborative voices: drawing on cross-sector expertise in building community capacity and sustaining partnerships towards net zero sustainability futures

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INTRODUCTION

While the climate crisis affects everyone, research shows that despite being disproportionately affected racialised communities are also disproportionately excluded from policy and decision-making processes (Agarwal, 2010; Engelhardt, 2011). Narratives promoting collaboration have expanded the potential for inclusivity, moving away from top-down approaches towards community, cross-sectoral participation. Against this backdrop, this report introduces systems leadership, an innovative methodology emphasising co-creation and inclusive dialogue for net zero future goals. London South Bank University is uniquely situated within a diverse community, with cross-sectoral professional connections to local third sector organisations, public sector, private companies and racialised community groups. We are therefore exceptionally placed to facilitate a cross sectoral network made up of the diverse voices of the disproportionately affected and excluded racialized communities. Crucially, this report acknowledges the power imbalance that sustains exclusion, which is customarily structured to position predominantly white academic researchers above the racialized individuals and communities who are traditionally the subjects of academic scrutiny (Smith, 2021). This project, instead, seeks meaningful conversations through collaborative action for informing policymakers, investors, experts and civil society. It does so by reorienting traditional power imbalances seen in academic knowledge production, of researcher and research, to establish trust at community level through co-creation and collaboration. A central aim of this research is to listen to racialised voices that are often excluded, whether consciously or unconsciously. Thus, this report seeks to highlight structures and/or decision making that may construct barriers to inclusivity or overlook certain communities' engagement in tackling future dilemmas. Therefore, this report is not simply about including cross sectoral groups from the community in southeast London, but also about identifying and supplanting power dynamics that either ignore or make contributions from racialised communities invisible.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative research approach, critically exploring the potential effectiveness of cross-sectoral networks. It does so through workshop sessions, prioritizing participant collaboration towards reaching net zero goals. The researchers adopted a common research methodology, recruiting network members from established networks and through non-random purposive sampling, through snowballing methods (Miller and Bell, 2012). All network members were asked to sign a consent form to participate in the research. A research proposal for ethical consideration was submitted and approved by LSBU's Ethical Research Framework, in early January 2022. The research project sought to build a cross-sectoral network of 20 members (5 community group members, 5 third sector groups, 5 public sector and 5 private sector – see below for further detail). It was intended to have 4 face-to-face

workshops and an end of network event. Working with an expert facilitator, the network developed terms of reference for the methodology, foregrounding the community co-creation and collaboration logic identified by the researchers. We sought to build a unique value system, establishing an honest and transparent dialogue, co-designing a blueprint premised on including racialized voices in the wider efforts for a sustainable future. Consistent with our aims, we succeeded in facilitating four sessions, but with nine instead of the original twenty members as initially intended. The reasons for this will be explored in the findings, addressed as an especially important structural barrier to racialized participation. Network members contributed to four themed practice-based workshops which took place across three months, documented processes of collaboration, tested methods of co-creation, and explored creative innovative ideas for collective community action, aimed at delivering net zero goals. As the team included racialised researchers, we knew that traditional systems of power could prevent marginalised people from feeling safe to fully contribute. As such, we co-created a process with network members that offered the opportunity to anonymously capture the contributions that are often side-lined and excluded from analysis. This includes participants' observations and feedback on their experiences, usually in the form of email messages. It also included a summary from the professional workshop facilitator after each workshop. This facilitator played a key part in democratizing the research process, bridging the power gap between the academic team and the community participants. Their post-workshop feedback was therefore a vital part of the research findings. Contributions were noted and included in the research findings' analysis. The network was facilitated to ensure that each contributing participant had equal control and authority during the process.

Because the research was guided by the theme of collaboration, the network took collective action towards a journey of discovery. As a result, the research team became co-participants in the network while the research assistant took on the role of coordination. We developed a clearer understanding of how effective co-creation works, as we progressed as a collective from workshop to workshop. An identified potential weakness in the methodology was the inability to foresee or manage imbalance in power relations between network members, which inevitably crops up and informs issues of trust. To address this, an anonymous process was established with the participants so that if they so wished, they could provide feedback of their concerns to the research team with the aim of capturing those dynamics in the research findings. Findings were multimedia including both digital and analogue. This comprised of digital notetaking, audio visual recordings, art illustrations, post-it notes, feedback in the form of participant reflections, participant emails, and four podcasts where each researcher had an opportunity to have a one-to-one conversation with a participant volunteer. The data was triangulated (Bryman, 2008) and shaped through a coding strategy informed by thematic analysis identifying, analysing, and reporting recurrent themes occurring in the data.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This executive summary of findings is organized according to the four main objectives in the initial proposal. Findings are therefore organized under four subtitles, to feed forward on the outcomes of project objectives.

1. Identifying racialized barriers to inclusive co-creation and addressing knowledge gaps for policymakers and practitioners engaged in net zero economy goals

The very existence of the British Academy's call for papers on this particular topic, demonstrates awareness at policy level that voices are absent from the net zero debate. As researchers, this corresponded with our own awareness and individual lived experiences. Our work at LSBU with students from disproportionately affected racialized communities, revealed the extent to which racialised voices have been marginalised from net zero and sustainability debates. This allowed us to think beyond the notion of carbon, and to consider how racialised social exclusion and inequality intersects with sustainability.

Against this backdrop, our aims were to discover the characteristics of those barriers that prevent us from hearing the voices and stories of certain participants. We found different types of barriers, some expected and others less so.

The first most notable was the struggle it took to even bring the voices into the room. As noted previously, our aim was to bring together a 20-member network for four sessions, and whilst we managed four sessions, we only had nine members in total. One of our potential participants revealed a particular type of inequality, disclosing the extent to which he was over-subscribed to events like these. There is a lack of bridging capital for marginalised communities and the mainstream. This means that he could not accept our invitation to participate because, in his words, 'there are not enough people like me'. In effect, he is oversubscribed to similar networks who are seeking more diverse representation. This was a formative barrier that we encountered to even put together the network, where it was hoped we would hear the voices of the marginalised. Further research on this revelation would be encouraged, as we seek to understand the character and content of racialization. One key question concerns the extent to which barriers are individual and structural.

Once the network members were in the room, we identified the knowledge gaps through storytelling. One knowledge gap was around the lack of continuity in how the sustainability debate has been defined at policy level, including the shifting definitional terminologies and trends to which localised peoples often do not relate. The lack of continuity takes a particular form: the first problem is with the nature of top-down processes of defining key terminologies associated with sustainability; the knock-on effect of this is that new terminologies continuously crop up and disrupt endeavours taking place on the ground, at grassroots level. Effectively, the top-down nature of policy processes demonstrates a disconnect to what is happening at grassroots level. This is a key contributing barrier to the marginalisation of voices. Storytelling reveals a disconnect between localised cultural practices that demonstrated sustainability but were defined out of that relationship. As a starting point, participants asked us to define net zero, and in response they indicated that lifelong attitudes and practices aligned with net zero. Yet they do not see these practices referenced in the popular imageries. This again demonstrates the problematic nature of a policy process using terminology that writes out cultural practices that already correspond to net zero goals.

Another barrier uncovered is the marketisation of terminology and practice in sustainability and net zero efforts. For instance, this relates to how local cultural practices are integrated into sustainability and net zero goals but without the individuals and communities with whom these practices originated. For example, one participant spoke of veganism and recycling as

strongly associated with various cultural groups. However, in the mainstream these groups are not associated with these practices. Academic scholarship on greenwashing describes this as cultural appropriation (White et al., 2014). The marketisation barrier is therefore important in showing one-way cultural groups are written out of opportunities and benefits and therefore represents an example of the embedded nature of structural inequalities.

2. Utilise the logic and processes of the systems leadership (co-creation) as a methodology to facilitate cross-sectoral stakeholder collaboration

Utilising systems leadership provided opportunities to disrupt the status quo of traditional research hierarchies and enables collaboration through a more democratic process. In formulating an approach guided by collaboration, we are borrowing the core tenets of systems leadership which prioritises the democratisation of knowledge production. For example, this relates to questions about barriers to participation corresponding to the very existence of the project. In drawing on systems leadership, we prioritised reflexivity in the first instance, to draw on our individual lived experiences. In reflecting on our own hierarchical structured academic experiences, we sought to transform towards a more democratic arrangement with the networks. For example, we disrupted traditional structures like researcher/researched and created more horizontal relationships. The network itself represented this transformed arrangement where participants were encouraged to interact in a collaborative format, such as utilising innovative methods such as speed-dating, pair-interviewing, taking part in podcasts, feeding back through emails, facilitator summaries, and sharing participant case studies. This helped participants build trust in enabling them ownership of the content and context of the research.

3. Identify a cross-sectoral network, determining conditions and processes, and building opportunities for continued community engagement towards sustainable future goals

Building opportunities for continued community engagement was an important outcome. This opportunity starts with a key discovery in the workshop: though the researchers viewed network participants as experts, participants did not see themselves as such. This became apparent when in workshop session two participants asked the researchers to connect them with experts. Therefore, as part of our democratisation efforts in systems leadership, we enabled a space for participants to reflect on their own skills and expertise. The idea behind this was that they collaborate amongst themselves, beyond the project. This was facilitated through some important methodologies. The use of podcasting enabled participants to capture ideas and disseminate them amongst themselves first and foremost, with an opportunity to spread them to others. Podcasting also has the potential to enable listeners to identify themselves in the way that the members discussed their work and engagement with other communities. The exit questionnaire that we devised gave the members an opportunity to consider further how they would engage with one another beyond the workshop.

4. Making research outputs inclusive using multiple accessible technologies

The sustainability community at LSBU has a strong track record of published, accessible research. At the heart of our work is co-creation and transparency. Therefore, we will bring together all outputs in an accessible space on the established sustainability research webpage based in the School of Law and Social Sciences. It is important to note that the sustainability

research webpage is a living site where new ideas can be developed in correspondence with co-creation collaborative net zero goals. Outputs, much like the modes of data gathering noted above, come in multiple form, as outlined below.

1. Making research accessible, the work will be published in The Conversation, a network of not-for-profit media outlets publishing research reports online.
2. Using the LSBU established sustainability research podcast, four episodes are near finalised to document and capture the processes of engagement in the learning sessions. This method of dissemination promises to reach wider audiences and communities.
3. We have conceived one article journal article, in progress, for an academic journal. This article expands on the findings included this report.
4. The presentation format most appropriate for network participants is a display of illustrations in each session by a professional illustrator. Each poster captures the stories told, in each session, by each participant. This is a democratized format of storytelling, which gives each participant an opportunity to verbalise ideas and to have what is said captured and disseminated visually. Thus far the illustrations have been presented at two panel sessions, exploring themes of sustainability.
5. The end of network research findings, including a literature review will be made openly accessible, to promote innovative methods for engagement in sustainable futures efforts.

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