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Communities on a Threshold: Climate Action and Wellbeing Potentialities in Scotland

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Abstract: Community projects provide opportunities for their participants to collectively undertake climate action and simultaneously experience alternative concepts of wellbeing. However, we argue that community projects do so in ‘liminal’ ways—on the threshold of (unactualised) social change. We employed an ethnographic approach involving participant observation and qualitative interviews to investigate two community climate action projects in Scotland supported by the Climate Challenge Fund (CCF). We identify some of the outcomes and barriers of these projects in relation to promoting wellbeing through work, transport, participation and green spaces for food production, biodiversity and recreation. Projects’ achievements are contextualised in light of the urgent imperative to tackle climate change and against a background of social inequality. Liminal community projects are structurally constrained in their potential to create wider systemic changes. However, the projects’ potential to promote wellbeing among their participants can intersect with climate change mitigation when systemic and wide-ranging changes are adopted. These changes must involve a meaningful shift towards an economy that centres wellbeing, framed through principles of environmental justice and promoting social equity.

Keywords: community projects; liminality; wellbeing economics; Scottish climate policy; environmental justice



Citation: Meyerricks, S.; White, R.M. Communities on a Threshold: Climate Action and Wellbeing Potentialities in Scotland. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 7357. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13137357>

Academic Editors: Candice Howarth, Matthew Lane and Amanda Slevin

Received: 29 April 2021

Accepted: 25 June 2021

Published: 30 June 2021

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1. Introduction

The goal posts for climate change mitigation have shifted towards the imperative that global CO₂ emissions must decrease well before 2030 to stabilise the global climate at 1.5 °C beyond pre-industrial levels [1]. Recommendations by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) around “the upscaling and acceleration of far-reaching, multilevel and cross-sectoral climate mitigation by both incremental and transformational adaptation” [1] reflect arguments by sustainability researchers that responses need to surpass incremental change and enable a paradigmatic shift in societal norms and goals [2,3]. Principles of environmental justice call for “fair distribution, recognition, capabilities, and functioning” [4] (p. 3) within global ecological limits [5]. The required multilevel responses need to adequately reflect local needs and outcomes, demographic differences and inequities. Increasingly, there are calls that a shift in the underlying economic logic must become a priority to enable these transitions, including a steer away from economic growth towards wellbeing goals [6–9]. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has not only had a detrimental impact on global economies and livelihoods, but also highlighted the adverse effects of social distancing measures on wellbeing and mental health [10,11]. There is an imperative on post-pandemic economic pathways to adhere to IPCC recommendations and global ecological limits, and to centre wellbeing (including restoring and strengthening social bonds) as a principal economic goal. While these substantial and intersecting challenges call for multilevel and far-ranging responses, we can untangle some aspects in relation to particular localities. Findings from (pre-pandemic) community projects which

combine targets around wellbeing, sustainability and low carbon living gain new relevance in this wider context.

This paper seeks to make a novel contribution to the literature around community projects that take low carbon and sustainability action by recognising such projects as ‘being on a threshold’ through promoting wellbeing practices that are crucial to engendering low carbon cultures, but which are not currently economically embedded. We unpack the experiences of those who participate in low-carbon community projects in two communities in Scotland—one of which is characterised by relative affluence, and one of which is characterised by relative deprivation. We focus on community projects as practice spaces for new forms of wellbeing that de-emphasise resource-intensive ways of life and instead emphasise collectivity and participation. We argue that an emphasis of participants on their individual and community’s wellbeing is not merely a positive side-effect of a project’s low carbon aims. Rather, formulating alternative modes of wellbeing is fundamental to our need for societal systems change in order to steer economies away from resource-intensive and polluting production and consumption processes that are incompatible with low carbon living [6–9]. We further argue that projects support wellbeing in ‘liminal’ ways—on the threshold of (unactualised) social change. We employ an ethnographic approach involving participant observation and qualitative interviews to investigate community projects in Scotland supported by the Climate Challenge Fund (CCF). We did not assess carbon community projects in terms of their carbon reduction performance, which has been explored elsewhere [12,13]. While our findings are of relevance to Scotland because the CCF is specific to the Scottish Government’s approach to climate policy, this focus on a role of communities in low-carbon wellbeing economies is also relevant for other cultural contexts.

We begin by describing the Scottish Government’s programme to enable communities to contribute towards their climate change mitigation targets: the Climate Challenge Fund (CCF), and the Government’s recently articulated priority to build an economy that prioritises the wellbeing of Scottish citizens [14,15]. We outline the role of wellbeing in sustainability literature that advocates a shift away from a growth orientation [16–21]. We then unpack the concept of liminality, which has come to have a particular meaning in response to collective crisis and in explaining stages of societal transformation [22,23]. We use this concept to analyse social characteristics of low carbon community projects. We then present findings from two CCF-funded community projects, paying particular attention to how patterns of social inequality play out with respect to wellbeing among participants. We discuss what we identify as the projects’ liminal characteristics, or being ‘on a threshold’, in relation to work patterns, spatial transformation for communities and individual health benefits. We conclude by making suggestions to overcome some of these barriers to change by affirming the need for a societal vision that puts wellbeing at the heart of the economic system, adopts principles of environmental justice and plans wide-ranging systemic infrastructural change.

2. Context and Definitions

2.1. Defining ‘Community’ in Relation to Sustainability and Resilience

‘Community’ is a contested concept [24] with a range of meanings, slippery and sometimes utopian, which provokes associations of a deep, horizontal comradeship [25]. Conceptualisations of communities used to be derived from small-scale or territorial settlements or units [26], local neighbourhoods [27] and geographical areas. This has been influential in how the term has been used in policy and social science literature [28]. ‘Community’ is often used in a favourable and “warmly persuasive” [29] (p. 76) way to describe an existing or alternative set of relationships, or the kind of world “which we would dearly wish to inhabit and which we hope to repossess” [30].

The revival of efforts to (re)build communities and engender local empowerment to address social and environmental issues, including carbon mitigation, denotes the wider context that has encouraged a renewed community discourse [31,32]. In the face

of dangerously brittle international institutions that struggle to adequately address the mounting interconnected environmental, social and economic crises [20], meaningful collective action can be experienced at a community level. Community involvement has been a UK policy trend over the past two decades in social inclusion, neighbourhood renewal and health development programmes [24]. While community involvement can be restricted to top-down consultations, communities can act in their own right as innovative social niches [33–35].

Research around developing new models to measure the sustainability of communities highlights the challenges of doing so (see, e.g., [36]. ‘Communities’ and ‘sustainability’ are both slippery, complex and aspirational concepts and ideas. Borne out of their association is the idea of ‘community resilience’, which applies ‘resilience’ (a concept frequently employed when analysing the ability of ecosystems to adapt to change [37]) to the social sphere and is closely associated with the adaptation to (rather than the mitigation of) external shocks. Furthermore, a ‘resilient community’ is characterised by high levels of social participation [38]. However, not all scholars agree that ‘community resilience’ is an empowering concept, as it can place the onus to adapt on communities while leaving wider systemic structures that cause our accelerating environmental crises intact. The concept of ‘critical resilience’ has been put forth to describe communities who actively challenge current systemic structures considered to be disempowering, and work for the emergence of radically new structures [39].

2.2. Localising the Climate Discourse in Scotland: The Climate Challenge Fund

Community projects for sustainability, resilience and low carbon living have played an important role in Scottish environmental policy in recent years [28,36,40]. This role is exemplified through the Scottish Government’s Climate Challenge Fund (CCF). The CCF emerged in the run-up to the Climate Change (Scotland) Act [41] and reflects a focus on climate change mitigation rather than adaptation in Scottish (and UK) policy [42] at the time this fieldwork was initiated. Since its launch, the CCF has awarded over £111 million to 1150 legally constituted, not-for-profit community projects across Scotland [43] at the time of writing. To qualify for funding, the CCF “supports community-led organisations in Scotland to tackle climate change by running projects that reduce local carbon emissions” [43]. ‘Community’ here is understood primarily, although not exclusively, in relation to place. Community groups bid for CCF funding to conceive of and carry out projects that commit to measurable carbon emission reduction, but the programme acknowledges wider goals of building resilience, capacity, awareness and additional social and environmental benefits [12].

The re-articulation or even reinvention of communities can be a consequence of actors rejecting the notion that global issues such as climate change are for the elite to solve, and instead assuming responsibility [35] (p. 1595). However, Bolger & Allen suggested that CCF projects that emphasise ‘local’ as opposed to ‘global’ concerns are more successful at achieving local involvement, because justifying the initiative in terms of local benefits helps to create a positive perception among resident-participants [44] (p. 12). This tension between initiators of CCF projects who were passionate about reducing carbon emissions locally, and organisations’ outward-facing pragmatism to not adopt a ‘green’ identity was apparent in some of our findings discussed in Section 4.

2.3. Scottish Policy Frameworks: From Behaviour Change to Wellbeing Goals

The CCF is reflective of a wider trend in western societies, within which laws, regulations and incentives as well as education and awareness raising are used to promote individual behaviour change [32,45,46]. Behaviour change has been critiqued as being rooted in an individualist view of societies and citizens as consumers [47,48]. In its conceptualisation, the CCF can be seen as being too overtly focused on changing individuals, groups and localities, thereby reflecting Britain’s style of policy-making as “consultative and negotiated consensus” [49] (p. 7) that avoids the implementation of policy solutions

rolled out across the social spectrum. However, the CCF's emphasis on community action also reflects underlying cultural predispositions that are particular to Scotland. The persistence of 'community' in Scotland can be partially attributed to discourses in environmental activism, land rights and further self-determination in Scotland (see [50,51]). The CCF fits into the pattern of the Scottish Government's aims to empower and enable communities to act on a range of public concerns—another one being the promotion of land reform [52].

Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has (at the time of writing) recently articulated a society-wide vision in which the collective wellbeing of the population should be the goal of economic policy, as fundamentally as the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) [14,15]. However, the continued emphasis on the GDP makes it clear that the Scottish Government continues to pursue economic growth as a guiding principle. This stands in contrast with how wellbeing as a guiding economic principle is conceptually emerging as an alternative to the GDP as a measure of economic prosperity (see, e.g., [7,8]). The notion that a global sustainable economy requires a steer away from economic growth as a guiding paradigm has grown from a fringe idea to being embraced and increasingly legitimised by policy advisers in the UK and internationally [6–9]. 'Postgrowth' economies are defined as a possible future beyond economic growth and accumulation [7]. The IPCC projected that climate change-related risks to economic growth will increase with global warming [1] (p. 11). Addressing the question of human wellbeing in a rapidly changing world is therefore vital to prepare for the impact of (even mitigated) climate change. While the literature on postgrowth economies holds diverse visions for pathways beyond growth, the notion of a wellbeing economy rests on the premise that the richest countries have already 'arrived' in a prosperous world, and the priority must be to share the fruits of prosperity [8].

2.4. Definitions of Sustainable Wellbeing

Wellbeing that is compatible with sustainability goals beyond economic growth needs to be defined as a core principle. An emphasis on wellbeing in a sustainability context seeks to answer the crucial question of "how people can live good lives without endangering the vitality of the ecosystems" [18] (p. 169). Wellbeing is understood in different ways, but a useful framing for sustainability considerations is that of New Economics Foundation [19], which sees wellbeing as comprising a mix of feelings (contentment, joy, satisfaction) and functions (sense of purpose, self esteem, competencies). These are placed in a setting of external opportunities (work, social relationships, participation potential) and personal propensities (health, resilience, positive thinking, personal experience) to offer personal and collective flourishing. O'Riordan [20] describes wellbeing as the beginning to a new approach to measuring and appreciating social betterment that relies on supportive families, neighbours and co-operative living, education and training, and includes the understanding and appreciation of new information, ideas and enterprise as well as the quality of empathy. Wellbeing thus relies on strong communities, individual attributes and opportunity; it is not only about "feeling good", but also about "realising potential" [20].

Whilst hedonic wellbeing (material wealth and goods) may align with economic growth goals, Stoic forms of eudaimonic wellbeing such as prudence, self-control, courage and justice align with goals that do not favour limitless growth and are compatible with sustainability [21]. These authors argue that an individual practising Stoic virtues can support habitat, provisioning and cultural services, with potential for sustainable collective wellbeing. Büchs & Koch propose that a redefinition of collective wellbeing requires social practices, or "a constant flow of performances" [16] (p. 90) that weave together discourses, institutions, technologies and more to generate new wellbeing behaviours that foster health and togetherness and challenge dominant practices that do not. Hence, there is potential for emphasis on collective and individual wellbeing to support sustainability, and for sustainability efforts to reinforce wellbeing and equity in ways that explicitly challenge economic growth goals [18,20,21]. As we argue in the following sections, community projects can illustrate collective wellbeing on a small scale, while also highlighting current barriers to anchoring wellbeing goals in economic policy in Scotland.

2.5. Liminality in Relation to Social Transitions

When researching local community projects for sustainability, liminality is a useful lens to assess the contributions such projects can make to the kinds of longer-term social processes and transitions described above. The concept of liminality is defined as “a transitional or initial stage of a process [or] occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold” [53]. In its established meaning in anthropological literature and ritual studies, liminality signifies a particular state within ethnographic observations of rites of passage, marking changes in social categories or conditions, occurring, for example, through birth, marriage or funerals [54]. The three states are separation, liminality and reintegration. The liminal stage refers to the ‘in-betweenness’ [55] that might manifest itself in a temporary physical separation, before the individuals undergoing the rites are reintegrated in their new status and associated social roles and responsibilities. One characteristic of the liminal state is *communitas*, or social bonding, which temporarily renders those who entered a liminal state together as “free and equal comrades” [56] (p. 233) and the temporary dissolution of normative social structures—roles, statuses, duties and so on. *Communitas* can emerge as a spontaneous expression of sociability but, perhaps most importantly, expresses new norms [56] (p. 232). Those who experience *communitas* enter an unstructured or differently structured collective state with the potential to generate and store alternative models for living “which are capable of influencing the behaviour of those in mainstream social and political roles . . . in the direction of radical change” [57] (p. 65).

As previously suggested, ‘community’, ‘sustainability’ and ‘resilience’ are best understood as aspirational principles that are constantly in the making, presently active and yet unfulfilled, guiding complex and messy processes in response to global uncertainties. These concepts tie in with a wellbeing economy framework (see, e.g., [16,20]) which is in itself aspirational and unfulfilled. The liminality lens makes visible what is not-yet-actualised by marking possible indicators of social transitions. Marking a threshold, liminality contains “a vital moment of creativity, a potential platform for renewing the societal make-up” [23] (p. 481). A related concept is that of ‘prefigurations’ which are characterised by “embedding envisioned future modes of social organisation into the present” [58] (p. 1646). A key limit of using liminality as a lens is the uncertainty around the long-term direction of the processes—they are, by definition, precarious and momentary. Liminality as an analytic tool for community projects captures snapshots of new social modes of community resilience, sustainability and wellbeing, based on the tangible benefits that these projects are able to achieve within their limited scope and remit.

In the following sections, we outline findings from CCF projects that suggest that community projects offer liminal practice spaces for post-consumerist notions of wellbeing in their localities.

3. Materials and Methods

As interdisciplinary researchers, we adopted a mixed methodology, accepting the patterns of facts represented by climate change science [1] and undertaking some quantitative analysis of sustainability resources against demographics. We report here on an interpretivist and qualitative approach to reveal the aims, motivations and experiences of participants.

Research methods adopted included participant observation over eleven months in 2011, during which one author (SM) joined the two groups as a part-time volunteer while making her position as researcher clear to all participants. Overall, she conducted 36 semi-structured interviews with 13 volunteers (two of whom were board members); 14 staff members; 7 close associates from the third and public sectors; and 1 service user. Participants are pseudonymised in this paper. Because the research was designed around adult informants, no participants under 18 were interviewed. However, a small section of the fieldwork involved participant observation with a group of young people, and the

adult group leaders were interviewed. The absence of young people's voices still presents a limitation of our findings.

Semi-structured qualitative interviewing was chosen as a research method well suited to “access the ‘world’ in terms of those people being researched” [59] (p. 197), rather than reporting on ‘hard’ targets such as carbon savings. Adopting qualitative methods had the advantage of generating in-depth place-based data which were coded to highlight aspects of wellbeing, sustainability, resilience and economic aspects in relation to participants' work patterns and livelihoods. The data were not intended to be representative [60] across other CCF projects, but rather to convey narratives in relation to two places and the priorities that emerged among project participants in their contexts.

‘Fair Town Community’ (FTC) was a community development trust founded in 2007 in a town of 8486 residents (2011 census) classified among the third-most affluent decile in Scotland [61], as described in Figure 1. At the time of research, FTC was entirely CCF-funded and consisted of 7 part-time or sessional staff members, its Board of Directors and some ad hoc volunteers. FTC proactively engaged with the local authority and Community Planning Partnership (a collaboration between public service organisations in each local authority area in Scotland) to promote a county-wide implementation of their goals. One of FTC's founders and co-leaders was active in the ‘Transition’ movement, a “global grassroots network that supports community-led resilience in the face of global change” [62] (p. 2017). While FTC was not branding itself as a ‘Transition Initiative’ at the time of research, this had been the intention during its formative phase, and the organisation retained strong links to and many of the characteristics of the wider movement. This focus was supported by some staff members who were strongly and overtly motivated by long-term environmental concerns. Other staff members emphasised local consultation around the future of the town and region, and advocated adopting a more ‘neutral’ stance. They did not wish FTC to self-brand as a green organisation as they were concerned about alienating a broad section of residents. SM initiated the research by approaching some key players of FTC who agreed to host her placement as a researcher-volunteer. In addition to conducting fieldwork at meetings and events and interviewing participants, she undertook a separate small research project on request of the organisation. As partnership work was key to FTC's *modus operandi*, SM also attended some partnership meetings and interviewed a limited number of key partners.

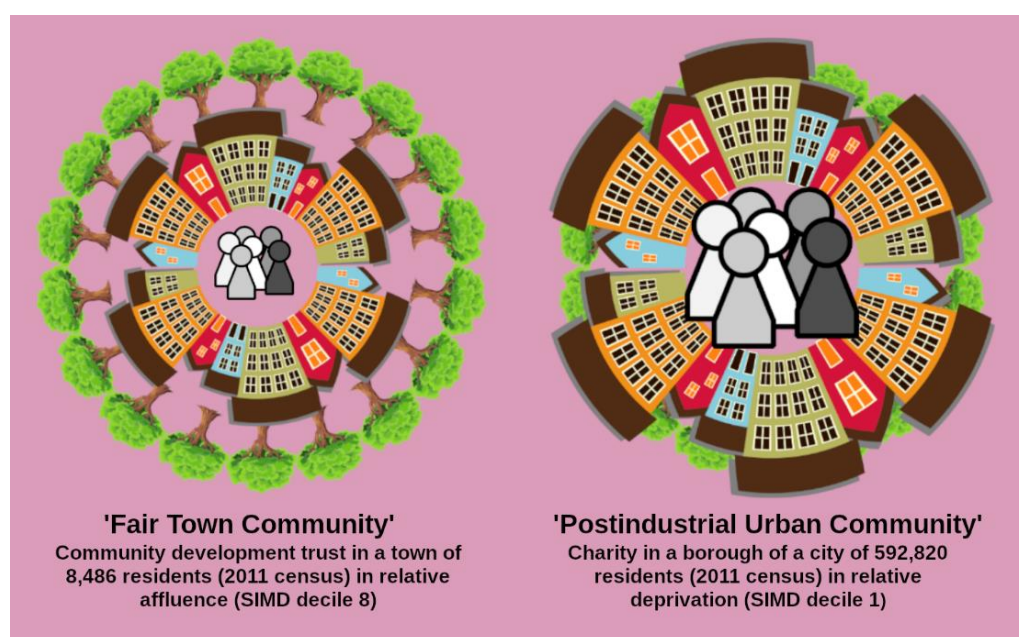


Figure 1. Demographic differences between the two case studies.

‘Postindustrial Urban Community’ (PUC) was a charity founded in 2002 and worked in an area situated within the decile categorised as most deprived [61] in a city with a population of 592,820 (illustrated in Figure 1) at the time of research. The organisation was community-led in the sense that the Board of Trustees largely consisted of local community members, and ongoing efforts were made to listen to residents in the community and to build effective partnerships with other local public and third sector organisations. In addition to its team of around 12 core staff and 15 sessional staff, PUC had around 80 volunteer-participants at the time of research. SM underwent a volunteer induction process to better understand the role volunteering played within the organisation. This community group was initially mainly youth-focused; the broad spectrum of activities for children and adults offered at the time of research retained an emphasis on play and on creating safe spaces for particular social groups such as young people, a women’s group, a men’s group and intergenerational activities. While PUC was funded by a range of sources, the CCF funded a ‘Swap Shop’ and waste awareness project in a previously unused shop, an Environment Group for group-led learning of sustainability issues, and the construction of two community gardens. During fieldwork, SM attended only the CCF-funded activities (especially the ‘Swap Shop’) on a weekly basis, and visited other relevant environment-themed activities and organisation-wide events on an ad hoc basis.

In the following sections, we outline a range of activities offered as part of each project, and analyse their liminal wellbeing characteristics during the research period.

4. Community Projects as Liminal Catalysts of Wellbeing

4.1. Fair Town Community: Mapping Visions for a Resilient Region

FTC’s core work was to prepare people in the town and surrounding region for future social and environmental challenges by promoting a local transition to a reduced dependence on fossil fuels and increased sustainability and resilience through a Local Resilience Action Plan (LRAP). In practice, that meant to not “*overlay the doom and gloom scenario*” (John, co-leader of the staff team) of the climate crisis and instead show local residents the potential of creating a better place to live, while planning for more sustainable infrastructure.

“I see [FTC] as mainly being an organisation to help people out and to help them to travel by bus, by bike, by walking, to know how to make compost, to grow more food, and to do things that are nice to do—and not to necessarily help the environment, but also help the people who get so much more out of it if they are walking and cycling. Then they’ll meet their neighbours more, and it will be more of a friendly place.” (Melissa, staff member)

FTC promoted pro-environmental practices through diverse initiatives, including creating a new food growing space and promoting cycling through group activities, a ‘Dr Bike’ pop-up bicycle repair facility and cycle maps of the local area. FTC’s specialised maps of the area also highlighted walking routes, to inspire a rethinking of existing spaces as human scaled. The emphasis of FTC’s transport projects was on improving the general infrastructure around the town, to encourage residents to improve their quality of life and to challenge car culture. One staff member described herself as “*quite anti car*” not for environmental reasons, but because “*it breaks up communities and takes up far too much space and puts everybody off walking and cycling*” (Fiona, staff member). FTC partly promoted public transport services. While they advocated train travel, and maintained their most prominent notice board in the town’s only train station, they did not promote bus travel which was seen as unreliable and uncomfortable.

“I just can’t bring myself to say to people, yeah you should get the bus—because then you are responsible for people’s experience, and it’s nearly always a bad experience.” (Fiona, staff member)

FTC also campaigned for a better infrastructure to improve the overall experience for cyclists, because “*if you had a nice cycle route that actually took you right into town, people would use it if it was nice and well lit and wide and smooth.*” (Fiona, staff member).

Improving community resilience was largely understood as providing the spaces and opportunities to nurture social connections between residents and interest groups in the region, which several staff members highlighted as a positive outcome in itself. FTC brought people together through hosting public events such as environmental documentary film screenings, community meals made from locally grown produce and the regular pub night ‘Green Drinks’, where residents were invited to discuss environmental topics. Group activities included the project ‘Neighbours Together’, to which 80 households had signed up. Residents of a particular street, whose homes may share similar characteristics and challenges to energy efficiency, were then invited to assemble in a neighbour’s home to learn about energy efficiency and share tips to become ‘household canny’ or smarter in their consumption habits. Neighbours could get to know each other and benefit from exchanging information.

The aim to improve the wellbeing of the residents of the town and surrounding region extended to FTC’s staff team. All staff members worked part-time and generally viewed this as desirable. Some preferred working part-time to be able to take on the role as main child carer while their wives worked full-time (2 staff members), or to advance their other creative or professional projects (2 staff members). Others simply wanted to be able to do things they had not been able to do while working five days a week, such as spend more time with their family and friends and embrace a lifestyle of increased self-sufficiency: *“The system makes you a consumer—you don’t grow your own stuff, you go buy it.”* (interview: Angus, staff member).

To achieve their aims, FTC worked closely with other local organisations. Often these did not only share some aims, but included personal social connections, due to the small size of the town. These organisations included a car sharing club, a group managing the community-owned woodland and local businesses such as a Community Bakery. Some of the groups had formed around local shared assets. Since one of the town’s woodlands had been transferred into community ownership, it was managed by the Community Woodland Group. Recreational and wellbeing benefits to different social groups in the community were writ large in the group’s activities.

“The Woodland Group I suppose primarily exists to look after the trees and the welfare of the trees, but then because it’s a community wood, we’ve obviously got a responsibility to the community to the woodland as a sort of recreation facility. So—we have dog walkers and joggers and kids out playing, and are looking after their interests as well.” (Catriona, Woodland Group volunteer)

Beyond their core work and partnership work, FTC also promoted the emergence of a localised economy. The LRAP’s asset-based planning to improve the region’s resilience focuses on health and wellbeing and a more localised, vibrant and resilient economy which “can create significant opportunities—for meaningful work, to develop new skills, to strengthen community networks and working to enhance the local environment” [63] (p. 1). One example of how this objective was put into practice was FTC’s strategic support of local job creation, and of promoting more sustainable livelihoods—for example, through the Community Bakery and a planned buyout of a local grocery shop. At the time of research, FTC also conducted consultations in the community around their plans to erect a community-owned wind turbine which could financially sustain local initiatives in the long run. Furthermore, the community woodland was also viewed as a potentially income-generating asset, in addition to its ecological and recreational benefits.

Liminal Wellbeing in Fair Town Community

Earlier in this paper, we introduced the concept of liminality to explain how the benefits of community projects can be ‘in between’ steps towards a resilient wellbeing economy in several key ways. FTC participants expressed their personal need to work part-time, offered activities that brought people together to improve the local quality of life through place-building and carried out aspirational mapping of low-carbon infrastructure.

While many of FTC's projects were geared towards improving the wellbeing of residents in the short term through, for example, social gatherings and events, a significant part of FTC's work revolved around envisioning and planning long-term structural interventions through the LRAP. Van de Grift et al. describe a "sense of liminality associated with the inherent difficulties of being part of a Transition initiative that is always working toward an imagined future, and that is operating in the middle of mainstream society" [62] (p. 7). FTC retained some of these 'in-betweenness' characteristics of a Transition initiative through its sustainability-focused planning practices to envision roads as cycle routes, land as potential space for regional food production, and the planning process for the community wind turbine facilitates the emergence of a vision for local, community-owned energy. The maps highlight the potential of spaces currently set aside for high-carbon practices that rely on extractive economies (roads for cars) to facilitate low-carbon practices that promote wellbeing instead (routes for cycling).

This community project emphasises the relational nature of human wellbeing and ecosystem wellbeing, and different aspects of human wellbeing—'doing' and 'being' as well as 'having' and 'loving' [18]. Practical examples of wellbeing supported in this sustainability initiative included physical recreation, active travel, healthy local ecosystems, social interaction and visioning of a 'better place'. However, these aspects were supported within a holistic planning framework, giving credibility to the proposals of Costanza et al. [17] that wellbeing offers an integrating goal for the diverse sustainable development goals (SDGs). While the project did not overtly question the dominant paradigm of economic growth, there was an explicit emphasis on the local economy for integrated sustainability and wellbeing. This approach provides empirical demonstration of suggestions made by previous authors—the emphasis at local level can leverage wider change [20] and can promote outcomes that support more sustainable lifestyles for some individuals such as shorter work days [16]. However, it also shows the complexity of tackling wellbeing and sustainability in integrated manner through multiple locally relevant approaches in practice. The focus on sustainability offers more than a health wellbeing focus would—it tackles not only superficial aspects but also deeper systemic aspects of society such as work, transport, energy, social interactions—and attempts to do so now and for the future.

4.2. Postindustrial Urban Community: Fostering Health and Togetherness

PUC's principal aim was to offer its participants meaningful opportunities and activities, and to facilitate spatial improvements—or what one staff member called "*mini-makeovers*" of the area. PUC's environmental projects served to limit resource use in a way that directly benefited volunteers and service users alike. For example, the Swap Shop grew out of PUC's other waste awareness, recycling and reuse projects. Led by a staff member, a group of volunteers planned and set up the Swap Shop in a disused shop and opened it one day a week to the public. The Swap Shop served to prevent waste and promote reuse mostly of clothing, as there could be a stigma associated with secondhand clothing locally. As it was based in an area of high deprivation, the Swap Shop especially targeted customers who may be embarrassed about their personal situations because "*they've not got the money to go out and buy something that is second-hand*" (Helen, volunteer). Meanwhile, staff members were concerned that the Swap Shop was not to be seen as a hand-out by residents, but as a place where people could bring unwanted items and take others away, and have social interactions. The group of volunteers who managed the Swap Shop bonded, and reported valuing the social element of spending time with other people.

PUC's community and wildlife gardens provided havens for biodiversity and offered leisure opportunities in alternative meeting spaces—somewhere where participants and visitors could "*take their kids and to go and meet other people, a nice outdoor space*" (Caitlin, staff member). Some young people who got involved in the conservation work had been involved in local gang fighting and self-destructive patterns. Staff member Douglas reflected that there was often at first a clash in values between young people who were preoccupied with money and designer gear and the experiences offered by PUC's conservation

summer programme he ran, which exemplified *“a slower way of life and it’s maybe no’ quite as consumptive a way of life”*. Those who decided to get involved anyway tended to enjoy the physical exercise and the sense of achievement that came with manual work such as digging over soil and moving compost.

“I can approach the kids and say, ‘what is it you’re gonnae lose?’ ‘I cannae afford to lose the face’. ‘You’re no’ losing face, you’re actually the bigger person, you’re learning a new skill, you’re learning to walk away.’ And it turns them away fae this self-destructive pattern, tae at that point they can start to be constructive, they can start planting trees, they can start learning how to weave willow, and cut wood and build bird-boxes and create footpaths out of just old muck and old pieces of hessian.” (Douglas, staff member)

The personal challenges and struggles faced by PUC’s volunteers were a result of the long-term impacts of macroeconomic forces and structurally embedded in the wider community. Frequently, long-term unemployment led to health-harming behaviours, and volunteers found that being involved in PUC’s projects helped to counteract these.

“You know how people are, if they’re unemployed they can just sit and booze if they want, if they’ve got money. And I had money as I’d been working so... I could’ve boozed all day if I’d wanted and half of it I did. But then it’s best you sort of kind of keep your feet on the ground a bit, doing something. Just times of the day that you’re going to do something at that time of the day, you know. I suppose when you’re meeting people as well.” (Harry, volunteer)

Volunteers frequently reported experiencing low self-confidence and searching for new opportunities as a route into paid employment: *“you’re thinking, ‘where do I go from here?’ You can get the rebuild and the experience, and retrain myself.”* (Helen, volunteer). Establishing regular work patterns helped volunteers *“to have a structure to my day”* (Noemi, volunteer) and to *“keep my feet on the ground”* (Harry, volunteer). Others had migrated to Scotland, and volunteering offered opportunities to be engaged in community projects and to improve their chances to obtain a work permit: *“you need to be active and especially you need to learn English. You need to be one of the Scottish society.”* (Rahim, volunteer).

However, one barrier to involving more residents was the negative view around volunteering that was prevalent in the area.

“‘Unless you’re getting paid for it, what’s the point in daein’ it?’ Well, you are getting paid: you’re creating a better environment for yourself, you’re geein’ yourself somewhere nicer to live. And it’s about trying to explain that change in values to [interested but hesitant young people].” (Douglas, staff member)

“Wi’ the volunteering sector, people will just say that’s an excuse to do someone else’s job for them, but it’s not really. Because you wouldn’t be a part of that volunteering group if you didn’t want to be.” (Helen, volunteer)

Some volunteers and staff members acknowledged that volunteering and training opportunities would not necessarily lead to paid employment as long as this is not readily available. Rahim, a volunteer who had migrated to Scotland from Iraq, was struck by the lack of opportunities for people who had been long-term unemployed: *“Give them money to live and then advance [them] into work—open offices, open factories for them and good wages. Now, if anyone is looking for a job they can’t find one.”*

Transport behaviours were largely dictated by local availability. Volunteers mostly did not own cars and found it often more efficient to walk or cycle, as bus services were experienced as infrequent and unreliable (Jane and Harry, volunteers). Walking or cycling were not seen as particularly desirable activities, but merely as pragmatic choices in the absence of reliable, attractive public transport solutions.

The garden sites’ long-term futures were uncertain. PUC’s gardens were built on ‘gap sites’ earmarked for development or land formerly belonging to the local authority and now managed by a City Property company. PUC staff members and volunteers did not express a sense of ownership and empowerment in relation to their locality. Some staff

members and volunteers explained that it was important for the organisation to challenge the psychological stigma associated with living in the part of the city where PUC operated (Heather, staff member; Helen and Noemi, volunteers). PUC sought to improve the quality of life in their community in the longer term by forming a campaign group with volunteers and working with an anti-poverty charity to get “*local people’s voices heard*” (Heather, staff member) and highlight and challenge issues around poverty on a political level.

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This project was in a more deprived area and hence pursued a wellbeing strategy that emphasised health and ‘being’ [18], focusing less on feelings and more on functions, or a “sense of competence or their sense of being connected to those around them” [19] (p. 6).

PUC’s activities can be characterised as liminal in several ways. There was creation of spaces, times and practices for health, wellbeing and sustainability. PUC’s community and wildlife gardens counteract hegemonic spaces by being neither public nor private [64] in an urban area lacking healthy spaces for people to meet. These spaces exemplified purposeful place-building, thought to be an important factor in building community [65]. However, they were constructed on temporary ‘gap’ sites with uncertain futures beyond community control.

Work and volunteering (‘doing’ aspects of wellbeing [18]) were centred in this project as activities worth doing for their own sake, and to be in others’ company. There was a sense that in this project, alternatives to mainstream economic activities were borne out of a search for options that people living here could not find. As a result, participants reported improvements to their confidence, and young people were inspired to try new work experiences for non-material gains, promoting less consumption-oriented ways of life. These activities resulted in momentary improvements to the wellbeing of participants. However, these improvements remain on the threshold of lasting change as long as participants face few prospects to eventually enter paid employment. Community projects offering informal training and improving local assets cannot offer lasting change, and may provide “‘escape for some’, while leaving the system that produces the need for escape intact” [66] (p. 9).

This community project also demonstrates the benefits of an integrated approach recognising the relational nature of human wellbeing and ecosystem wellbeing [18], in particular through the conservation project with young people. There was a focus on the need to be heard and to re-establish some autonomy and self control; critical aspects of wellbeing [21], as well as on youth [20]. PUC’s collective activities generated *communitas*—social bonding while expressing new norms and experiencing different modes of being. Participants’ identification as part of a group, as expressed by volunteers of PUC, has the potential to refine social skills of co-operation [67] (p. 6) and to counteract feelings of isolation.

5. Community Projects as Fragments of a Wellbeing Economy

As apparent in our discussion of FTC and PUC and as described in Figure 2, community projects can be important liminal catalysts of wellbeing practices among their participants. Activities in both projects were geared towards advancing pro-social over or alongside pro-environmental objectives. Community cohesion was nurtured as an asset for the wellbeing of all residents. However, staff members and volunteers acknowledged that additional far-ranging and substantial political and economic interventions were needed to address the wider challenges around lack of choices, systems resilience and lack of adequate infrastructures to enable and drive deep and wide-ranging transformations in these communities. In addition, PUC’s participants generally faced more substantial structural challenges and had fewer choices available to them than FTC’s participants.

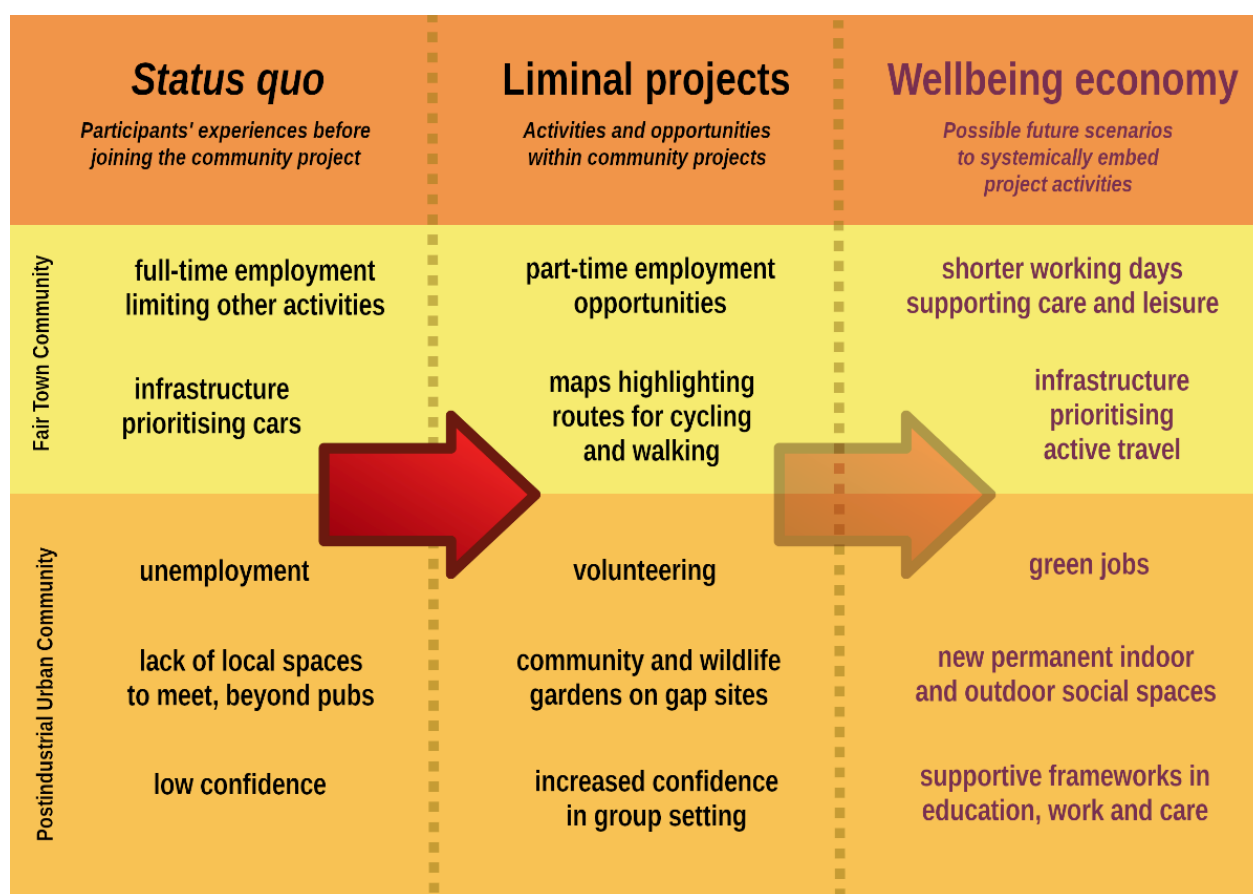


Figure 2. Situating liminal community projects in relation to wellbeing potentialities.

Liminal projects are precarious and transient in the sense that space, relationships and identities are constantly being produced and formed [68]. PUC's creation of spaces as alternatives to the mainstream culture and FTC's reluctance to outwardly emphasise environmental goals are construed as 'other' from everyday life [69]. Collective practices and 'non-consumptive' values in these projects remained relatively marginal in the wider communities in which they operated. The temporary nature of grant-funded community projects renders such projects liminal by design. Grant funding is a "double-edged sword" [40] in the sense that it enables community organisations to deliver projects but creates financial dependencies. Projects constitute open, malleable transitory processes which are complementary to and connect with different areas within society [70]. However, the ephemeral nature of such activity constrains the relationship and trust building that can catalyse social learning, and their ability to be agents of change. In the following sections, and as illustrated in Figure 2, we argue that community projects constitute fragments of a wellbeing economy, but a shift in economic policy towards centring wellbeing can build on these achievements and scale up the social and environmental benefits by embedding them across social institutions.

Firstly, the liminal solutions to work we have seen in the case studies (part-time work for some in FTC and volunteering for long-term unemployed participants in PUC) are inadequate in addressing issues of inequity in relation to work and assets. Our findings suggest that programmes such as the CCF which generate meaningful environmental and social action across a range of demographics need to better account for inequities and appraise environmental justice principles at the design stage. Furthermore, programmes such as the CCF need to be better integrated into systemic and joined-up solutions of transitions to a low-carbon and equitable wellbeing economy, to avert the risk of placing the onus of carbon reduction and behaviour change disproportionately with groups and

individuals. Tackling inequities in Scotland would improve conditions in marginalised communities in the first instance, but in the long term can improve wellbeing for all [71]. Beyond incremental changes, a wellbeing economy could redistribute work [16] (p. 76), leaving more people in part-time paid employment with time to engage in work and leisure for non-material gains. Additionally, distributing material services (defined as benefits that materials contribute to societal wellbeing through fuels and products) in just, proper, efficient and effective ways [21] across communities can engender long-term improvements in social wellbeing. Glimpses of a shift towards a wellbeing economy can be found in FTC's LRAP, which adopted a systemic and joined-up view and outlined some aspects of a localised economy for the region.

Secondly, securing communities' long-term access to land, and increasing community ownership of land and assets, across Scotland can facilitate more equal access to resources and local self-determination, as enjoyed by participants in the community-owned woodland in FTC. A transfer of assets into the hands of communities comes with challenging in its own right, especially with a view to long-term financial sustainability [72] and capacities to sustain the administrative labour and ongoing maintenance required. In FTC, the community-owned woodland was therefore included in plans for a localised economy also for its income generation potential. However, there are other intangible benefits to community ownership of assets, such as nurturing competence in community governance and grassroots planning processes and potentially, in the long term, 'commons governance' [73]. The commons have been associated with sustainable economic practices through localisation, sufficiency and co-operation, as well as non-market-based transactions [16].

Thirdly, our findings highlight potential areas where low carbon and wellbeing policies could intersect—for example, transport. Redesigning localities to allow better management of low carbon transport, especially active transport such as cycling and walking [20], is a key sustainability goal. 'Wellbeing' in this context means enabling choices that promote better public health, human-scale connectedness and safer streets. While more research is needed on the relationship between use of different modes of transport and wellbeing [19], commuting by walking and cycling can be more relaxing and exciting than commuting by car [74]. In our findings, however, bus services and cycling facilities were experienced as inadequate in both communities. While participants in PUC were pragmatic about their choices to walk and cycle rather than wait for unreliable bus services, FTC sought to promote cycling for its wellbeing benefits, as the town was blessed with an attractive physical environment. City planning for active travel infrastructure can mitigate risk trade-offs for active travel, such as the inhalation of air pollutants and exposure to traffic injuries [75]. Wellbeing economy campaigners suggested that the prevalence of "girls on bikes" could be a social and environmental cornerstone indicator for community wellbeing [76] because it suggests a perception of safety from the point of view of some of the most vulnerable members of society and their carers in a traffic system in which low-carbon means of transport have been structurally enabled. Furthermore, public transport and new services such as car clubs, especially important for those with restricted physical abilities, should also take the positive experience of its users into account—including affordability, reliability and comfort.

Finally, beyond mitigation practices emphasised by the CCF, climate change action in the two community groups was constituted by a range of discourses and meaning-making processes [77]. Adaptation measures that involved caring for green spaces and wildlife were frequently aligned with wellbeing goals such as better health and togetherness. Helne and Hirvilammi suggest that sustainability efforts need to take a relational approach, in the sense that "needs-fulfilment on all dimensions of wellbeing depends on well-functioning ecosystems" [18] (p. 173). However, creatively transforming spaces to enable low-carbon practices, better health, food growing and wildlife conservation can also help counteract the effects of anticipated ecosystem collapse [78] by strengthening the resilience of communities. While the extent to which the trajectory of unravelling ecosystems through climate change

can be stopped or even reversed is uncertain, stabilising the global climate at 1.5 °C, and restoring wellbeing in conjunction with well-functioning ecosystems should be the principal goal, while building up community resilience to prepare for systemic future shocks. Such combinations of mitigation and adaptation practices have elsewhere been called ‘mitigadaptation’ [79] and invite national and international institutions to honestly and publicly consider and communicate the likelihood of risks from climate change impacts in different scenarios.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that building a ‘social mandate’ for large-scale crisis interventions is possible, but climate action would require deliberative engagement mechanisms to ‘stick’ and become more accepted, embedded and bearable in the long term [80]. We concur with the postgrowth literature that to enable adequate measures to mitigate and adapt to climate change and the ecological crises on a national level and to address structural inequities, Scottish economic policy needs to centre wellbeing and equity goals rather than growth goals. Further research could look at ways in which such wide-ranging shifts and interventions do not only gain public buy-in and are informed by best practice and cutting edge science, but are also driven by the experiential knowledge of ‘grassroots experts’ such as those who have carried out work and interventions on community-level scales.

However, national and local efforts require international multilevel cross-sectoral support [1] and institutions that regulate and channel levies into not-for-profit companies and organisations operating locally [20] (p. 33). Without synergistic national and global efforts reflecting the monumental scale and urgency of the intersecting climate and ecological crises that poses a threat to our future livelihoods, community-scale climate mitigation and adaptation efforts remain marginal and constitute ‘green niches’ [35]. As long as a wellbeing economy remains lip service by Scottish policy makers that leaves the growth paradigm intact, the positive achievements of community projects in their localities remain liminal in the sense of being short-lived, ‘other’ than the wider social norm and relatively marginal.

6. Conclusions

In summary, the liminal characteristics of community projects support the intersecting potential for collective, local processes to improve the wellbeing of participants and, to a limited extent, carbon mitigation. Accordingly, community projects exemplify local alternative visions of wellbeing beyond consumerism. Our findings suggest that participants’ wellbeing is improved through healthy, collective work experiences that increase the confidence of participants (PUC), flexible part-time work opportunities (FTC) and improvements to the locality through recreational social green spaces (both communities). While our research was focused on Scotland, and the project participants’ differing needs and priorities reflect the inequities present there, the findings are relevant with respect to the role and potential of community projects for sustainability in other localities and demographic contexts.

We recommend that further programmes such as CCF are (re)designed according to environmental justice principles and avoid over-emphasising community groups as agents for climate change mitigation, in order to better support the kind of community-based projects described in this paper. Rather than being required to focus on notions of behaviour change [32] that can reinforce individualism [47], local efforts should foster ‘critical resilience’ [39] that challenges and interrogates fragmented and piecemeal policy frameworks. By reconfiguring and strengthening community action according to environmental justice and critical resilience frameworks and objectives, such action can help shape systemic shifts through responsive, participatory and embedded knowledge on the ground. In Scotland, the government’s recent emphasis on wellbeing as the purpose of economic activity [14,15] presents an opportunity for policy makers to pursue a more joined-up society-wide vision of sustainability that works in support of and in synergy with community projects prioritising local needs. Further empirical research on how community

projects foster wellbeing among their participants in other localities could help identify local needs to which communities respond, and how economies centring wellbeing can meet these needs effectively and more widely in the long term.

At the time of writing, climate change requires more deep, effective and urgent national and international collaborative and synergistic systemic shifts [1] than at the point when our fieldwork was conducted. Without such shifts, low carbon community projects effectively constitute brief liminal moments—‘green niches’ [35] or fig leaves against the political and systemic inability to effectively tackle climate change and the intersecting deep environmental and social crises of our time. These intersecting challenges call upon governments in Scotland and elsewhere to replace growth in post-pandemic global economic pathways with targets reflecting a “fundamental, system-wide reorganisation across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values” [9]. Alongside a decarbonisation of all sectors, prioritising wellbeing in economic policy will require a transformation of work and livelihoods [16], material services [21], transport infrastructure, access to land and other assets. While the exact shape and form will differ between nations and locations, such systemic shifts would enable community projects to engage, educate and prepare localities as part of wider multi-scale transition processes that effectively tackle climate change and social exclusion.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, data curation and writing—original draft preparation, S.M.; writing—review and editing, S.M. and R.M.W.; supervision, R.M.W.; funding acquisition, R.M.W. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded through a collaborative PhD studentship by the Scottish Government and the Economic and Social Research Council, grant number ES/H029354/1.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the University of St Andrews Teaching and Research Ethics Committee (under School of Management Ethics Committee, 2011).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available in this article.

Acknowledgments: We would like to thank all informants of the community groups behind the case studies for volunteering their time to share their insights. Our thanks also go to numerous colleagues and friends who supported the thesis that forms the basis of this research, but in particular to Jan Bebbington.

Conflicts of Interest: The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

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