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Reflecting on a collaborative approach to a regional sustainability transition: Dingle Peninsula 2030

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses a reflective method to gather findings with relation to a collaborative governance approach for the sociotechnical transition to a low carbon society in a regional context. As top-down and bottom-up approaches to sustainable transitions have proven insufficient in bringing about the necessary changes required to meet the demands of climate action, more collaborative approaches between local communities, national public bodies and research organisations are warranted. Within this, there is a need to understand the dynamics of collaborative governance for participants in the process. Through a process of reflective practice, this paper outlines the networks, personal capacities, organisational capacities, benefits and challenges of collaborative governance partnerships for sustainable transitions from the perspective of individuals within a collaborative committee working on a regional transition project on the Dingle Peninsula, Co Kerry, Ireland. Alongside this, some solutions to challenges outlined through reflection are highlighted. This research paper highlights the need for the incorporation of reflective practice within collaborative governance for the socio-technical transition to a low-carbon society.

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1. Introduction

Multi-stakeholder partnerships are receiving increased attention with relation to complex sustainability challenges (Dentoni et al., 2018). Such partnerships are premised on the foundation of collaboration between a small number of organisations (Zeyen et al., 2016). Collaboration is essentially a process to reach goals that cannot be achieved or at a minimum, cannot be reached as efficiently, if each organization acts alone (Bruner, 1991). It enhances the potential to discover novel, innovative, solutions. The process leads to a shared and deeper understanding of the challenge(s) and results in solutions which could not have been achieved by any one group working alone (Roberts & Bradley, 1991). Collaboration is a complex, powerful, and often very fragile process. Successful collaborations require cultivation (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992) and reflection (Sherry & de Haan,

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2012). Co-production, predicated on collaboration and reflection for knowledge production and action, places an emphasis on both process and outcome (Miller & Wyborn, 2018). This is relevant with relation to an investigation of a sustainability initiative using reflection to support the creation of knowledge and guide the implementation of action. Through reflection we can inform the outcome whilst understanding the process. An emphasis on reflection can help bridge the divide between learning traditions and sustainability transitions studies as outlined by Van Mierlo and Beers (2020), and adds to the literature on the importance of reflective processes within governance networks related to sustainability transitions (Sol et al., 2018).

Reflection must begin by acknowledging the need for clarification on what we understand the practice of reflection to be (Jay & Johnson, 2002) and the need for a theoretical foundation (Thompson & Pascal, 2012). Here, we ground our understanding in the experiential-intuitive model found in the work of Schön over the rationalist-technicist model of Dewey. Despite the benefits of Dewey's model (Simpson et al., 2004), we seek instead to understand reflection, as outlined in the works of Schön (1987, 1991) due to its emphasis on special expertise and intuitive processes that are established by professionals through their work. When looking at a diverse multi-stakeholder collaboration, the range of different professional expertise, skillsets, trainings and intuitive understandings can be best understood reflectively through an experiential-intuitive model. The idea of reflection-for-action, a 'process of planning, thinking ahead about what is to come so that we can draw on our experience in order to make the best use of . . . resources available to us' (Thompson & Pascal, 2012, p. 317), has been applied here with the 'action' defined as participation in a collaborative committee for a regional transition project. Following on from the work of Bleakley (1999), reflection can be understood as a form of action, a process through which future events or actions are orientated.

Dingle Peninsula 2030 or Corca Dhaoine 2030 (Irish translation) is a collaboration project aiming to transition a geographic region in the South West of Ireland to a low-carbon, sustainable society by 2030. Our group have collectively developed initiatives across a number of sectors. In coming together, our four organisations work as a collaborative committee. Our organisations are the not for profit, Dingle Creativity and Innovation Hub (Mol Téic); the local community development organisation, North East West Kerry Development (NEWKD); Ireland's national electricity distribution system operator, ESB Networks, and a research centre, MaREI, the SFI Centre for Energy, Climate and Marine. Within our collaborative committee there are seven members. These include a board member, and the Manager of Mol Téic, the Local Area Manager within NEWKD, ESB Network's Dingle Community Engagement Manager, and a community engagement specialist and two PhD students from MaREI. Alongside this, the Communications and Public Engagement Manager within MaREI acts as an associate member of the committee. A transdisciplinary approach has been taken throughout, working across University College Cork's Departments of Sociology and Engineering, and a community context. As the members of the collaborative committee, we have prepared this article as a reflection on the collaborative experience we have had, engaging together in a transdisciplinary research practice, 'transgress(ing) boundaries between scientific disciplines and between science and other societal fields . . . include(ing) deliberation about facts, practices and values' (Wiesmann et al., 2008, p. 5).

The group is predicated on a commitment to working collaboratively. Despite the organisations represented having never worked together, the collaborative committee has developed a working style which enables all voices to be heard. On some decisions one or other of the groups may take the lead, but all others input their viewpoint. Over the 3-year time frame relevant to this paper, the group was engaged in regular meetings (29) and continuous email interactions. The lead author on this research paper is a PhD student within MaREI (with previous experience of reflection as method through academic teachings) and member of the collaborative committee. All members were active co-authors; inputting text, revising their reflections, and editing the piece throughout the process. While collaboration has been embedded in the group, reflection was an emergent practice developed due to the need to document, and learn from, our experiences. This need emerged from the group through conversations, as the overall project began to develop and scale-up. The collaborative committee has continued beyond this intervention, with a continued emphasis on collaboration and a new commitment to reflection which has been manifested through the creation of a series of accessible, publically available 'learning briefs', which act as documentation to reflect upon developments within the project.

As collaborative projects are creative, sometimes experimental, and endeavours are fraught with inevitable and unexpected structural, organizational, and process challenges, almost all aspects of the process must be open to continuous re-examination and re-evaluation (Roberts & Bradley, 1991). Feedback can then be used to strengthen the collaborative relationships and their effectiveness (Bronstein, 2003). A process of reflection, guided by the experiential-intuitive model, have been deployed here to provide insights into the multi-stakeholder collaborative governance approach under investigation. We have guided our investigation with a simple reflective question; what are the benefits and challenges of working in such a collaborative manner across organisations?

2. Methods

Our collaborative committee within *Dingle Peninsula 2030* has met regularly throughout the course of this project to discuss plans for the different range of initiatives. Through taking a transdisciplinary research approach, working across disciplines and between a number of organisational bases within a community context, the initial research design was inherently influenced by the principals of reflexivity (Popa et al., 2015) and on from this critical reflection (Thompson & Pascal, 2012). The experiential-intuitive model for knowledge and on from this action is relevant to transdisciplinary research as it relates to the issue of sustainability (Scholz, 2013). The need to differentiate between reflexivity and reflection is warranted, with both playing a role in critical reflection. Reflexivity is a form of reflection which acknowledges our own influence in the process, our personal, cultural and social circumstances that influence our work. Reflection, in a literal sense, is the 'process of thinking about the work we undertake' (Thompson & Pascal, 2012). This can be isolated from our personal biases if detached from reflexivity. Both of these factors are important for critical reflection to occur.

Reflection as a process of learning is of central importance. Within sustainable transition studies, learning practices have been highlighted as an important yet underexplored area, despite no explicit reference to reflection (Van Mierlo & Beers, 2020). Reflection

within governance structures for sustainability transitions is also an important consideration from an institutional and cross-institutional perspective (Sol et al., 2018). In this analysis, a number of questions were designed which each member of the group would reflect upon over the course of a few months. This approach enables reflection-in-action (Hébert, 2015, p. 365) whereby the questions posed for reflection would have influence in action, enabling participants within the group to undertake a process akin to the outline provided by Schön and further developed by Bleakley, with the theoretical dimension of reflection-for-action (Thompson & Pascal, 2012) necessary within a 'live' project. Upon completion of the guided questions for reflection each member of the collaborative committee returned their responses to a designated member of the group for compilation. On from the compilation of responses, the answers were given back to each member to ensure each answer covered the necessary reflections. On from this, a paper was drafted by the lead author which was then circulated to all members to input content, edit, and verify. The questions posed were as follows:

- (1) What do you personally bring to the Dingle 2030 collaboration – in terms of skills, experience, information, network of contacts, etc?
- (2) What have you practically done to contribute to the collaboration since the beginning?
- (3) What does your organization bring to the table?
- (4) Can you describe the benefits of the collaborative process so far?
- (5) Can you describe any challenges that have emerged during the collaborative process so far?
- (6) Can you suggest how to overcome them?

The work of Schön has been brought into question for lacking a theoretical foundation (Fook et al., 2006). The guiding questions used here were influenced by the idea of critical reflection (Mezirow, 1990), whereby reflection in and of itself is not sufficient, but rather critical reflection must involve 'thinking about one's practice and critically deconstructing how we have developed these skills and responses with a view to developing new theories of practice for the future' (Hickson, 2011, p. 831). The reflections were compiled into a number of tables and graphs and used to draw out findings on the collaborative process to date. These were then revisited by each member of the group for further development to ensure they were representative reflections. This method acted as a first instance of reflective practice for our group and is representative of reflections from an individual perspective with relation to our individual organisations. The reflections do not represent an objective understanding of the situation. Despite this limitation, the rationale for this process was to critically reflect on the collaborative multi-stakeholder process underway with relation to the governance of *Dingle Peninsula 2030*, and all our individual involvements in it. Within the practice of reflection two key considerations (Fook, 2002) have driven the method used here. First, the rationale for this process is to learn from the diverse organizational and individual experiences of working in a collaborative manner on a project of this nature, which is then analyzed within a research setting to draw out findings.

Four topics were selected through which to analyse reflections 1.- Personal networks, 2.- Individual capacity, 3.- Organisational capacity, and 4.- Benefits/challenges/solutions

for collaboration. The range of guiding questions previously outlined was used to facilitate reflection over a 3 month period within the longer timeframe of the project. Some limitations exist within the method used. Firstly, we have not focused on the wider system level of analysis, focusing rather on the four topics outlined above. Future investigations could focus on the system level. Secondly, the paper is focused on one reflective process. Further reflections over a longer time period could enhance the reflective knowledge creation. We have sought to overcome this limitation through revisiting reflections collaboratively in production of this paper to ensure that our individual inputs cover all necessary topics.

3. Results

3.1. Personal networks

In Figure 1, the personal networks of individuals have been outlined, acting a visual aid to depict the reflections. These have been separated into two categories – those based on the peninsula (yellow), and those based off the peninsula (blue). Where two organisations within the collaborative committee have referenced the same network it has been

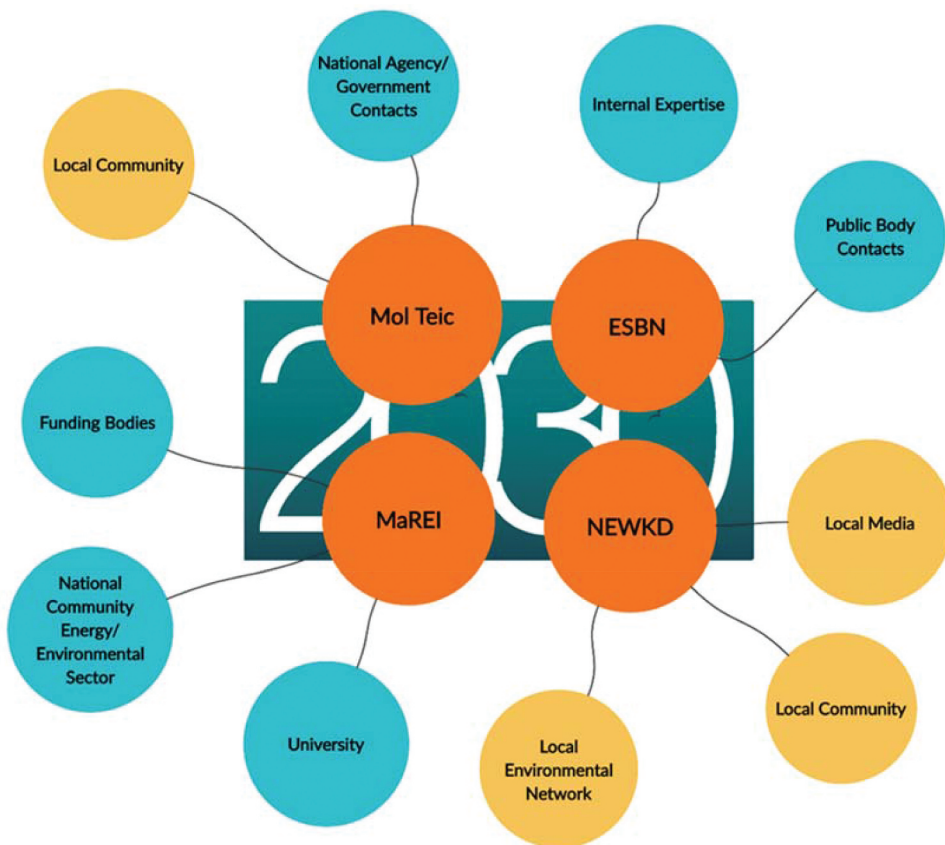


Figure 1. Wider networks of individual members of coordinating committee.

reference twice (i.e. local community– NEWKD and Mol Téic). The diverse range of both local and national networks that the collaborative committee can access is clearly illustrated. We have, however, not sought to outline the nature of linkages (e.g. resource flows, constituent members, etc.). Working in silos, from the perspective of a public body, a community group, or a research institute, the scope of personal networks would be far more limited than that highlighted here. ESNB and MaREI were supported by Mol Téic and NEWKD in offering access to local networks. In the case of ESNB, the employment of a community engagement manager enables the leveraging of local networks and the establishment of further local linkages.

3.2. Personal/individual capacity

Personal or individual capacities refer to the individual skill and ability of actors, their personal resources, understanding of sustainability, and willingness to act (Middlemiss & Parrish, 2010). These are summarised in Table 1. Community initiatives often rely on resources of their members (skills, knowledge, leadership, values and enthusiasm), encompassing both intrinsic motivations and collective action capacities. This classification acts as a bridge between individual and collective actions. In outlining all of our individual capacities we have been able to assess where we have skills and where we may need to bring in new members to the group to further develop skills. At a broad level, through outlining personal capacities we see the sum as being greater than the parts. Personal capacity is often characterised as the ‘champion’ role (Hall et al., 2013), which reflects the importance of key nodes in the network, and has been shown to play a role both in garnering social acceptance (Simpson, 2018) and influencing behaviour change (Parkhill et al., 2015). It must not, however, be simply equated to the individual champion. Personal capacity can be developed through both volunteerism and through employment, with both of these having different dimensions when acted upon. In a positive sense, volunteerism can often come from a vocational drive, and with people embedded within the community in question. In relation to employment, personal capacity can benefit from being structured and resourced professionally. Looking at the negatives, personal capacity related to volunteerism may suffer from burn out or a lack of resources, whilst personal capacity based on employment may be inhibited (but not always) by organisational norms.

3.3. Organisational capacity

The values of established organisations in the community and how they align with the values of sustainability provides (or prevents) the existence of organisational capacity.

Table 1. Personal capacity drawn out from personal reflection.

Personal Capacity	
Group	Capacities
Mol Teic	Facilitator, Convenor, Supporter, communication skills, technical competence, engagement experience
MaREI	Energy engineering expertise, engaged research, report writing, public engagement and outreach, group development
ESBN	Decision making, conflict management, strategy development and implementation
NEWKD	Community development, partnership approach, inclusive approach to engagement

Table 2. Organisation capacity drawn out from personal reflection.

Organisational Capacity	
Group	Capacities
Mol Teic	Local/national support (public bodies, private companies, community bodies), attract diverse skillsets in the community
MaREI	Funding for engagement activities, expertise in climate mitigation and energy research
ESBN	Finance, Technical Expertise, Influence, Public Relations
NEWKD	Track record bringing investment into the community. Track record of working with community. Established structure of communities throughout the peninsula.

Through these organisations, resources and supports are provided within the community (Middlemiss & Parrish, 2010). Central to the organisational capacity of formal groups established in the community is their participation in everyday life, acting as established members within different sectors within the community, e.g., sporting, cultural, political, environmental and residential. While a specific intent towards sustainability is useful, it is this wider embedded aspect of their operations which can provide the greatest influence, particularly in light of the national drive for sustainable practices moving forward (Boyle, Watson, Mullally, & Ó Gallachóir, 2021).

Here in Table 2, the organisational capacity classification has been used for all members of the *Dingle Peninsula 2030* collaborative committee group, both those pre-established in the community (Mol Teic, NEWKD) and those with a presence in the community as part of the project (ESBN, MaREI). While acting as an institution at a broader level, ESBN through their collaboration in the wider *Dingle Peninsula 2030* initiative can be seen to operate as an organisation in the community, with regular engagement through events and initiatives within the area. Similarly, while acting predominantly as a research institute, through taking an engaged approach to research as part of *Dingle Peninsula 2030*, MaREI can be classified as acting through its organisational capacity with involvement in engagement activities, workshops and outreach events in the community, while still having a primary directive towards research findings. Similar to personal capacity, through outlining organisational capacity we have been able to see how the totality of skills and characteristics of our organisations when working together is vastly superior to when we act alone.

3.4. Benefits and challenges of collaboration and their solutions within the process

The idea of critical reflection is aligned with the process of thinking about challenges and their solutions. The process, however, has been called into question by some as it 'conjugates up a focus on the negative aspect of an interaction or experience' (Hickson, 2011, p. 832). Here, focus has been given to benefits alongside challenges and solutions, using direct quotations and examples taken from our responses to the reflective questions (see Table 3). Critical reflection on benefits across a number of organisations can lead to insights into how these positives can be built upon and where, in some cases, capacity may be missing to ensure benefits are utilised. Within this section, the results contained in Table 3 are a compilation of responses from all participants fitted within our individual organisations.

Table 3. Benefits, challenges and their solutions drawn out from personal reflection.

<u>Organ-isation</u>	<u>Benefits</u>	<u>Challenges</u>	<u>Solutions</u>
<u>Mol Téic</u>	Local/Policy Impact. Open, Transparent, Trusting. Key expertise of each group.	Lack of flexibility in funding, slow response of public bodies to engage on the ground. Lack of mechanisms for large organisation to collaborate with community organisations. Day to day financial support. Lack of organisational mechanism that value collaboration in itself.	Engage public sector at senior level for initial buy in. Solve problems collaboratively. Keep local media informed. Link initiatives to national/global challenges. Demonstrate value in collaboration make case for financial support for community groups to engage with research projects
<u>MaREI</u>	Trust, Links to local community. Key expertise of groups. Good communication, joint decision making. Strong interpersonal relationship.	Pressure for time specific outputs not aligned with time commitment of building relationships. Funding. Internally underestimated time/resources required. Logistics of location. Formalizing partnership with industry organisation. Communicating outputs, outcomes and impact and evaluating project. Financial imbalances between organisations. Different deliverables. Structuring for community involvement. Finding time for reflection. Pace of new projects.	New structures and more time given to collaborative/engage research projects. Co-ordination of collaboration needs support, clarity of expectations of each organisation from start, more time needed for reflection, evaluation and forward planning. Funding for on the ground engagement person.
<u>ESBN</u>	Ability of group to learn from one and other. Key expertise and experience of each group.	Difficulty in getting clearance internally on decisions made. Understanding it is a collaboration.	Being open/honest but respectful at all times, Understanding what the issues are and coming to the table with solution as opposed to problems, having a positive can do attitude. Being resilient and persistence
<u>NEWKD</u>	Key expertise of each group. Strong interpersonal relationship developed. Multi-disciplinary approach.	Exploring and identifying vision and value of project. Collaboration challenged by industry partner. Commitment to real collaboration where all partners are equal. Protocols for completion of written documents.	Agreement about the writing/finishing of documents Long term commitment from ESB to the area

4. Discussion

4.1. Network for action in multi-stakeholder collaborations

Through reflecting on the different networks within which each of us as individual members of the stakeholder committee are attached, the diverse range and strength of the wider network becomes apparent (Figure 1). From pre-established local community networks up to national level policy circles, and international research networks, the

group is well networked for achieving the different goals we have. The importance of a robust network of actors and institutions supporting sustainability projects has previously been referenced within other sectors (see: Smith et al., 2005 on organic agriculture).

Often niche projects are embedded in networks which are less stable than established projects or systems. Often the context of niche projects means that networks are local, but this need not always be the case (Berkhout et al., 2017). Within the context on *Dingle Peninsula 2030*, our diverse range of networks spanning from local to the international creates a favourable context for the scaling up of project goals, and the ability to influence change within the established order. Often emergent projects 'are characterised by networks of actors with low levels of relative proximity in emerging socio-technical systems. Their short histories have not yet led to dense networks with strong social, institutional, organisational and cognitive relationships among its nodes' (Raven et al., 2012). While it is relatively early within this project, the potential of the current network to be strengthened further and expanded wider is of note. From this process of reflection we are aware of our strengths but also the need to continue to build up the network as the project scales up.

4.2. Individual and organisational capacities for regional socio-technical transitions

Collaboration involves jointly developing and agreeing a set of common goals, sharing responsibility for attaining these goals, and working together to achieve them using the expertise of each participant group (Bruner, 1991). To engage in collective ownership of goals, each partner must take responsibility for their part in any successes or failures, and they need to facilitate and support constructive disagreement and deliberation (Bronstein, 2003). The diverse range of expertise which we collaboratively hold has been drawn out (Tables 1 and 2) alongside the acknowledgement of this expertise and the ability of joint decision-making across our different organisational bases (Table 3). The central importance of leadership is evident we have outlined as essential, as previously referenced (Savage et al., 2010).

Members of collaborative structures need to establish personal connections, regular interactions and develop a cohesive working group. They need to set up an effective system of communication at the beginning of a collaborative initiative, in order to facilitate widespread and shared access to information (Arnaboldi & Spiller, 2011). From an organisation perspective, at the local community level (i.e. Mol Teic & NEWKD), our ability to attract diverse skillsets in the community is important, alongside an established track record of bringing investment into the community and working with the community. The other two organisations within our collaborative group (ESBN & MaREI), bring funding for engagement activities, expertise in climate mitigation and energy research and finance, technical expertise, and public relations. Through pooling our resources together and working collaboratively, we can greatly enhance our capacity to achieve our goals, as previously noted as important for addressing and environmental problems (Rasche, 2010, p. 4). There is, however, no evidence of collaborative governance being necessarily more effective in and of itself, with the success of the approach dependent on 'the nature of the stakeholders and the quality of their interactions (Rasche, 2010, p. 5). The need to reflect more regularly, finding the time for it within a project, just as meetings

are held, accounts are kept, and training is undertaken, has been noted (Table 3) and may deepen the benefits of reflection-for-action, improving project management and strategy moving forward. This process has taken place through the development of 'learning briefs' built upon the principles of reflection as outlined below.

4.3. Challenges in a collaborative governance structure

Collaborative governance has become an emergent approach when seeking to address sustainability and environmental challenges, something which has been experimented on in our case represented here. There is, however, a lack of research focus on the challenges of collaborative governance in practice (Margerum et al., 2016). Despite the networked nature of our group (Figure 1) the challenge of accessing funding is still prevalent. In the context of a regional community-based socio-technical transition project, this illustrates a clear need for the creation of new funding mechanisms. If such a well networked group has difficulty in accessing funding, the prospect of less-networked groups following on from our project is bleak without structural changes to how funding is provided and administered. Any group, such as ours, needs to have an adequate and reliable financial base to support its operations. Securing the financial means for existence must be a priority in forming a collaborative group, and as work may be expensive in the early stages money should be available at the outset (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992).

We have outlined the importance of trust building (Table 3), yet must also acknowledge the time requirements which this takes (Johnston et al., 2011; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Our internal organisational structures, like most, are often poorly equipped to manage this need for time or trust building. While the establishment and achievement of individual goals can be realised, the ability of a range of stakeholders to identity a shared vision has been a challenge for our group, whilst also being a key consideration within the literature (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Trust building has been linked previously to power sharing (Ran & Qi, 2019), to help manage power asymmetries within collaborative relationships (Purdy, 2012; Ran & Qi, 2016). The need to create space, through freeing up time, to enable trust building is of central importance to collaborative governance processes.

Through this research, the project partners first experimented with, and developed a reflective approach, the aim of which is to create a 'governance network that is able to adjust, reorient and change in a flexible and surprising way' (Sol et al., 2018, p. 1400). The collaborative committee has built on this reflective exercise by developing what we have termed 'learning briefs' which draw out further reflections on specific aspects of the overall project (ref to learning briefs). Through the learning briefs we have now established reflection as a core practice of our group both for internal learning and wider exposure. The interrelated nature of knowledge creation and action through collaboration and reflection (Miller & Wyborn, 2018) is highlighted through our journey of reflection leading to embedding reflection as a practice for the creation of learning briefs"

4.4. Organisational differences; positives negatives and ways forward

Power imbalances have previous been reported as common within collaborative governance (Purdy, 2012; Ran & Qi, 2016). But on from this, the difficulties in establishing structures to work collaboratively between public bodies and community groups are

something we have experienced. Within the public body, internal clearance is a challenge. The difficulties for the research body in formalizing the partnership with the public body are also something we have noted, highlighting difficulties associated with collaborative research beyond consultancy (Loan-Clarke & Preston, 2002).

In addition, the desired outcomes or goals being pursued by each individual organisation can limited the scope for collaboration. There are a number of key differences among us as *Dingle Peninsula 2030* partners. ESB Networks, the electricity distribution system operator, are solely focused on electricity. However, the research of MaREI and initiatives emerging from Mol Teic seek to address the whole energy system, including alternative technologies in heating and transport. The local organisations (NEWKD/Mol Teic) have a long-term vision and commitment to the area, whereas for the public body and research institute (MaREI/ESBN) involvement will be much shorter, perhaps only lasting the duration of the project.

A change is needed with relation to the way in which institutions interact with community groups and citizens in order to effectively go about implementing the measures needed to expedite the transition to a low-carbon energy system. Institutions have a key role to play within sustainable transitions and within this institutional change is considered of utmost importance (Geels, 2004; Jolly & Raven, 2015; Wirth et al., 2013). We have acknowledged the benefits of our group, as a collaboration where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Yet, we still must make clear the difficulties around establishing such a group, and the need to create mechanisms within public bodies and research institutes to participate in such groups to deliver on sustainable transition ambition.

5. Conclusion

Reflecting on collaboration is well developed within the literature on teaching practice (Bos, 1995; Wildman et al., 1999). The need for collaborative governance structures for the establishment of socio-technical transition projects within community contexts is noted (Bos & Brown, 2012); however, little attention has been given to the need for reflection within these collaborative groupings, with collaborative governance not necessarily more effective in and of itself, but dependent on characteristics of actors and their interactions (Rasche, 2010, p. 5), something understandable through reflection. Within this paper, we have undertaken a single process of reflection which has outlined the networks, personal capacities, organisational capacities, benefits and challenges of collaborative governance partnerships for sustainable transitions from the perspective of individuals within the collaborative committee. Throughout this process, reflection has become an embedded practice within the group, now regularly engaged in the development of learning briefs, reflecting collaboratively on different aspects of the project. While this paper only outlines a single initial instance of reflection, which sought to draw out findings on the collaborative approach, further work is needed which reflects on the process of reflection itself.

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