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Beyond Capital: The Role of Shared Leadership and Collective Engagement in Transitioning Post-Industrial Regions

Introduction

In the current era of global instability - characterized by climate change, energy crises, and the socio-economic repercussions of post-pandemic recovery - territorial development processes are undergoing a fundamental transformation. A growing body of research underscores the importance of bottom-up initiatives in driving socio-economic transitions towards green and sustainable societies. Across diverse application areas and geographies, researchers point to the potential, challenges, and mechanisms through which community-led and grassroots actions contribute to systemic transformation. These initiatives are no longer viewed as peripheral but as central mechanisms for systemic change, operating as laboratories of experimentation and bridges between citizens and institutions. The concept of "Just Transition" necessitates that these processes do not leave marginalized groups behind, making the study of community-led collective action particularly urgent, especially since marginalized communities are frequently absent from the discussion on just transition initiatives (Clement et al., 2025). The choice of this topic is justified by the need to explore how local agency can be mobilized in "uncertain and challenging times". While international and national policies provide the framework, it is the local initiatives that translate these goals into lived realities. Understanding the success factors of these initiatives is crucial for policymakers and practitioners aiming to foster territorial resilience. This study specifically delves into the preconditions for successful project implementation in marginalized communities across Europe, where traditional institutional capital may be weak, but social capital remains a potential catalyst for change. By exploring how non-professional, voluntary-based community collaboration groups utilize external funding for self-created initiatives, this research addresses a significant gap in our understanding of effective project management within ad hoc bodies aiming to deliver societal benefits.

Collective Action and Sustainability Transitions – Literature Review

The existing literature highlights that community-led actions contribute to systemic transformation across diverse geographies. Bottom-up citizen initiatives often arise in contexts with weak institutional capital, where they enhance local adaptive capacity and resilience (Thaler & Seebauer, 2019). Such initiatives foster community resilience through people-place connections, engaged governance, community networks, and the sharing of skills and knowledge, thereby embedding resilience within social systems (Arvanitis et al., 2023). In the realm of climate action, everyday practices of care and collective engagement in marginalized communities are seen as vital for adaptation and mitigation (Simon et al., 2020). Researchers argue for a move toward "regenerative urban planning," where community-led initiatives serve as necessary vehicles for moving beyond mere sustainability to regenerative development (Crowley et al., 2021). The energy transition further illustrates this, with simulations showing that local energy initiatives thrive on cooperative orientations, leadership, and prosocial attitudes (Ghorbani et al., 2020). However, the literature also warns that marginalized communities risk exclusion if vertical coordination of innovation policies fails to reach the local level (Clement et al., 2025).

Success in these transitions is often attributed to several fuzzy and cross-cutting factors, including social and human capital such as trust, skills, and leadership. Literature emphasizes that initiatives thrive where communities possess strong shared norms and trustful relationships, even if formal institutional capacity is weak (Thaler & Seebauer, 2019). Yet, sustained action often hinges on individuals willing to lead, making leadership a frequent bottleneck (Ghorbani et al., 2020). Engaged governance and enabling institutions are also critical; success depends on opening spaces for participation, sharing power, and providing resource mobilization (Pereira et al., 2019). Furthermore, civic initiatives build staying power through dense community networks and strong place attachment (Arvanitis et al., 2023). Grassroots innovations are most effective when they expand human capabilities, improve public reasoning, and create fairer structures (Belda-Miquel et al., 2020). Modern frameworks like the ecological citizenship lens suggest that success requires people-centred co-design and participatory governance that embeds equity into everyday practices (Gooding et al., 2025). Recent advancements in management studies offer a refined lens through which to view these processes, suggesting that project success relies on a delicate interplay between robust management structures and crucial psychosocial factors (Iqbal et al., 2025). The critical importance of effective human capital is underscored by the fact that poor leadership contributes significantly to project failure, highlighting the need for "power skills" and inclusive leadership styles characterized by openness and accessibility (Iqbal et al., 2025). Inclusive leadership fosters a positive environment and increases team members' positive affectivity, which translates into Project Citizenship Behaviour (PCB) - extra-role behaviours like sharing ideas and proactively assisting peers (Iqbal et al., 2025). On a strategic level, success in socio-technical transitions (STT) hinges on Project-Oriented Agency (POA) - the collective ability to mobilize resources and align around common objectives (Hetemi et al., 2025). This agency can manifest as "Emergent Agency," characterized by bottom-up prototyping, or "Induced Agency," which relies on top-down mandated charters (Hetemi et al., 2025). Ultimately, achieving strategic goals requires a cohesive framework that moves beyond "confetti" (disconnected actions) toward "spaghetti" (intertwined projects sharing a unified direction) (Schmidt-Thome & Mesarcik, 2025).

Research Design and Assumptions

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to explore the role of conditions leading to perceived project success in non-professional, voluntary-based community collaboration groups. The research is exploratory, focusing on marginalized communities across Europe - a demographic often absent from discussions on just transition. The core assumption is that non-professional bodies, frequently lacking formal structures or support "from above," must rely on self-organization and internal motivation to focus on common goals. The study investigates how these groups utilize external funding (up to 3,000 Euros) when given the opportunity to implement self-created initiatives under the supervision of the BOLSTER Team.

Data collection occurred between January and March 2025 following project completion, with 57 team members from 11 projects across Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Poland, and Spain submitting responses via a questionnaire. The 11 micro-projects analysed were diverse in scope, ranging from urban gardens in Halle and Dąbrowa Górnicza to youth green-skills workshops in Pula and intercultural networks in Ponferrada. The analysis sought to identify configurations of conditions - such as leadership, commitment, resources, and passion - that led to high or low perceived success.

Results and Discussion

The research results indicate that there are five distinct configurations leading to micro-project success, revealing that no single condition alone is fully sufficient to guarantee success. These pathways suggest two overarching "worlds" of project realization: "Hot Success" and "Cold Success". "Hot Success" is driven by internal psychological and social drivers, specifically

passion and shared leadership. The analysis shows that projects can thrive even without sufficient funding when strong shared leadership, knowledge, and expertise are present. Furthermore, a strong community identity and informal support systems may sometimes suffice to lead to success, even in the absence of formal leadership, a finding that aligns with theories of relational agency and localized social capital (Arvanitis et al., 2023; Simon et al., 2020). "Cold Success," on the other hand, is grounded more strongly in organization, logistics, and material resources. These pathways indicate that an abundance of material resources and high team commitment can ensure success even in the absence of shared leadership or high emotional embeddedness.

Shared leadership emerged as a "polarizing factor" in the study; its presence in most cases leads to a perceived success of the initiative, while its absence frequently signifies perceived failure. It appeared as a core condition in two of the five success configurations and was never a peripheral factor, suggesting that while shared leadership may be difficult to achieve in ad-hoc groups, it is a powerful driver of success when it exists. Additionally, the results highlight that micro-projects can be perceived as successful even with limited funding, provided that members effectively assign roles and have basic access to non-material resources. Conversely, the absence of passion, shared leadership, and commitment leads to low perceived success. Crucially, enthusiasm and funding do not compensate for a lack of competence and determination, emphasizing the need for mentoring and external help for ad-hoc teams (Iqbal et al., 2025; Clement et al., 2025).

Conclusions

The research demonstrates that territorial development in "uncertain and challenging times" relies heavily on the quality of collective action and the specific configurations of local agency. The success of transitions in marginalized regions is not merely a matter of financial investment but of fostering local leadership, passion, and social capital. A key implication is that micro-grants should not focus solely on the transfer of money; funding should be preceded by an analysis of leadership and competencies. Furthermore, policymakers must recognize that there are multiple, diverse pathways to success, whether through structured approaches ("Cold Success") or passion-driven engagement ("Hot Success"). By moving away from "confetti" toward "spaghetti" portfolios, territorial development can become more inclusive and resilient (Schmidt-Thome & Mesarcik, 2025). Understanding these new forms of territorial development is vital for navigating the socio-economic transitions of the 21st century.

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