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# **Grassroots innovations in community-led housing in England. The role of social capital in niche development**

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## **Abstract**

The paper aims to take forward recent debates concerning the development of grassroots innovations and their ability to scale up local impact and alter regime practices.

Drawing on qualitative data, our study explores the emergence of community-led housing (CLH) in England – a grassroots-based housing niche which operates in a context of market dysfunction. We offer further conceptual development of the strategic niche management (SNM) concept in the field of grassroots innovations, especially through the lens of social capital theory. In line with previous findings, the results of our study question an unadapted application of the simplistic growth-oriented SNM approach, leading to a coherent ‘global niche level’. Our empirical analysis shows that a grassroots innovation niche relies on the complex and multi-level co-presence of bonding, bridging and linking networks. This suggests only a limited role for niche-wide intermediaries in establishing coherence and that they should rather focus on productively using diversity to preserve the specific and disruptive nature of individual sub-niches. Nevertheless, niche development still relies on establishing core principles and values that key niche actors agree on. In the case of CLH, actors’ opposition to the current housing regime provides an emerging, but as yet unrealised, basis for this.

## **Keywords**

Community-led housing, Grassroots innovation, Niche development, Social capital, Intermediary actors, Strategic niche management

## **1. Introduction**

This paper focuses on the emergence of community-led housing (CLH) in England.<sup>1</sup> While there is significant internal diversity and different historical trajectories within CLH, the current period is of particular interest for three main reasons. First, a range of organisations in CLH are currently attempting to create a unified response to the highly dysfunctional and crisis ridden housing market, heightened by the 2008 financial crisis. There are several elements here including land banking and market domination by an oligopolistic house building industry as well as a longer ideological project to shift housing from a social to a private and financialised commodity (Aalbers & Christophers, 2014; Hodkinson, 2015; Immergluck, 2011). Second, attempts to drastically roll out low carbon housing have stalled, thus bringing into stark relief the difficulty of attempting to tackle climate change through housing (Seyfang, 2010). CLH contributes pro-actively to the environmental agenda, for instance, through promoting carbon-lite living arrangements or the recycling of wasted empty homes. Third, there have been attempts to create more active forms of citizenship and denser social networks, through recent moves towards ‘localism’ and the ‘Big Society’ discourse and the passage of the Localism Act 2011. The localism debate has been an opportunity for CLH to get more political attention and to be rediscovered as an innovative, alternative

form of housing provision that can respond to social problems (DCLG, 2011a; Author, 2012; Author, 2015).

We are specifically interested in understanding this distinctive housing niche through the multilevel perspective (MLP) approach and the role of social capital in scaling up local impact that can alter regime practices. According to the MLP approach, opportunities for transitions can flourish where there are tensions and problems within the regime and uncertainties within the wider landscape. New socio-technical configurations that develop and mature in niches can then offer potential solutions to problems in the regime (Berkhout, Smith, & Stirling, 2003; Gibbs & O'Neill, 2015; Smith & Raven, 2012). Our paper therefore, is located in specific housing regime problems in England and the extent to which these are stimulating the emergence of a grassroots niche that is coalescing around CLH that can potentially influence regime level actors. Notably, there is now a growing literature focused on studying the role of community-based housing actors in transitions (O'Neill & Gibbs, 2014; Gibbs & O'Neill, 2015; Seyfang, 2010).

More specifically, we focus on Strategic Niche Management (SNM) and the role of niche-level intermediary actors in scaling up grassroots innovations (Hargreaves, Hielscher, Seyfang, & Smith, 2013; Seyfang, Hielscher, Hargreaves, Martiskainen, & Smith, 2014; Smith, Hargreaves, Hielscher, Martiskainen, & Seyfang, 2016; Hatzl, Seebauer, Fleiß, & Posch, 2016). When exploring the issue of system transformations through innovations – both in terms of market-based but also social innovations – authors have applied the SNM approach (Kemp, Schot, & Hoogma 1998; Schot & Geels, 2008). As a governance concept, SNM shows under which conditions niches become robust and influential enough to eventually displace an existing system. It

essentially advocates for strategic coherence in a niche based on letsocial networks, shared performance expectations and aggregation of learning from individual projects. Drawing on some recent applications of SNM to grassroots transitions we deploy a more critical application of SNM reflecting the context of grassroots and civil society innovation (Smith & Seyfang, 2013; Seyfang et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2016), and the role of different forms of social capital in understanding niche development (Caniëls & Romijn, 2008).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 introduces the key theoretical concepts underpinning our analysis: the MLP and SNM frameworks and the key further insight from social capital. Section 3 describes our methodological approach. Section 4 outlines CLH and the extent to which it functions as a grassroots niche. Section 5 reports on our empirical findings around the three aspects underpin effective niche management: learning, social networks and expectations. For each of these aspects we explore the role of bonding, bridging and linking social capital. In the concluding section 6, we reflect on the implications of our study findings for theory building on grassroots innovation in terms of relations, impact and democratic control.

## **2. Conceptual starting points**

### **2.1. The Multilevel Perspective and Strategic Niche Management**

Our analysis is primarily situated within the well-established MLP framework which is used to study system transitions involving multiple actors and institutions at three main levels. According to Geels (2002, 2004), the overall longer-term and relatively stable ‘socio-technical landscape’ (1) is the macro-level context and is comprised of shared cultural values, wider political and socio-economic trends and issues such as

demographic change, political worldviews and longer-term macroeconomic orientations. While the landscape structures social practices and action, actors have no direct influence over change on the landscape level. ‘Socio-technical regimes’ (2) are where an interconnected set of rules, artefacts, institutions and relationships shape daily practices and use of technologies and frame what is possible. Regimes are usually slow to change leading to path dependency and lock in, but can be dislodged and ultimately replaced through disruptive innovations. ‘Niches’ (3) are where innovation and learning occur, often at very localised and experimental level through single experiments or projects, or clusters of several experiments. It is at the niche level where social capital is developed that can support innovation. Niches are seen as nurturing new social and technological configurations that could ultimately grow to influence and displace establish regime practices when interactions occur between niche, regime and landscape levels (Geels & Schot, 2007).

In this sense, windows-of-opportunity for transitions can appear when certain trends within the wider socio-technical landscape influence the regime level. Niche innovations can then offer potential solutions to problems or changing circumstances within the regime itself or the wider socio-technical landscape, and are taken up more or less successfully through strategies ranging from assimilation or confrontation (see Berkhout et al., 2003; Smith & Raven, 2012). For the analysis in this paper, the levels of niches and regimes are mainly relevant.

The well-established analytical tool of strategic niche management (SNM) helps us to understand how the transition of innovations from niche to regime level can be governed (Kemp et al., 1998; Schot & Geels, 2008), and has been applied to studying grassroots innovations too (Witkamp, Raven, & Royakkers, 2011; Seyfang et al. 2014;

Hatzl et al., 2016). Therefore, in this paper, we draw on the SNM approach to structure our empirical accounts on the development of a CLH niche in England and recent efforts by niche-level actors to scale-up grassroots social innovations to influence the housing regime level. We particularly emphasize the niche intermediary level and its relation to the regime.

SNM encompasses the following three processes. (1) social networks refer to solidarity-based networks within the niche as well as a broad network of heterogeneous stakeholders. This network formation should be accompanied by (2) formulation of expectations and visions, and (3) implementation of learning mechanisms among niche actors. If these three processes are managed well, strategic coherence can be implemented within the niche that is thus more likely to replace an existing regime (Geels & Raven, 2003; Hatzl et al., 2016).

In the context of SNM, the role of intermediaries becomes crucial to support the creation of a robust and coherent niche where knowledge aggregation and resource sharing across different local projects is institutionalised (Geels & Deuten, 2006; Smith, 2007). Furthermore, intermediaries act as brokers and coordinators for relationships to stakeholders beyond the niche and thus as facilitators for scaling-up grassroots innovations to the regime level, e.g. by translating disruptive practices into solutions palatable to regime actors (Hargreaves et al., 2013). However, the exact conditions under which intermediaries can support niche development and the scaling up of grassroots innovations is still very little explored in the literature (Hargreaves et al., 2013; Seyfang et al., 2014). It is our contention that the concept of social capital can help here.

## 2.2. Linking social capital and intermediaries

Incorporating insights from social capital theory into the analysis of grassroots niches helps expand our understanding in terms of the diverse nature of relationships between actors involved in the process of scaling up grassroots innovations (Caniëls & Romijn, 2008). Despite the lack of an established definition, there is consensus among scholars that on a generic level, the notion of social capital broadly refers to resources embedded in networks which can be mobilised through social interactions that can lead to potential benefits for actors both individually and collectively (Brunie, 2009). A classification of social capital which we deploy in this paper is between bonding, bridging and linking capital.

Bonding capital is considered as an attribute of homogenous social networks (such as in terms of education, income levels or place) and is also associated with trusting but inward looking relationships that may constrain behaviour and flow of information. Niches are often described as ‘protective spaces’ where actors form ‘deep networks’ for knowledge development and exchange which suggests that they primarily exhibit bonding capital (Geels, 2002; Gibbs & O’Neill, 2015; Kemp et al., 1998; Schot & Geels, 2008). In contrast, bridging capital is defined as outward looking relationships which connect people with different socio-demographic and geographical backgrounds (e.g. outside a local community) but also social identities. It thereby provides individuals with crucial access to new information and resources (Poortinga, 2012).

For this study of CLH organisations, we consider two key indicators for measuring bonding and bridging capital among niche actors (Brunie, 2009; Osborne, Baldwin, & Thomsen, 2016): the membership in a particular type of grassroots housing movement

(e.g. cooperative or community land trust) – as a structural feature – and as a cognitive feature, the main shared values in respect to housing (e.g. affordability, employment creation, intentional community living).

Finally, linking capital can be regarded as a specific form of bridging capital. Like horizontal bridging capital, it connects different groups but connects people vertically ‘across power differentials’ (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004: 655). These vertical ties to institutional decision-makers can help local people leverage resources and information. However, it has to be noted that linking capital, like every form of social capital, can also have negative effects. Thus, privileged access to resources might lead to “nepotism, corruption, and suppression.” (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004: 655). An understanding of linking capital is so important given that Schot and Geels (2008: 547) suggest that niche innovations “can only diffuse more widely if they link up with ongoing processes at regime and landscape levels”. Linking capital can deliver further insights into the relationships between multi-level actors and the scaling processes of grassroots niche projects to enable regime changes. Linking capital is related to access and mobilisation of critical resources from powerful institutions and authorities in society for community-led purposes (e.g. political legitimacy, consultancy, public funding, venture capital) (Agger & Jensen, 2015; Jones, 2013; Author et al., 2014).

Reflecting Osborne et al. (2016) we argue that only a combined analytical approach of the bonding, bridging and linking dimensions of social capital can deliver a more comprehensive picture of grassroots niche development and effective niche development. In particular, as Smith and Raven (2012: 1026) argue “ideas and conceptualisations of how path-breaking innovations escape their protective spaces and interact with wider regime change processes are still poorly developed” (see also Gibbs

& O'Neill, 2015). Therefore, we enrich the MLP and SNM framework with a social capital approach which considers the wider institutional context, in contrast to over-individualistic and localised approaches to social innovation (O'Neill & Gibbs, 2014). This avoids neglecting the multiple factors at work in socio-technical transitions and includes the role of stakeholders and intermediaries at the national, local and niche scales.

**[Figure 1 here]**

Figure 1 displays the conceptual model for this study which integrates the social capital approach within grassroots niches. In this we explore niche innovation across three separate but inter-connected levels. Level 1 represents five CLH sub-niches (cohousing, cooperatives, self and custom-build, self-help housing and community land trusts), each of which are constructed from loosely associated clusters of individual niche projects. This confirms insights that instead of innovation in CLH being contained within a single networked niche, we show that it is made up of “a series of nested niches” (Gibbs & O'Neill, 2015: 138) or sub-niches (Kemp et al., 1998). Typically, learning, networking and the development of expectations within these sub-niches occurs through substantial bonding capital, i.e. trusting and inward looking relationships (represented by continuous arrows). Bridging capital, i.e. outward-oriented interactions to access comparative knowledge and resources, exists between the sub-niches, and interestingly between sub-niche projects and sub-niche intermediaries at Level 2.

This second level is comprised of sub-niche intermediaries - umbrella organisations which represent sub-niche groupings of projects. Thus, in our conceptual model, intermediary actors are also part of the niche innovation arena and located between

niche projects and the regime. However, these intermediaries appear to be closer to the niche than to the regime level in the MLP terminology. Previous research has highlighted the crucial role these intermediaries play in establishing links between niche actors and regime resource holders in the multi-level institutional environment (Agger & Jensen, 2015; Brauholtz-Speight, 2015; Author et al., 2014). Such niche intermediaries deploy bridging capital as they learn, network and develop expectations between each other. They also support niche projects by reaching out to the regime level through linking capital which facilitates and scales up the impacts of niche innovations (e.g. through consulting, mediating or leveraging resource access). Level 3 represents a broader niche-wide intermediary. This is a kind of intermediary that is more commonly represented at the niche level, and is able to undertake a broader role in terms of coordinating learning and network opportunities and coalescing expectations, and articulating them externally. In the case of CLH this is a relatively new role and takes the form of an emerging Community-Led Housing Alliance (CLHA) which we explore below.

Above all these we have represented a patchwork of regime actors such as local authorities, housing associations, funders and builders. The interesting point to note is that there are multiple upward and downward connections between the regime and these three interconnected niche levels. So, for example, vertical linking capital exists between projects in various sub-niches and their respective sub-niche intermediary organisations, but also directly to the larger niche wide intermediary and with people in positions of influence and power in formal regime institutions such as resource holders in local authorities, housing associations, the building industry or institutional investors.

### **3. Methods**

CLH is still a relatively new and under-researched phenomenon in England. Thus, we followed a qualitative research strategy and content analysis (Mayring, 2010) of documentary sources and key informant interview transcripts, seeking to discover central concepts and relationships in our data set to be able to address our research aim. The content analysis helped us to structure the empirical material in accordance with the analytical categories outlined in the previous section. The category system was established deductively and reflects the three key processes of SNM, different levels, actors and social capital dimensions from our analytical framework (see Figure 1).

The paper draws on a large data reservoir established by the authors and in particular makes use of two waves of field work in 2013 and 2015/16 which generated an evidence base of 60 semi-structured qualitative interviews with housing experts and initiators as well as members of selected CLH initiatives and organisations located across England. Given the multi-level character of this study, it was important to include actors on different levels of the CLH field in England. Reflecting our research question, however, the focus is on the niche intermediary level and stakeholders on the regime level. Potential research participants were identified through network contacts of the authors, membership databases of umbrella organizations, e.g. the “National Alliance” database by the community foundation Building and Social Housing Foundation (BSHF), internet searches and snowball sampling. Interviews were complemented by participation in and observation of umbrella body meetings, analysis of secondary sources (including government papers, internet and media sources), field observations of housing sites, field notes of informal encounters with residents of the facilities and observations of interactions between staff members and residents to

increase the contextual and content related plausibility of our data. There were many opportunities to validate and refine findings by frequent interaction with central actors from the CLHA and related field bodies such as the Confederation of Cooperative Housing (CCH). Rather general trends and lines of analysis have been coded and distilled across the different contours of SNM.

#### **4. Community-led housing. An emerging grassroots niche?**

Given the dissatisfaction with the contemporary crisis-laden housing regime in England, characterised by an asset-inflated, individualised and corporate-dominated model of housing, the conditions for socio-technical transitions based on niche innovations seem to be ripe, although at present largely unfulfilled. There are obvious problems with regime rules and practices: unsustainable levels of housing debt; the lack of regulation of private landlords; the stalling of attempts to decarbonise the housing stock; land banking by private developers combined with low rates of new build leading to a supply crisis and artificially inflated unit costs; market distortions by a small number of volume housebuilders; the decline of publicly funded house building; the use of private equity finance to fund new builds; widespread negative equity and foreclosures; and regressive welfare changes such as the bedroom tax and restrictions of rent payment increases (Gibb, 2015).

These regime conditions are not restricted to England but part of a broader financial crisis unfolding since 2008, in part underpinned by the global trend towards the commodification of housing and speculation on housing assets. These factors have coalesced to create a deeply unbalanced market and a lack of housing options from a diverse range of providers. There is now widespread dissatisfaction with existing

choices that are largely limited to depersonalised and expensive volume housebuilding types, large-scale stigmatised social housing, unregulated and unaffordable private rentals.

In response to problems and tensions at the regime level, England has witnessed the emergence of particular types of grassroots housing innovations corresponding to more or less established groups of local initiatives under the label ‘community-led housing’ (BSHF, 2014; HCA, 2011) which can be defined as “housing shaped and controlled by a group that represents the residents and/or the wider community that will be served by *the housing*” (Heywood, 2016: p.12). Similar grassroots niches can be found across Europe (Czischke, 2017) with ‘collaborative housing’ emerging as an umbrella concept that is “wide enough to encompass all international variations” (Fromm, 2012: 364).

While the community-led niche is in its infancy, and numerically remains an insignificant part of the overall UK housing stock (less than 1%), there is a growing appetite for alternative housing provision.<sup>2</sup> Advocates claim a number of benefits for CLH. It can deliver affordable, low impact and socially cohesive housing that can empower communities, and offer substance to the localism agenda based on equality and fairness through building social capital and active citizen engagement. These community-driven innovations have high levels of social relevance as collective responses to the multiple housing problems outlined above (Heywood, 2016; Author, 2015).

Rather than representing one unified niche, there are five identifiable sub-niches: community land trusts (CLTs), mutuals and co-operatives, cohousing, self and custom-build, and self-help housing. In reality these are more messy and blurred and coherence

has been imposed by the sub-niche intermediaries. In fact regime actors impose a demand for a more structured field when in reality grassroots innovations are interconnected, plural and messy.

For the purposes of this paper, we conceptualise these various CLH sub-niches as grassroots social innovations which primarily pursue social objectives and “[...] respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved” (Seyfang & Smith, 2007: 585). Drawing on this work, grassroots social innovations emerging from civil society can be distinguished from market-based technological innovations in terms of context (private market vs. third/public sector), driving force (profit seeking vs. social/ideological orientation), organisational form (capital companies vs. voluntary associations, co-ops, informal community groups etc.) and resource base (commercial income vs. grant funding, voluntary work, donations etc.). These four aspects can be used to outline the major contours of our five sub-niches (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Characteristics of CLH sub-niches as grassroots innovations** (based on Seyfang & Smith, 2007; Hatzl et al., 2016; Heywood, 2016)

	<b>Cohousing</b>	<b>Co-operatives</b> (including mutuals and tenant management organisations)	<b>Self-help</b>	<b>Self- and Custom Build</b>	<b>Community Land Trust</b>
<b>Context</b> <b>(Dominant institutional housing contexts in which CLH initiatives operate)</b>	Private home ownership, co-operative rental	Non-profit social (rented) housing	Private rented housing	Home ownership	Non-profit social (rented) housing

<b>Driving force (Main motivations of participants)</b>	Mainly ideological values: Alternative lifestyle, intentional community, environmental awareness	Mainly social needs: Affordability; good housing quality; member /community democracy	Mainly social needs: Affordability, housing quality; capacity building; work integration; poverty alleviation	Place making; Alternative lifestyle, architectural innovations, local control of production	Mainly social needs: Affordability; place stewardship; local resilience
<b>Organisational form (Legal aspect)</b>	Community interest company, member cooperative, informal community group	Member / community cooperatives, housing associations	Community benefit societies, community interest companies, companies limited by guarantee, co-operatives, charities, community land trusts	Community interest company, member cooperative, informal community group	Community Land Trust
<b>Organisational form (Governance)</b>	Typically bottom-up, resident self-management	Bottom-linked governance (mix of local resident self-management and top-down professional management by secondary coops)	Typically local project-based partnerships led by sub-niche intermediaries, incl. social enterprises	Typically developer-led with resident participation	Bottom-linked governance (mix of local community self-management and top-down professional management by CLT umbrellas and/or HAs)
<b>Resource base (Financial resources, revenues, operating resources)</b>	Mainly self-financed, in-kind contributions and commercial bank loans; some early stage public grants	Public grants, social business model, voluntary work, co-operative member resources	Public funding, voluntary work, cross-subsidising from social enterprise activity	Funding channelled through commercial developers; commercial loans, government grants	Early stage public grants, external support from large private builders and housing associations, voluntary works
<b>Size</b>	14 completed schemes with over 40 in development in England	836 organisations across the UK, about 169,000 units, 91% of co-operatives based in England	110 organisations by 2015, bringing about 1297 properties (3025 bedrooms) back into use between 2012 and 2015	Individual self-builders represent around 10% of all new builds in England	About 160 projects around England

In line with Seyfang & Smith (2007), we can consider the five sub-niches of CLH to be part of the social economy context where we find initiatives primarily pursuing social aims, focused on serving local community needs. This is in contrast to the mainly profit-seeking initiatives in a market economy context. However, we believe that such a simple dichotomy (market vs. social economy context) does not help much to understand the messy nature and practices of grassroots innovation in English CLH and the institutional environment in which they operate.

In particular, given the limited institutional completeness of CLH, it makes more sense to conceptualise CLH and its sub-niches in relation to the dysfunctional mainstream housing institutions to which these grassroots innovations respond (e.g. non-profit social housing, private renting, commercial volume builders, home ownership).

In practice, grassroots initiatives often have a hybrid nature (Hatzl et al., 2016), weaving together market, state and community context, similar to social enterprises (Defourny & Nyssens, 2013). For example, while many organisations involved in CLH have a strong grassroots, even activist, character and align themselves less with the formal non-profit housing sector (such as housing associations) and private market actors (e.g. custom builders or private letting agencies), others are more closely aligned to market actors, emerging from innovative small and medium-sized architectural and building enterprises. Moreover, all grassroots niches are in some way embedded in institutionalised housing fields of the non-profit and private market sector through its regulators, funders, builders, architects, consultants etc.

## 5. Strategic niche management in community-led housing

In this section, we return to the three areas of activity that have been identified as constituting effective niche building. In particular, we are interested in the extent to which our three forms of social capital, bonding, bridging and linking, are evident in these three areas of niche-building activity - learning, social networking and expectations. This is represented in table 2 below and discussed in detail in the following sections.

**Table 2. The role of different forms of social capital in SNM** (based on Seyfang & Smith, 2007, Hatzl et al., 2016)

	<b>Bonding</b>	<b>Bridging</b>	<b>Linking</b>
<b>SNM aspect 1.</b> <b>Networking</b> <i>(Depth and actor heterogeneity)</i>	<b>Internal actor network within the sub-niche</b>	<b>External actor network to other sub-niches</b>	<b>External actor network to the regime level</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective informal networking between individual projects</li> <li>• Veteran project initiators and social entrepreneurs represent nodes in sub-niche networks</li> <li>• Larger circle of actors loosely or not at all connected to the sub-niche umbrellas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sub-niche intermediary strategies to develop bridges</li> <li>• “Social entrepreneurs” promoting hybrid models are well connected across sub-niches</li> <li>• Formal intermediary organisations in each sub-niche that connect projects on a regional and national scale</li> <li>• Local and regional project-based cooperation between coop, cohousing and CLT sub-niche intermediaries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social entrepreneurs and project actors establish vertical links to regime (e.g. CLTs to housing associations) without support from intermediaries.</li> <li>• Secondary housing coops with longstanding relations to local authorities (e.g. Redditch, Liverpool)</li> <li>• SHH, NCLTN and NaCSBA establish effective links to regime actors</li> <li>• CLHA recently establish links to central government</li> </ul>
<b>SNM aspect 2.</b> <b>Learning</b>	<b>Learning between projects from the same sub-niche</b>	<b>Learning between projects from different sub-niches</b>	<b>Learning from external resource holders (in the regime level)</b>

<b>First order learning: learning from others how to establish and operate (building up skills)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CLH initiatives are aware of fellow projects within sub-niche</li> <li>• Typically informal sharing of experiences and information sources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On individual project level, learning across sub-niches is less common</li> <li>• Occasional facilitation by sub-niche and niche intermediaries or even regime actors (e.g. research institutions)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drawing on expert know-how (e.g. consultants) is limited for individual projects (financial constraints)</li> <li>• CLH intermediaries serve as central knowledge and information pool for sub-niche projects (on request)</li> <li>• Emerging policy and think tank support to create evidence base</li> </ul>
<b>Second order learning: passing on experience and sharing information with interested parties (disseminating skills &amp; information)</b>	<b>How does dissemination work on the sub-niche level?</b>	<b>How does dissemination work across sub-niches?</b>	<b>How does dissemination work between the niche and external parties (e.g. regime)?</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many individual projects run websites and use traditional communication, such as word-of-mouth, brochures, small events</li> <li>• Sub-niche intermediaries run websites, newsletters, distribute handbooks and organise events and conferences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Occasional dissemination events by two or more sub-niches (e.g. ‘Getting it built’ in 2012)</li> <li>• Key actors represent their projects at other sub-niche projects</li> <li>• Advocacy reports from different sub-niches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nationwide Foundation supported niche wide umbrella structure (CLHA) and related research reports and website</li> <li>• DCLG support 2017 onwards</li> </ul>
<b>SNM aspect 3. Expectations (Shared objectives and visioning)</b>	<b>To what extent do we find joint visioning and objectives in the sub-niche?</b>	<b>To what extent do we find joint visioning and objectives across sub-niches?</b>	<b>To what extent do we find joint visioning and objectives in external niche relations?</b>

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High sub-niche coherence based on bonding capital and clear model principles (e.g. cooperative values)</li> <li>• Limited sustainability of business models</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Niche intermediaries' attempts to reinvent themselves as wider bodies to represent other parts of the entire niche</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recent attempts to create an integrated niche intermediary to align expectations and create sustainable income streams for the niche</li> </ul>
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### 5.1. Social Networking. The role of diverse intermediaries

The first prerequisite for effective niche management concerns building diverse but meaningful social networks. What is particularly striking about our empirical exploration of the CLH niche is the significant levels of effective informal networking between individual projects within sub-niches, underpinned by strong levels of bonding capital amongst active grass-roots agents and social entrepreneurs. Much of this takes the form of informal networking through, for example, face-to-face meetings telephone conversations and chance meetings at events and conferences. In many instances, especially the cohousing sector that has generated high-profile exemplars, individual niche projects have more effectively taken on networking functions above and beyond those undertaken by formal sub-niche intermediaries. But this underlines that the intimate and emotional functions of bonding capital play a crucial role in the network aspects of niche building. Bridging capital is also developed from highly skilled actors and social entrepreneurs who have driven forward niche projects without support from intermediaries.

Moreover, the five sub-niches and their respective intermediary bodies have developed a range of internal sub-niche networking strategies, resulting in strong bonding, bridging and even linking capital to be found at a regional scale. For example, in the co-

operative sector, a range of place-based intermediaries, also called ‘secondaries’, have emerged from the co-operative housing movement such as Birmingham Co-operative Housing Services and Redditch Co-operative Homes in the West Midlands, CDS Co-operatives in London and North West Housing Services in the Liverpool area, which have developed vertical linkages to key local decision-makers, including local authority professional and political leaders. Sub-niche specific national umbrellas, such as Radical Routes, and the Confederation of Co-operative Housing (CCH) have found fewer opportunities to build vertical linkages to central government in England. Interestingly, CCH has focused recent activities on Wales where national government is more receptive to co-operative ideas and opportunities have opened up at the regime level for niche innovations to be mainstreamed.

Certain sub-niche actors have been more effective at establishing vertical linking strategies. For example, the National Community Land Trust Network (NCLTN) in spite of being a young organisation established formally only in 2014 has been effective in establishing vertical linking capital at regime level. It established a statutory definition of CLTs, which modified regime practices in their favour. Moreover, in 2016, it was central to negotiating a £60m Government Community Housing Fund to support CLH projects. This followed close working between NCLTN, other sub-niche intermediaries and the BSHF at the regime level, involving Government ministers and officials.<sup>3</sup> However, networking strategies are still diverse and even messy within this sub-niche. While CLTs have an excellent network of regional umbrella organisations which link up to a national umbrella, individual CLT projects also work directly with regime level actors to develop new homes. In one such case, linking capital was developed downwards directly from a housing association which led the development of several

CLTs in small villages and drew on national funding from the Homes and Communities Agency.

The self-help housing (SHH) sub-niche is a further example of a sub-niche able to develop effective linking capital. It represents successful constant efforts to link the sub-niche vertically with external partners such as central and local government, social investors and foundations; and to encourage new entrants through horizontal links with local projects such as Big Local. The distinctive aspect of this sub-niche is the absence of a formal intermediary but rather the presence of a small number of highly influential and vertically linked advocates who have supported both individual projects and sub-niche development through peer to peer networks. This strategy enjoyed a similar level of success to CLTs in securing £50m in public grant (2012-2015) under the empty homes community grants programme. Further support was leveraged from banks, social investors and charitable foundations at the regime level and this continued after the grant funding ended. The linking strategy in this sub-niche also builds on long-standing place-based organisations established in the 1980s and 1990s including Canopy, Community Campus '87, Latch and Giroscope, in Yorkshire and the North East of England. Some sub-niche projects also moved into a local intermediary role and built vertical linkages to local authorities and housing associations to acquire key resources for the wider sub-niche.

What the analysis in this section shows is that both niche projects and sub-niche intermediaries have developed their own multi-level linking networking strategies to align with regime level actors, with varying success given changes in political opportunities. For example, the co-operative housing sub-niche had experienced successful linking in the 1970s when there were wider political opportunities for the co-

operative movement. At that time, it benefited from the Housing Minister's direct support and infrastructure and funding through the Cooperative Housing Agency which for a few years after 1976 operated in parallel to housing associations. More recently, it has been less successful at vertical linking as discourses emerging from the co-operative movement align less with central government priorities on housing.

Other younger sub-niches have more pragmatic and less politically-bounded umbrella organisations, especially the UK Cohousing Network, the NCLTN and the National Custom & Self Build Association (NaCSBA), and have responded opportunistically to changing national policies. In particular, NaCSBA has aligned itself very closely with government policy to the extent to which it renamed itself to include the term custom-build. It specifically gained traction at the regime level through the 2011 Housing Strategy for England which set out a custom-build homes programme to double the size of this sub-niche over the next decade. NaCSBA was able to engage with regime actors to modify institutional rules and resources for example the requirement for local authorities to set up self-build registers and make sites available.

Overall, our analysis shows strong levels of bonding capital exists within different sub-niches consisting of local projects that share certain sets of housing principles.

Therefore, while individual sub-niches are rich in bonding capital, especially through peer to peer exchanges, they also remain inward-looking. To address regime issues in a co-ordinated way, bridging capital is also required. While there is certainly productive diversity of grassroots initiatives across the niche, the question remains whether this actually translates into stable bridging social capital between the different sub-niches. Given their distinctive historical trajectories, bridging capital has not naturally developed between the different sub-niches in CLH which include more pragmatic

individual self-builders and aspiring owner occupiers as well as more politically motivated co-operative and intentional community projects, an issue we now turn to.

## 5.2. Learning

The second factor, learning, takes a number of forms within niche development. In particular, we can distinguish between what is called first and second order learning, i.e. building up and disseminating skills. Evidence of the latter points to a more matured niche. What we found is that bonding capital within and between projects of the same sub-niche is extremely important for first order learning that occurs within projects between peer groups, neighbours and grassroots activists. Many community housing actors often regard themselves more as social activists rather than merely housing providers and hence build up deep bonds of affinity between group members. What emerges from this is a desire to distil and transfer learning between similar projects, but also to advocate to a wider group of stakeholders (e.g. from other CLH sub-niches) their unique, albeit small, contribution to resolving the housing crisis. This is particularly noticeable within cohousing and co-operative projects which usually have an organisational commitment to sharing learning. Self-evaluation and reflection underpin bonding capital formation. In particular, many grassroots innovators embark upon learning techniques for self and group development especially around interpersonal communication and decision making skills. This is an essential bedrock for wider learning across sub-niches through developing bridging capital.

At the level of intermediaries, there is an increasing commitment to capturing and sharing this learning which develops bridging capital. This occurs mainly within sub-niche groupings of projects. For example, every sub-niche intermediary has developed

its own website and associated reports and tools advocating for how to form projects from the perspective of their sub-niche. However, what is evident from the review of these learning tools are significant overlaps in terms of features promoted such as land stewardship, place making, low carbon building, social connection, and affordability which actually span various sub-niches. Notably, learning is increasingly occurring across sub-niche intermediaries. For example, in 2012, the Community Land Trust and Cohousing networks worked together to undertake a joint roadshow entitled ‘Getting it built’. In the case of self-help housing, the very lean support structure of one part-time coordinator and a website suggests a high reliance on peer learning and sharing of experience across the sub-niche through formal regional meetings and less formal local networking.

There are more recent attempts to develop and consolidate niche-level learning and establish vertical linking strategies for its dissemination. This included two research reports supported by Nationwide Foundation in 2015 alongside its funding for CLHA on how to deliver and scale up CLH,<sup>4</sup> and a Commission in 2016 on CLH led by the Co-operative Council’s Innovation Network.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, CLT, cohousing and co-operative intermediaries have formed a formal partnership to unify learning messages ready for upward dissemination to regime actors.

### 5.3. Expectations. Addressing the niche coherence problem

The third factor identified that underpins effective niche building concerns expectations, especially in terms of the ability to develop shared and specific visions, aims and goals. Overall what is evident in CLH is strong sub-niche coherence due to the presence of high levels of bonding capital through which values and expectations are articulated.

However, there is a certain degree of messiness in the overall niche due to the presence of multiple sub-niches each driven by their unique contextual factor, priorities and ambitions. In particular, there are multiple growth strategies for CLH: first, developing internal resources within and between individual sub-niche projects and creating respective sub-niche intermediary organisations; and secondly, attempts to directly create strategic vertical partnerships with larger stakeholders in the regime, especially with housing associations, but also on isolated occasions with central and local government. However, neither have created a critical mass of projects. The former has lacked organisational capacity and financial resources and has shown the limits of self-help. The latter has struggled to create generalizable organisational and business models underpinned by participation and resident empowerment.

Some sub-niche intermediaries have tried to reinvent themselves as wider bodies to represent other parts of the entire niche, mainly to ensure greater financial stability, and this has been effective in extending bridging capital. However, none were able to gain the legitimacy and resources required to undertake this role. The question remained whether a cohering logic to CLH sub-niches could be brought to the fore that can ultimately scale up and reshape regime practices? Thus, the absence of a more integrated niche intermediary that could effectively communicate niche wide expectations upwards was increasingly recognised as a gap that needed to be filled. In this context, over the last few years, individual sub-niche strategies to scale up have been brought together. The forerunner was the Mutual Housing Group. This was a loose alliance of the umbrella bodies operating in each of the main sub-niches which met regularly between 2010 and 2014. It secured support from BSHF which in turn received

financial support from another foundation, Nationwide, to strengthen sub-niche links and build the CLHA.

CLHA was born at a major learning event in May 2014 on ‘scaling up community housing solutions’. It tried to build shared understanding of the field, the overlapping aims and models that sub-niches represented, and their approaches to scaling up. Early examples of co-operation included common promotional activities such as ‘Getting It Built’ workshops run collaboratively by the UK Cohousing Network and NCLTN across England in 2014 which demonstrated a degree of shared purpose of a wider community-led idea rather than sub-niche interests. They could also be read as efforts by particular sub-niches to position themselves as central players in moves towards a single niche intermediary. In this sense, while CLHA is an attempt to resolve the coherence problem and to create a niche level intermediary, its effectiveness relied on continued support from and productive engagement with sub-niches and their own regime level linking strategies.

One of the early tasks of the CLHA was to help create a statutory definition for CLH, using the following conditions: providing accommodation to the local community; that the local community have the opportunity to become members and also provide the majority vote on resolutions; that any profits will be used to benefit the local community; that the accommodation let to individuals is owned and/or managed by the stated body. Each of the individual sub-niche identities such as cohousing, CLT, co-operative or self and custom-build were deemed insufficient labels to build a national movement, often due the presence of too much bonding capital. More directly, some have been played down to increase attractiveness to regime actors. This has resulted in a smoothing out of sub-niche identities within CLHA to maximise opportunities for

vertical linking with statutory agencies and funders. Meanwhile at niche project level, we have already seen the emergence of hybrids that cross sub-niche boundaries.

The persistent use of CLH as a niche identifier is showing signs of paying dividends. For example, the UK government's 2016 budget announced the establishment of annual £60m Community Housing Fund and several sub-niche intermediaries have been invited to work with the government's Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to develop a strategy for the sector. Moreover, three large national third sector support and funding organisations with a wider remit than housing (Unltd, Locality and Power to Change), in turn launched dedicated programmes for CLH in 2017. This indicates a growing recognition of the potential of the niche and its potential to influence regime actors.

In spite of the significant and ongoing task of creating a more unified niche for CLH, CLHA does represent a step change in the deployment of different forms of social capital. It has forced niche intermediaries to think carefully about the broader identity of CLH beyond sub-niche interests and use bonding capital as a platform to develop more meaningful forms of bridging capital between organisations. This has proved effective in negotiating directly with central government on grant funding to support CLH. In this sense, CLHA has already shown that it can pool linking capital across the various sub-niches and strategically deploy areas of strength to engage with the regime. In particular, CLHA is attempting to understand how to effectively harness growth to challenge the dominance of large-scale economies of both mainstream social and private housing developers. An organisational question is whether this overall niche intermediary incorporates or coexists with the sub-niche intermediaries. If there were moves to consolidate into a single niche intermediary what would this mean for capacity

to address regime problems and how to continue the specific and disruptive nature of individual sub-niches.

## **6. Discussion and conclusions**

In this paper, we have explored grassroots niche development in relation to CLH in England. In doing this, our intention was to offer further conceptual development of SNM frameworks as applied to the field of grassroots innovations, especially through the lens of various forms of social capital. By way of conclusion, we highlight a number of key points for future research that emerge from our work.

First is the issue of inter-organisational relations. We have offered a more complex and multi-level understanding of the grassroots niche innovation arena in which can be identified local projects grouped together in distinct sub-niches supported by different niche-level intermediary organisations. These compete and cooperate for scarce resources, and thus pursue parallel linking strategies with the regime. We have shown that the development of a ‘global’ grassroots niche not only requires bonding capital as the transition literature suggests. It can only be achieved through intermediaries who link up to the regime and down to local projects to stimulate bridging capital between sub-niches too. This shows the relevance of considering the interplay of all three forms of social capital in future niche development analyses.

The current coordination role played by intermediaries suggests to us that CLH in England might qualify for the trans-local phase of niche development (Geels & Deuten, 2006). However, our empirical evidence does not indicate immediate prospects of rapid advancement towards the creation of a robust and coherent ‘global niche level’ with eventual regime replacement, as the SNM approach predict it. On the contrary, echoing

the findings of Hargreaves et al. (2013) and Seyfang et al. (2014) on UK community energy, our analysis questions an unadapted application of the simplistic growth-oriented SNM approach to grassroots innovation. Similar to what Gibbs and O'Neill's (2015) study on the green building sector revealed, we show that the CLH niche is far from being a homogeneous network characterised by bonding capital. Our study identifies substantial diversity in terms of goals, values, ideologies and networking strategies of its actors. In the context of CLH, effective niche management would require integrating various sub-niche activities, and articulating the added value an overall niche intermediary offers alongside existing bonding, bridging and linking strategies.

From the SNM logic, the creation of the CLHA makes absolute sense – a single niche-level intermediary should foster stronger coordination and integration of existing sub-niche intermediaries to create a coherent niche. However, as already experienced in other grassroots niches (Seyfang et al., 2014), this attempt is not likely to gain wide traction as it does not account for differences between the nature of market-based and civil-society based innovations (Witkamp et al., 2011). Too close alignment of expectations and visions among grassroots and civil society actors and implementation of a niche-wide intermediation infrastructure turns out to be difficult. Bridges can only be built across a few core principles that key actors in CLH intermediary organisations agree on. Their opposition to the current housing regime provides elements of this. But beyond this there is insufficient agreement on a joint growth strategy for the niche. Achieving such alignment of growth expectations is crucial.

Therefore, the issue of diversity has important implications for the study of grassroots innovations and civil-society based niche development (Hargreaves et al. 2013). Our

paper adds to the theoretical discussion on SNM for grassroots innovations by introducing a multi-level social capital approach. What we have shown in our empirical analysis is a complex co-presence of linking, bridging and bonding capital in niches. We believe that a combined analysis of the three forms of social capital by niche actors can provide a more comprehensive picture of niche development. Building on ideas developed by Witkamp et al. (2011) and Smith (2016), we suggest studying actor networks in grassroots niches in terms of value fit. This starts with analysing bonding capital and identifying the core values that connect members of local projects within a sub-niche. This analysis further indicates what kind of bridging capital could possibly be developed within their niche and what form of vertical intermediation (i.e. linking capital) is needed.

This leads us to a second issue of impact and the creation of novel niche institutional arrangements to influence regime actors and practices to enact socio-technical transitions. What we found is an emergent and internally heterogeneous niche which is only just beginning to internally coordinate. More mature relationships may emerge over time, but they are unlikely to have a broad impact on the established housing regime in England. In this respect, we explored the emergence of a national alliance, as a consolidation of existing bridging and vertical linking strategies amongst sub-niches in order to enact a step change in their ability to influence regime actors. However, we also found local project and even intermediary actors who were more concerned with consolidating their housing initiatives through mutual support within the niche rather than aiming to influence regime practices or induce fundamental change in the landscape. Thus, our findings provide support to the concept of strategic versus simple (sub-)niches. The latter do not necessarily seek wider regime change whereas SNM

implies that market-based niche innovations ultimately want to break through to the regime level (Seyfang & Smith, 2007). We would also support Smith's (2016) call for a more realistic view on the transformative potential of social innovations in capitalist economies. Based on our results, we would not anticipate structural regime change in housing to be induced by small groups of CLH initiatives but rather through political mobilisation through established parties or new political movements that take up core aspects of the CLH agenda.

Ultimately, we need to know much more about which types of intermediary organisations are best placed to pool linking capital to secure key resources such as land and finance to act as trigger points for socio-technical transitions. Notably, what we found were broader based intermediaries within civil society which had become interested in CLH because of its potential to contribute to scaling up innovations across a whole range of community asset areas such as energy, food, transport as well as housing. This reflects findings from the community energy niches in the UK that are engaged with projects and intermediaries from the wider sustainability and community development field (Seyfang et al., 2014). Coordinated action amongst intermediaries in a range of adjacent localist and socio-technical niches raises the prospect of a broader transition to a local foundational economy of which CLH is only one part (Bowman et al., 2014).

Third, there are key issues of democratic control related to potential negative effects of linking capital. As niche level intermediaries become information brokers and gatekeepers of resources for local projects, there needs to be meaningful democratic involvement from sub-niches in governance. Checks and balances are required against too much corporate influence and to ensure that sub-niches do not lose their radical and

transformative aspects for the sake of being palatable with current regime conditions (Gibbs & O'Neill, 2015; Smith & Raven, 2012). Moreover, niche intermediaries might be used by regime actors and hence undermines their legitimacy with niche projects. A real challenge is that niche intermediaries stay independent, maintain legitimacy amongst grassroots actors and are not co-opted by regime actors. They need to enable rather than overly-direct.

A key lesson from international experience is that powerful central umbrella bodies as well as state promotion of community-led forms of housing can lead to isomorphism tendencies and undermine if not completely replace the traditional values of grassroots housing, such as solidarity, self-help and self-organisation (Bengtsson 1992). It is in the nature of the co-operative movement that local communities invent and experiment with new organisational structures and also with intermediaries and umbrellas. Local authorities and housing regulatory bodies should thus explicitly encourage diversity of governance models and provide spaces for community-led experimentation within housing, as this is a crucial basis for social innovation which can permeate into official policy. In that sense, the CLHA should remain a loose umbrella body and should co-exist with, and empower, individual sub-niche umbrella bodies.

Nevertheless, more empirical research is needed to explore whether being part of a wider niche intermediary might pull sub-niche participants away from their local project objectives. Future studies should also explore how niche intermediaries can connect with supporters and potential beneficiaries of their activities, e.g. the victims of the housing crisis and regime failure, who have not so far been attracted into the sub-niches on any significant scale. Such issues point towards new critical agendas and directions

for those interested in niche innovation and socio-technical transitions, especially if the aspiration for a more socially and ecologically just future society is to be fulfilled.

## Notes

1. We focus only on England rather than the UK as Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have different legislative contexts for housing.
2. A 2011 YouGov poll commissioned by the Building Societies Association suggested that one in two people would consider building their own home if they felt that they could (DCLG, 2011b).
3. See <http://www.communitylandtrusts.org.uk/article/2016/12/23/government-unveils-60-million-annual-community-housing-fund>
4. See Heywood (2016) and Cadywould and O’Leary (2015)
5. See <http://www.councils.coop/case-studies/launch-of-the-ccin-housing-commission/>

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