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The Fair Energy Mark in the making: framing a citizen-led campaign by participatory design

Dr Laura Santamaria, Loughborough University London

Abstract

There is a growing understanding that design can positively contribute towards highly complex social, economic and environmental problems we face today. One key area is citizen empowerment to change built-in systemic inequalities and exploitative practices. This paper presents a design intervention that explored citizen empowerment in the context of The Fair Energy Mark campaign, a citizen-led action aimed to raise practice standards and address power imbalances in the energy supply sector. The project-based investigation explored the tensions emerging between expert–diffuse design in the process of elaboration of campaign branding and communication strategy. The researchers experimented with new tools that enabled an open participatory process of campaign framing, but also facilitated fluid knowledge exchange between participants through experiential learning. The investigation contributes some conceptual constructs to discuss strategic design management practice in the socio-political sphere. Furthermore, the research identified that a closer integration of design and communicative action theories, and participatory design and community organising methodologies present promising opportunities to amplify the impact of design research for social change.

Keywords: *design for social change; citizen empowerment; expert & diffuse design; strategic communications*

1 Introduction

In times of energy resource scarcity and ecological extinction, accessibility to affordable energy becomes an increased concern for citizens globally. While environmental and climate justice movements organize and mobilize for radical changes by pressuring industries and political leaders, the conceptual tools and frameworks of energy justice and fuel poverty generated by academic scholarship seems slow to attend to. Meanwhile, of the 14 million people living in poverty in the UK, 8.5 million are food insecure and 2.5 million live in fuel poverty¹ (Barnard et al., 2018). Despite the perception of the UK leading the fuel poverty agenda, politicians would have the public believe that reforming the energy market is outside the realms of possibility (Middlemiss, 2017). This disempowering situation reveals not only the importance of supporting initiatives to reduce poverty, but the potential for design to amplify impact by creating innovative vehicles to even power dynamics engrained in the energy sector through leveraging various interests.

With design research taking responsibilities and standing up for energy futures (Fuller & McCauley, 2016; Jenkins, Sovacool, & McCauley, 2018), we stress the importance of engaging at all levels – i.e. not only via sociotechnical innovation and policy groups, but more importantly with civil society organisations, activist networks and citizen-advocacy groups (Delina & Janetos, 2018;

¹ Fuel poor, defined by a government policy “*low income, high costs*” (LIHC) indicator, refers to people living with lower than average income levels (Middlemiss, 2017; Koh et al., 2012).

Jenkins et al., 2018; Shove, 2018) who work tirelessly towards addressing injustices and empower the most vulnerable and underrepresented peoples and issues.

Beyond project making, as researchers working within a broad-based civil society organisation, we identified the opportunity to consider on how power is managed in *expert* and *diffuse* design in participatory processes, and elaborate conceptual constructs that help us reflect and improve strategic design practice in the contexts of design for social change.

2 Research background

In 2017, Citizens UK set a challenge for postgraduate students at Loughborough University London to develop innovations to address fuel poverty, environmental and economic injustices in the energy market. Working within a Design Thinking process, students generated a set of 'Fair Energy Standards' which served as the basis to develop the Fair Energy Mark. During the following 12 months, a steering committee of founding partners was formed with various stakeholders who met monthly to further develop the kitemark, engaging the with local authorities and energy experts. In 2019, consensus was reached about the contents of the mark. At this point, the researchers, as design experts, were asked to lead the development of the campaign branding and communications' strategy. The task was to shape the contents of the mark and develop strategies for its deployment and implementation. This presented an opportunity for design research for change intervention.



Figure 1 – Fair Energy Mark development timeline

3 The Fair Energy Mark campaign: making fuel poverty a design for change issue

Campaigns are an undeniably effective vehicle for paradigm change. Conceptualised as a form of activism grounded in communicative action theory (Habermas, 1984), they aim to disseminate knowledge and ways of understanding that empowers people to take individual actions that, collectively, generate benefit for society as a whole. Historically, Citizens UK has initiated very successful nationwide campaigns such as the Living Wage² which resulted in pay rises for over 150,000 workers and their families. Equally, the FEM campaign represents an opportunity for design research for change whereby the framing – or reframing – of complex issues around

² <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/>

energy becomes key to influence practices in the energy market at individual, local and national level.

The concept of framing is an important topic at the centre of power and influence (Goffman, 1986) because it focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning and relevance³. Framing theory suggests that how something is presented to the audience (called ‘the frame’) influences the choices people make about how to process that information, and therefore creates biases that influence beliefs and behaviour (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). Frames are essentially ‘schema of interpretation’ of values negotiated politically between actors over unfolding issues (Goffman, 1986). Typically, values that are legitimised through framing strategies are manifestly bound up with the cultures and agenda-setting practices of elite actors (Scheufele, 2000).

In design, framing is understood as a meaning- and sense-making process, intrinsic and inseparable to the design activity (Dorst, 2015). As design represents and legitimises meanings and values (Kolko, 2011; Krippendorff, 2006) – influencing tastes, beliefs, prejudices that can change people’s views and behaviours – design is political by definition. However, unlike in media or strategic action where framing is used *explicitly* to influence and advance agendas, design influence is *implicitly* bound up within expertise and there is a lack of knowledge on how political and ideological dimensions are managed in the social sphere, due to limited integration of theories of social change within design research (Willis, 2012). ‘Design is always a silent but hard-working part of our history. Design is one of the most powerful routes through which our beliefs and views of the world flow’ (Zingale & Domingues, 2015, p.9). In this, learning from others can advance a more legitimate and transparent practice.

3.1 Strategic design in the social sphere

In order to obtain the change they seek, citizen movements and organisations can often be driven by strategic action agendas – i.e. action oriented toward success, pursued regardless of the interests of others (Jacobson, 2003). In contrast, strategic design seeks to use ‘design principles and practices to guide strategy development and implementation toward innovative outcomes that benefit people and organisations alike’ (Calabretta, Gemser, & Karpen, 2016).

Common across strategic design practice for social change are co-production and collaborative principles, where a wide network of stakeholders are considered as co-creators of public value. Co-creation is strongly connected to notions of “participatory design”, “co-design”, “design attitude” and “design thinking” (Bason, 2010, p.7). Within Participatory Design (PD) *design* operates as a participatory process for “design-for-use” and “design-for-future-use” that is “infrastructuring” (Le Dantec & DiSalvo, 2013). Infrastructuring, as developed within PD, refers to ongoing designing in which the designed projects/products are designed in such a way so that they can be redesigned, and serve to build capacity and learning that positively impacts the agency of the stakeholders involved – i.e. ‘knowledge is power’. Conceptualising PD as *empowerment* (Ehn, 2008) has located PD within the wider community as it approached societal issues as ongoing infrastructures (Björgvinsson, Ehn, & Hillgren, 2010; P. A. Hillgren, Seravalli, & Emilson, 2011; Le Dantec & DiSalvo, 2013).

This means that beyond delivering specific project outcomes, expert designers seeking *infrastructuring* interventions aim to grow the design and change capabilities within individuals, organisations, communities or multiple stakeholders. This is translated in forms of training initiatives such as participatory and co-creation workshops, and/or collaborative pilot projects.

³ The most common use of frames is in the news, or media. Framing is usually a conscious choice by journalists – a way media as gatekeepers organise and present the ideas, events, and topics they cover.

Formalising design processes and methodologies to be transferable is part of this strategy (Sangiorgi, 2015).

3.2 Strategic action: Citizens UK and community organising

The work done by Citizen's UK has been conceptualised as a 'broad-based community organising' in the UK, a political methodology ontologically rooted in civil society and epistemologically based on the concept of power' (Bunyan, 2018).

"For Citizens UK the word power is really central to our fuel of change. Some people feel very uneasy with that, but we recognise that power is essential if you want to make real change. And we unpack power by talking about organised people and organised money." – Community organiser (Citizens UK)

The strategic vision for change employed by Citizens UK is based on a view of society that is "comprised of three distinct sectors: 1) the state, the governments and the regulatory boards, 2) the market, companies, corporations, and 3) civil society" (Citizens UK). From a community organising perspective, this means that civil society holds the state and the market accountable of the practices and values they represent. At the core of their methodology lies creating permanent alliances between different civil society group to address *worthwhile and winnable issues*. While such issues might not achieve radical change in the community, the ultimate goal for Citizens UK is capacity building for participation in public life. This is done through relational meeting/one-to-one sessions and listening campaigns that seek to identify and train citizens to be leaders who mobilise their communities to take action on issues they care about.

Citizens UK logic of *non-partisan organising strategy* with *capacity building for leadership* as an objective sets Citizens UK apart from the sporadic nature of social movements, and is parallel to strategic design principles of empowerment through *infrastructuring* and building powerful alliances that create value for all (Hillgren, Seravalli, & Eriksen, 2016). Table 1 summarises the similarities in both approaches.

Table 1 – Comparison of principles adopted by Community Organising and Strategic Design for social change

| | Community Organising | Strategic Social Design |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Empowerment through knowledge</i> | <i>Capacity building</i> through relational sessions, listening Training for leadership | <i>Infrastructuring</i> through participatory projects Formalising methodologies |
| <i>Organising strategy</i> | Non-partisan civil society alliances | Stakeholder partnerships |
| <i>Agenda/goal</i> | Citizen participation | Co-production of 'expert-diffuse' outcomes |
| <i>Vision of change</i> | Rebalancing power (pressure) | Innovation (value creation) |

These synergies present a resourceful and genuine territory for developing joint methodologies that can potentiate empowerment in citizen-driven societal change.

While it is clear that PD practices have enhanced the democratisation of the design process, what is less clear is how the power conferred to the designer as 'expert' is managed in these settings, and how we – as design research scholars and practitioners – should attend to the tensions emerging in the *production of expert-diffuse designs* as vehicles for change.

The concept of 'expert design' refers to the discipline and profession that emerged at the beginning of the last century (Manzini, 2015). In these settings, however, this means someone

who is expert in the various ways of stimulating and supporting wider, more complex co-designing processes for the non-experts (Manzini, 2015). The design expert is expected to integrate and promote the design abilities of the others; ‘diffuse designing’ of everybody – i.e. design as a diffuse human capability. This view implies that the expertise of the designer transcends the traditional technical capability (for example, to design a campaign logo) and extends into the capacity to enable community empowerment to design their own vehicles for change, to articulate and frame their significance and meaning, and to implement them in a way that makes sense to them. Thus, design becomes a collaborative effort where *‘the design process is spread among diverse participating stakeholders and competences’* (Björgvinsson, Ehn, & Hillgren, 2012) – i.e. the expert and the community – and is envisioned and explored in hands-on ways characterized by human-centeredness, empathy and optimism (ibid).

Habermas holds that ‘the negotiation of definitions of the situation is an essential element of the interpretive accomplishment required by communicative action’ (Habermas 1984, p. 286). Thus, the ‘definition of the situation’ can be usefully be conceptualised as a framing activity that can be facilitated through participatory methods. For this reason, as expert designers, we see our role as ‘staging the process’ wherein elaboration of strategy can happen democratically. On the other hand, design expertise in communication strategy is a valuable resource that equips us to deploy, professionally, the mechanisms that work best to influence public perception and action towards the desired change. This gives rise to our research question(s):

How is power negotiated in the *diffuse–expert* design relationship?

- How does the ‘empowering of others’ (diffuse design) and ‘self-power’ (expert design) relation balance?
- How can we open participation in the framing and strategy elaboration process?
- How can the expert designer enable and empower?

We see these questions contributing to literature on community-based PD and within that to the discussion on *PD for useful systems* and *PD as infrastructuring* (Ehn, 2008; Le Dantec & DiSalvo, 2013).

4 The Study

The aim of the project was to co-design the materiality of the campaign that could speak to and mobilise wider public(s). This involved facilitating participation in framing process for drawing together 1) the communications and marketing expertise of energy companies with 2) the leadership and human resource mobilising for collective actions capacity from Citizens UK, and 3) lived experience and knowledge practices from local citizens.

Our methodology for the study sought to develop a format that would be familiar enough for diverse stakeholders to co-articulate the FEM campaign. This included experts and non-experts in design and strategy who, although diverse in their practice, share a vision of change for the energy market.

Workshop design – We designed the workshop around the metaphor of the local newspaper, as a relatable and familiar framework⁴. The activities were inspired by drawing framing techniques from leadership and organisational communication literature (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996) which best suited the context and the purpose (Table 2).

⁴ According to Goffman (1986), individuals are capable users of frameworks on a day to day basis, whether they are aware of them or not.

Table 2 – Framing workshop activities

| Activity | Technique (Fairhurst, 1996) | Purpose |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| WORKSHOP | Metaphor | To frame a conceptual idea through comparison to something else |
| <i>Activity 1 Stories and personas</i> | Stories | To frame a topic via narrative in a vivid and memorable way |
| <i>Activity 2 Brand values & Visualisation</i> | Artefacts | Objects with intrinsic symbolic value – a visual/cultural item that holds more meaning than the object itself |
| | Slogan | To frame an object with a catchy phrase to make it more memorable and relatable |
| <i>Activity 3 Communication Strategy</i> <i>Activity 5 Headlines</i> | Spin | To present a concept in such a way as to convey a value judgement (positive or negative) that might not be immediately apparent; to create an inherent bias by definition. |

The venue – Our campaign partner, St James the Great Clapton (London) provided the venue, as this was considered a welcoming and inclusive community space (Figure 2). Invitations were circulated strategically to reach energy companies, citizens advocacy groups and community centres, but the setup remained open for anyone interested to drop in and join.



Figure 2 – FEM Participatory framing workshop

The process – Communication strategists and graphic designers from Bulb and Octopus Energy, community leaders from Foodbank, Citizens Advice, Citizens UK, and the local church and citizens with lived experience of fuel poverty participated actively in the workshop. Guided through the five activities, participants articulated the brand – that is issues, values, vision, language of FEM – and put forward strategic actions to mobilise publics.

Activity 1 focused on deconstructing the stories of lived experience of fuel poverty. We then moved on to visualise and construct the brand by thinking about the benefits, values and the promise of FEM (*Activity 2*) and synthesising a visual language in a poster. *Activity 3* focused on developing the communication strategy by thinking about calls to action that a) would invite new energy companies to join the mark, b) raise awareness among energy advocacy groups mediating between citizens and energy companies, and b) mobilise the wider public to switch to energy providers that represent the values of the mark. Together we then mapped campaign tactics to

spread the word on various platforms (Activity 4). The last activity aimed to frame the narrative of the cause and the campaign by coming up with headlines that would speak to the press and the public (Activity 5). In the following sections we provide an overview of these in more detail.

4.1 Activity 1 – Stories and personas

This activity was designed to enable narratives to emerge from the experiences and tacit knowledge of the participants.



Figure 3 – Activity 1: participant's representations of unbalanced and unjust power relationships

Through writing and representations, participants expressed the lack of reciprocity in the supplier-customer relationship (Figure 3). The recurrent themes in the data were fuel poverty, lack of support, debt lock, unfairness, lack of accountability and transparency and poor service.

There is a call to action for the industry to step up in its responsibility towards customers, developing more ethical business practices, and for the powerholders to *"play your part in reducing people living in poverty."* This could be particularly important when the campaign has the intention of disrupting the status quo.

Strategically, this also poses an opportunity for companies to gain competitive advantage by improving customers service to strengthen relationships with customers. Service innovations that allow for customer empowerment and could be viewed as opportunity to improve supplier credibility and retain customers.

4.2 Activity 2 – Visualisation and brand representation

The language that dominated the workshop was 'fair' and 'care' – there can be no doubt that the participants intend these value messages need to be communicated loud and clear through the promise and benefits of the fair energy mark. Figure 4 summarises the activity findings.



BENEFITS

"energy saving", "fair treatment",
"empowerment", "fair energy for all"

VALUES

"caring for the future", "more clarity,
more parity", "fair energy"

PROMISE

"fair treatment", "simple bills",
"transparent", "clean echnology/energy"

VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS

Sun, flame – warmth, clean energy
Smiling family – safety, comfort, happiness
Scales – fairness, justice
Stamp – validity, security, legitimacy

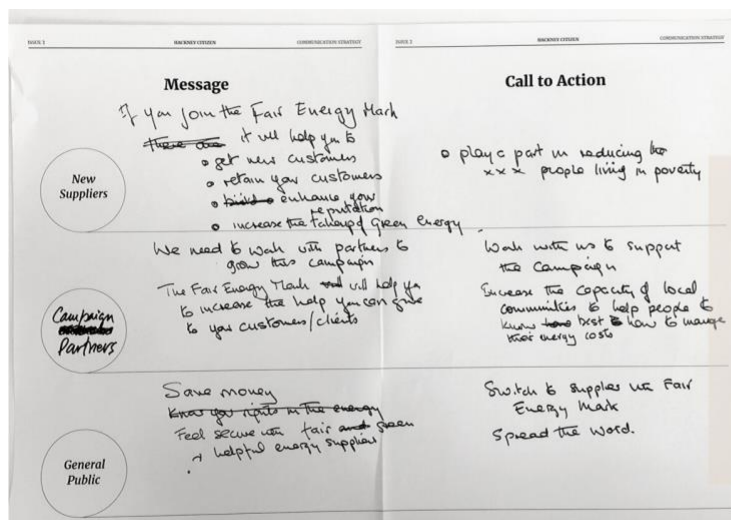
02

BRAND REPRESENTATIONS

Figure 4 – Activity 2: Brand articulation and representations generated by participants

4.3 Activity 3 – Communication strategy

Figure 5 evidences ideas generated for communication strategy directed to the various stakeholders – energy suppliers, strategic partners and the general public.



"don't waste your money
on suppliers who don't
treat you fairly – look out
for the fair energy mark"

"don't get left behind"

"be part of the change"

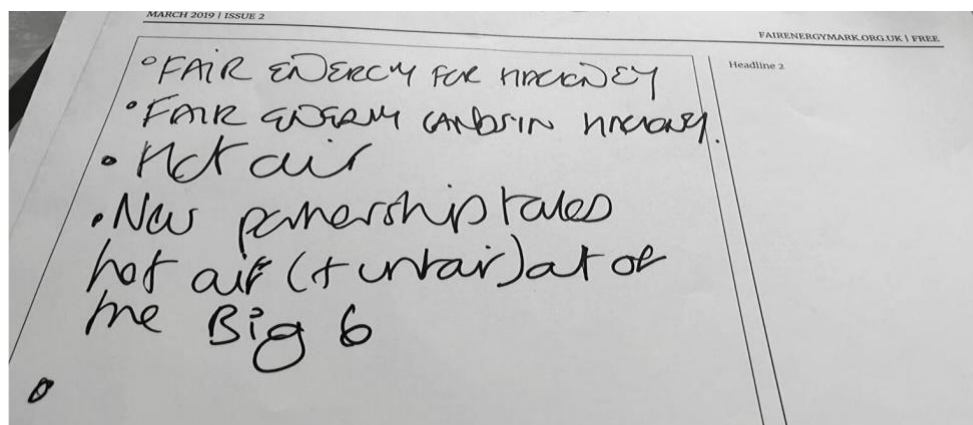
"If you join the fair energy mark, it will help you to (1) get new customers, (2) Retain your customers, (3) enhance your reputation and (4) Increase your take up of green energy"

03

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Figure 5 – Activity 3: elaboration of communication strategy

The call to action further articulated the brand benefits to various stakeholders. The results provide a social learning opportunity for industry to understand that citizens are demanding change and if industry does not respond, they will miss out. The empowerment of the participants can be evidenced by the changing language when given opportunity to role model.



05

HEADLINES

"Fair Energy for Hackney"

"New Partnership takes hot air (and unfair) out of the Big 6"

Figure 7 – Activity 5: newspaper headlines produced by participants

The statements take a hopeful tone, announcing a 'change of dynamics' to bring relief at last from unjust market practices.

5 Discussion and reflections

While there is much literature on participatory design and co-design applied to the development of tools to facilitate citizen-led innovation on one hand, and the role of design in the development of branding to support campaigns on the other, what this investigation set to interrogate and challenge is the implicit nature in which expert design assumes and manages power in such collaborative practice arrangements.

Through project-making, the study provided a twofold opportunity for design research for change:

1) To observe the political and power dynamics of expert–diffuse engagement in the context of civil-society activism, and identify constructs that can help bring to light the implicit understandings of engagement; and 2) To facilitate expertise exchange between two strategic approaches to social change (design and community organising) and formalise the generated knowledge into methodologies that amplify capacity building for agency towards change.

5.1 Conceptual constructs to discuss power in expert–diffuse design

Three broad concepts stand out from the literature as relevant to discuss the expert–diffuse design relationship: expectations (Manzini, 2015), accountability (Habermas, 1984) and agendas (Scheufele, 2000). These concepts appear fundamental to the implicit 'engagement contract' for establishing a working partnership between the expert and the community based on openness and mutual trust. We put them forward as helpful constructs for structuring discussions and locating power relationships.

Expectations

In the first place, the designer is empowered by the group, being identified as the most expert member of the community to further the cause at that particular stage: a good communication strategy requires skills in persuasion, which a communication designer can deliver. However, in a conventional branding and strategic communications exercise, it would not be standard practice

to consult with 'non-designers' or open up the process to participation, but rather the expert would take charge and ownership for project development as 'expert in the field'.

From the expert design practice perspective, this involves risk and making more courageous, experimental choices (Manzini, 2016) and remaining flexible and open throughout a dynamic collective sense-making process. Delivering on these expectations meant that:

- 1) we had to design tools fit for the purpose, familiar and inclusive – e.g. newspaper format – to enable citizens to collectively elucidate, articulate and strategically frame issues (Figure 8);
- 2) we interpret the data collected through the workshop into professional standard communication materials. This implied refining the design outcomes while keeping legitimacy towards the set of embodied knowledge we generated together (Figure 9).



Figure 8 – Interpreting outcomes of the workshop for brand development



Figure 9 – Final brand communication visuals

Accountability

The trust placed on the expert's ability to lead the community through this process prompted us to consider issues of accountability and reciprocity.

Working as an embedded member of the community, it can only be sensible for the designer to adopt and build on community organising methodologies, principles and best practice. In this case, it meant sharing power through consultative decision making, and being accountable to the group for the kind of operative mechanisms we created to enable inclusivity and participation. It also required setting aside a 'problem solving–outcome oriented' mindset and adopting a 'learning–infrastructuring' mindset. For example, rather than a mechanism to 'harvest data', workshopping was considered a capacity building opportunity that provided an inclusive way of grasping new understandings, bringing transformation and empowerment through experiential learning and creative self-expression.

Agendas

Drawing framing strategies is a highly political dimension to navigate as designers. Like with all stakeholders involved, it required exercising self-reflection frequently to identify the motivations behind our views, decisions and actions, and disclosing them openly.

Questions such as ‘What decisions am I taking on behalf of others? Are we preselecting or progressing certain choices without consulting others? Are we highlighting or prioritizing certain aspects over others?’ prompted reflection for ourselves and others, and kept us on check to ensure that the power and responsibility entrusted to us as experts was exercised responsibly and we did not get ourselves in the way while striving to achieve strategic goals legitimately.

5.2 Participatory activities as platforms for learning

Beyond the importance of co-creating framing and strategy with the people and businesses the project will impact (stakeholders and project outcomes), bringing participatory design and the community organising logic of Citizens UK together in the workshop provided mutually beneficial means for knowledge exchange that extends capacity building – or empowerment – for change in many ways. In Table 3, we illustrate how the project enlarged and enriched areas of practice and understanding through this collaborative partnership, with new learnings highlighted in bold.

Table 3 – Transformative change through project-based learning

| | Community Organising | Strategic Social Design |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Empowerment through knowledge</i> | <i>Capacity building</i> through relational sessions, listening Training for leadership Moving from the debate to materialisation New methods for creating stakeholder ownership Identifying areas of opportunity for innovation | <i>Infrastructuring</i> through participatory projects Formalising methodologies Good practice in inclusive, relational strategic leadership for social change |
| <i>Organising strategy</i> | Non-partisan civil society alliances | Stakeholder partnerships |
| <i>Agenda/goal</i> | Explicit. Motivated by citizen participation Understanding that creating value for all stakeholders advances the cause via higher buy-in instead of pressuring. | Implicit. Motivated by co-production of ‘expert-diffuse’ outcomes Setting up mechanisms for motivation disclosure, accountability and transparency in decision making that affects representation of all Reflect on tacit contractual terms of engagement. |
| <i>Vision of change</i> | Rebalancing power (pressure) | Innovation (value creation) Participation and co-creation mechanism as enablers for capacity building and mutual empowerment. A learning vs facilitation mindset Detachment of subjectivity and choosing most effective strategy for achieving legitimacy and impact. |

6 Conclusion

In this project, we engaged with paradigm change through design in civil society activism context. Through a project-based research aimed at participatory co-creation of campaign brand and strategic communications, we explored the political aspects at play in the *expert-diffuse* design relationship and contribute a useful construct – **expectations-accountability-agendas** – to discuss contractual engagement in practice-based interventions with citizen empowerment at its core.

By enabling expert knowledge transfer through issue framing activities, the research achieved transformative effects at individual level, empowering citizens as agents capable to create their own vehicles for change. At collective level, the changed achieved through this design research collaboration is evidenced in having moved the cause a step forward – that is, from the critique and issue debate space into materialising actionable pathways to make the issue visible, but most importantly a persuasive and winnable cause.

Although this paper presents the experimental stage of the project, it is worth noting that considerable public funding for advancing the FEM campaign as a larger, long-term project was subsequently secured, on the basis of the strong alliances and robust results produced at this stage. At disciplinary level, the research identified important knowledge gaps in strategic design management in the socio-political sphere. A closer integration of design and communicative action theories, and participatory design and community organising methodologies pose significantly promising avenues for accelerating the impact of design research for social change.

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