Advocacy In An Age Of Disconnect: The Power Of Grassroots Activism And Its Impact On Contemporary Environmentalism

Introduction

The purpose of this research paper is to evaluate the role of the Central Coast Community Environment Network (CEN) in social and political spheres, accounting for the ideas, beliefs, and values which underpin the organization. CEN, an environmental community-based non-government organization, endeavors to provide a regional voice for environmental sustainability as well as a forum for public discourse and education (Community Environment Network 2019). The environmentalist ideology can be seen as a major proponent informing the strategy of CEN, which is centered around awareness, education, and grassroots activism. It is this advocacy that plays a significant role in informing community attitudes and contributing to political discussion.

This report begins by explaining the ethnography-based research undertaken to inform preliminary observations, followed by the findings of the study and a critical analysis of CEN's contribution to contemporary environmentalism. Analysis of CEN will highlight the power of activism on a grassroots level, which can be seen as a major proponent in the social movement of contemporary 21st Century environmentalism (Doyle 2000, p.72). Agendas within the environmentalist movement such as climate justice and energy democracy are extrapolated on in relation to CEN's advocacy to further support the notion that NGOs are instrumental in mobilizing the public and stimulating collective desire for social change. Here, CEN will be understood as an element within larger social movement networks, in the context of the environmental movement as well as the climate movement.

Methodology

Participant observation was conducted over the course of six weeks. A form of traditional ethnographic research, this qualitative observational activity exists to aid researchers in understanding the beliefs, values, and ideas of study populations (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995, p.1), something which can only be ascertained through personal experience (Mack et al 2005, p.13). With this comes the inevitable subjectivity of both the researcher and the study population (Mack et al 2005, p.15), which incurs questions of bias, credibility and reliability. To counter this, caution was taken throughout the research process to report observations rather than interpret them (Mack et al 2005, p.15).

Preliminary research was conducted prior to any participant observation. This entailed gathering information from the CEN website and social media platforms to conjure broad research questions. A number of events organized by CEN were attended, one of them being a private meeting of CEN Youth, the youth branch of the organization. Held at the CEN office, the meeting lasted approximately two hours and began with the chair of the organization leading the group in a discussion related to the day's agenda. Here, observation and participation in discussion of upcoming events and initiatives were conducted, which was integral to the

research as it allowed for facilitation and development of relationships with key informants (Mack et al 2005, p.16) and members of the organization.

An informal interview with the current chair of CEN was conducted in a casual setting, the duration of which was approximately 45 minutes. This was transcribed and coded to inform theoretical interpretations and frameworks within the research focus (Atkinson 1998, p.55). The informal interview is designed to encourage analysis of the study population as a whole, rather than as “fragmented and independent” (Srivastava 2009, p.79). Hence, it allowed me to refine my initial research questions to produce a more explicit and substantiative research question (Srivastava 2009, p.80).

Further observational activity conducted for the purpose of this paper included participation in the Gosford Climate Strike and the awards presentation for the 2019 Central Coast High Schools Open Writing Competition ‘Human Rights in an Age of Climate Change: So What’s the Action Plan?’. Though not included in my participation, the Monthly Letter Drive has been included in the analysis of CEN’s strategy. Also included in this ethnographic study is an analysis of the organization’s Climate Strategy.

Findings

Youth empowerment and grassroots environmentalism

The process of youth empowerment within the scope of environmentalism begins at a grassroots level. Conducting participant observation of a private meeting of the CEN Youth group, it was made evident the grassroots nature of the organization. The main objective of the youth group is to provide a forum for discussion and collaboration of ideas pertaining to sustainability and the environment. Ergo, it serves as a safe space for like-minded youths aged 16-30 to have their voice heard. “The best legacy we can leave behind is a generation of leaders resilient enough to manage any future challenges they may face” (Community Environment Network Youth 2019). This statement exemplifies the social process of youth empowerment, which denotes “the idea of youth as the engine for long-needed change” (Paciello 2014, p.3). Youth participation and involvement in social and political decision-making is the necessary path to youth empowerment, both of which draw upon the agency paradigm (Kenny 2004, p.71) amongst young people. CEN upholds this vision, with the aim to bring more young people on board to eventually see an intergenerational transition within the organization (2019, pers. comm., 23 September). This idea also coincides with the nature of the CEN Youth private meeting, wherein all members contributed to group discussion and presented potential ideas and initiatives. In observation, physical behaviors and gestures such as body language indicated a sense of familiarity and solidarity. This was also evident in the relaxed nature of the meeting, with members sitting close together and sharing lunch. A select few could be differentiated from the group due to their evident extrovert personalities – this highlights the youth group as a platform for personal expression and participation.

A current initiative of the group is ‘10 Steps to a Sustainable Future [1], a ten-step list designed to educate the public on small ways of living sustainably in everyday life. At the meeting, members were encouraged to extend each point, providing simple examples communities will easily understand. The aim of the initiative is to develop these steps into a brochure to hand out to the public at an upcoming Letter Drive and Plant Sale, a monthly event held by CEN to

engage the public and encourage sustainable living. Simple grassroots initiatives such as this reflect the environmental attitude “think global act local”, which Christian J. Stoeckert determines as local groups and individuals changing the world, beginning with “actions within one’s own local community” (Marquardt 2010, p.130). With this comes the understanding that environmental issues are transboundary. For example, living a sustainable lifestyle will reduce one’s personal carbon footprint, with the intention of reducing society’s use of the Earth’s natural resources. [1: See Appendix A]

Another initiative directed toward youth empowerment is the 2019 Central Coast High Schools Open Writing Competition funded by CEN and Amnesty International. This year's theme of the competition was ‘Human Rights in an Age of Climate Change: So What’s the Action Plan?’, a concept which engages youth in the social process of environmentalism and allows them to vocalize their concerns in their own creative way. The award presentation for the writing competition was another observational activity for the purpose of the study. “Youth are the people who will be most affected by Climate Change, yet there are few opportunities to be involved in solutions, action and events' (Community Environment Network Youth 2019). This concern can be attributed to the lack of youth empowerment within societies (Jennings 2006, p.47). Initiatives put forward by NGOs such as CEN aim to counter this by acknowledging youth as 'autonomous, self-conscious beings” (Kenny 2004, p.72) with the ability to shape and change society by using their voices to express their beliefs and spread awareness for existing issues. The writing competition and consequent award presentation can be seen as a direct facilitator of this. At the presentation, members of CEN Youth readout selective pieces of finalist entries, an action connotative of empowerment of youth by youth.

Youth empowerment can be seen as reflective of the “shift from social class to identity” (Heywood 2007, p.20) which came with the wave of ‘new’ ideologies such as environmentalism. This draws upon notions of agency and self-definition, both of which are inherently linked with individualization (Heywood 2007, p.20). Environmentalism, which harnesses these ideas at its nucleus, directly underpins CEN’s strategy of youth empowerment through grassroots initiatives.

Grassroots democracy in the scope of the global climate crisis

Analysis of the 2017 Climate Campaign Strategy presented by CEN’s Climate Future committee highlights links between ideological agendas such as climate justice and energy democracy, both of which exist within the environmental movement. Climate justice is the term for which global warming is framed as a social and political issue as opposed to one which is purely environmental (Brand et al 2009, p.9). Underpinned by this agenda, CEN’s prescription is “based on the need for education of the community about the coming impacts and for urgent action to reduce emissions by all levels of government” (Community Environment Network 2017). The motion was approved by Central Coast Council in 2017; to date, the Central Coast Council has declared a climate emergency, a result of CEN’s solidarity with a number of homogenous NGOs as well as what can be described as “people power” (2019, pers. comm., 23 September). This serves as an example of grassroots democracy; the political process being driven by ordinary citizens (Kaufman 1997, p.7). A response to the failings of the capitalist market model, grassroots democracy aims to reach citizens who otherwise might not be heard (Kaufman 1997, p.4). This is quintessential of environmentalism as both an ideology and a social movement, both of which inform and guide CEN’s strategy for social change. The

environmental ideology differs from traditional ‘old’ ideologies in the sense that it diagnoses a different set of problems within society (Heywood 2007, p.18) pertaining to environmental destruction by mankind.

Environmentalism critiques modern industrialism and capitalism as destructive development. CEN upholds this claim, essentially aiming to remold society into one which is free of “the exploitation of people and the environment” (Rhiannon 2009, p.30) by means of energy democracy. Energy democracy is a term that epitomizes the desirable transition from fossil-fuel-based power “towards a distributed and decarbonized energy system” (Szulecki 2018, p.22) which includes an increase in renewable energy sources (RES). It can also be defined against the increasing measures taken by “societal actors, such as prosumers, energy cooperatives, or not-for-profit organizations” (Szulecki 2018, p.22). This agenda can be seen in CEN’s Climate Strategy, which espouses the following: “An urgent and ambitious approach to reducing emissions of greenhouse gases is critical. Climate Future will be working towards the replacement of our coal-fired power stations with renewable energy such as wind, solar thermal, photovoltaic (PV), geothermal power, etc. These new power systems need to be industrial scale to enable us to shut down the coal/gas/oil that are ruining our planet for future generations” (Community Environment Network 2017).

The ethnographic activity of the informal interview revealed that for this social change to occur, both political elites and the masses of civil society must get onboard (2019, pers. comm., 23 September). Within contemporary environmentalism, pure political activity has proven to be ineffective in enacting social change (Kenny 2004, p.73). Hence the growing desire to shift to an energy democracy that incurs “the rule of the people” (Szulecki 2018, p.27) has influence over decision-making. Social change begins with grassroots actions; this is the foundation of CEN’s mission to provide pathways for communities to get involved in environmental advocacy (2019, pers. comm., 23 September). CEN does so by educating public through programs and initiatives such as Habitat for Wildlife (tree planting program), Land for Wildlife (bush regeneration program), water watch programs, wild native plant sales, and regular educational workshops.

The further ethnographic activity was attendance and participation in the Gosford Climate Strike with members of CEN and CEN Youth. Protests are a clear exhibition of active citizenship (Macduff 2014, p.131), satisfying democratic notions of freedom of speech and expression. Macduff contests that “active citizenship is more than political participation within the existing framework of laws and institutions” (2014, p.131). Observing the actions of CEN members as well as other attendees at the climate strike, it was evident the vigorous support for the ideals behind the activism. The majority of attendees were aged between 15 and 30, most of which attended with friends or family. This is indicative of the growing presence of youth empowerment in NGOs, of which is becoming the driving force behind the 21st Century environmental movement.

Critical analysis

According to Goodman, social change relies upon three main organizational forms; the political party, the NGO, and the social movement (2009, pp. 3-4). CEN falls within the sphere of the NGO, which can be defined as a non-governmental entity that expresses ideological commitment to realms of civil society and is above the fray of party politics (Goodman 2009, p. 5).

Grassroots actions of NGOs can be more powerful than political movements or organizations, especially within the environmental movement which appraises grassroots democracy as the key to environmental and ecological justice (reference Schlosberg?).

Freeden presumes denotes ideology as a major proponent in not only key political decisions but public opinion (2003, p.34). The ideology of environmentalism on a grassroots level has the power to inspire forms of mobilization other than that of a social movement (Paciello 2014, p.7). That is, simple grassroots actions which increase public awareness and understanding of environmental issues have the potential to influence public opinion and thus determine the active citizenship of a society. The thoughts and subsequent actions of society are inherently influenced by ideas; reflective of idealism and the conception that ideas motivate us and so inform history (Pozueta 2009, p.208).

The sense of community that NGOs foster acts as a catalyst for individuals to partake in active citizenship, which in turn 'empowers men and women to be able to make decisions for themselves (Crick & Lockyer 2010, p.26).

A considerable benefit of this research type is its method of direct observation which allows researchers to break down preconceived notions and assumptions of a particular framework.

This is the role of social movements within social and political spheres; encouraging active citizenship by influencing ideas and reframing public debates (Paciello 2014, p.7).

NGOs are often critiqued as groups that prioritize their own agendas or respond to the interests of their donors, patrons and members (Tortajada 2016, p.266),

many NGOs exist on the foundation of ideological beliefs which fulfil a desire for social change. CEN is comprised of individuals such as planning experts, climate scientists, teachers, biologists, and development experts, all of which volunteer their time and expertise to create environmental change (2019, pers. comm., 23 September). The environmental agenda,

Appendix A

10 Steps to a Sustainable Future

1. Reduce, reuse, recycle
2. Plastic-free alternatives
3. Native wild plant/ tree planting
4. Solar/ renewable community energy
5. Storytelling; changing the narrative through writing, film, and social media
6. Sustainable transport; bicycles, public transport, carpooling
7. Community gardens, bush regeneration
8. Connecting with the community; collective actions and networks
9. Plant-based food alternatives; as much or as little as you can
10. Permaculture; food networks PEG/FIG; local economy