The devolution deal is a chance to start working towards a more sustainable future.

Paul Benneworth, p.benneworth@utwente.nl (Center for Higher Education Policy Studies).

Preamble

I was working last week in Norway in a meeting for the Norwegian Research Council’s Idélab programme. The idea behind Idelab is to create new multi-disciplinary research teams to undertake projects to address particular elements of the transition to a sustainable society.

There were four projects funded in 2014: bioenzymes to cut cement energy costs, carbon capture via algae, zero-emission housing and mineralising biocharcoal to permanently remove atmospheric carbon. Alongside those four projects, the Research Council also funded a Fellowship project, which seeks to create linkages between the projects and add value to the programme.

That Fellowship is being run by Anders Gravir Imenes of the Nordic Center for International studies and Kate Maxwell of Tromso University. As part of that, I have been working with them as part of encouraging the projects to talk more about their public engagement and societal benefits, with the aim of making delivering these benefits a core element of the Idelab model in coming years.

At the meeting at the Voksenåsen, we devoted a day specifically to thinking about how the projects’ public profiles, exploring some interesting examples of where different projects had become media stories (mineralised charcoal and zero-emission homes). We were very enthusiastic about these examples and the group realised that
even with the compromises involved in public communication that it was probably worth doing.

During the day, Kate suddenly turned to me and said something along the lines of ‘you’ve got a column, why don’t you write about Idelab in that?’ It clearly was a good idea and her words planted a germ in my mind that subconsciously grew to fruition the next day, fortuitously a deadline day for me!

So what follows below is the attempt to take my sense of wonderment at the Idelab projects and use it to write a piece for the Politics section of my local paper, *The Journal*. Enjoy!

---

**The devolution deal is a chance to start working towards a more sustainable future**

There’s been great fanfare in recent weeks in anticipation of the north east’s city-regional devolution deals. The Treasury yesterday agreed to devolve substantial funding to new authorities, including a Mayor with a North East Investment Fund at their disposal.

When the north-east voted ‘no’ to devolution in 2004, it didn’t abolish the deep seated regional problems it was supposed to solve. The recent shock announcement of the SSI closure on Teesside reminds us of the north-east’s continuing vulnerability.

Whilst the south-east bathes in the rosy glow of a thriving London financial sector, swathes of the rest of the country have yet to find a convincing way to make a living in an increasingly competitive world. And it’s not just the economy where things need to be done differently.

In the coming years, challenges to society and the environment are going to come thick and fast. Without addressing global warming,
urban poverty, our ageing population and the end of oil, the north-
east in 2065 is not going to be a pretty place to live. We could even
see whole villages and towns become ghost settlements, a process
already well under way even in parts of prosperous Germany.

I’ve been in Norway this week meeting other scientists to find
solutions for climate change problems. Norwegian researchers are
developing practical solutions, often using surprisingly simple
technologies in innovative ways.

One project researched using wood panelling to help warm
homes. Wood absorbs moisture at night, releasing heat and
warming the house; during the day, sunlight dries the wood and
recharges the energy. The savings are not modest: done correctly
the right way, it can save enough energy to fill 100 baths per year.

Other projects are capturing mineral carbon from the atmosphere
for storage in soil, and developing antibiotic additives that lower the
temperature at which cement can be made. They’re such beautiful,
elegant and natural solutions that gives me a real hope of solving
these grand challenges.

But the meeting’s surprising aspect was that many solutions rely on
local initiative. You need homeowners willing to embrace wood
chic, farmers willing to plough deactivated carbon into their soils, or
builders willing to add antibiotics to their cement.

New kinds of power stations may help solve global warming and
energy shortages, but it’s clear we must all do our bit. But to change
their lives, people must see the benefits – not just economic, but
social, cultural, and aesthetic.

Storing deactivated mineral carbon in Kielder Forest could provide
a huge opportunity to deacidify soils and upgrade the pine
landscape to a more authentic oak landscape. There’s huge
opportunity in our timber stocks to manufacture these heat storage panels and create local jobs to boot.

But being proactive consumers, willing to buy wooden panelling or houses built from biocement, is not enough. We’ve got to be proactive imagining a future north-east where we all feel comfortable.

And in an increasingly individualist society, that demands strong and inspiring leadership, a new kind of politics. We also need a new kind of politician, who both imagines this alluring future and persuades us to collaborate in realising it.

Does the devolution deal give us this new approach? To me it seems very bureaucratic, but it’s undeniably an opportunity that we can use to start imagining these more sustainable futures.

So let’s give the deal two cheers, put our cynicism to one side, and encourage the new Mayor to be the leader we need to give us towns, villages and cities in the north-east where we can all be proud to live.