

Multi-stakeholder networks as learning settings towards pro-environmental entrepreneurship: learning through the diversity and policy-practice interface

Abstract

The article explores the value of stakeholder diversity for learning towards pro-environmental entrepreneurship in multi-stakeholder networks (MSNs). Networks are viewed as entrepreneurial learning settings where stakeholder diversity frames the access to knowledge, practice and stakeholder dialogues. A qualitative case study research design is used to explore the experiences of learning towards pro-environmental entrepreneurship across 15 organisations as part of a well-established MSN with over 140 members operating in the Midlands. Stakeholder dialogues are identified as a significant feature of the MSN and reveal the policy-practice interface. The article shows how learning in MSNs is informed by the policy-practice interface, and as such expose the policy-practice gap and orient entrepreneurial behaviour. A view of a MSN as a dynamic learning system that brings together, often conflicting, agendas of environmental stakeholders and supports development of pro-environmental entrepreneurship as a pathway to sustainable regional development is argued. Policy makers and business support agencies are advised to pay a close attention to MSNs as mechanisms for the development of entrepreneurial activity which is policy attuned, practice informed and environmental sustainability oriented.

Keywords – entrepreneurial learning, diversity, policy-practice interface, multi-stakeholder network, dynamic learning perspective, sustainable regional development

Introduction

The literature exploring the role of multi-stakeholder networks (MSNs) in sustainable regional development has been growing steadily (MacDonald, Clarke and Huang, 2019; Jossierand, Kaine and Nikolova, 2018). MSNs where ‘*actors from civil society, business and*

governmental institutions come together in order to find a common approach to an issue that affects them all' are viewed as arenas for addressing a specific issue or a problem that concerns actors from different societal spheres (Roloff, 2008 p. 238). In response to calls to accelerate the capacity building of micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises towards sustainable development (UN DESA, 2020), the role of the MSNs as learning settings towards pro-environmental entrepreneurship is yet to be understood.

The literature recognises networks as effective settings for 'green' innovation (Mellett *et al.*, 2018) and knowledge sharing and exchange towards regional 'knowledge economy' (Vittoria and Lavadera, 2014). They are sources of organisational growth and competitiveness (Lechner and Dowling, 2003), and social capital where trust (Besser and Miller, 2011) and commitment to achievement of the joint objectives strengthen the relational value of the networks (von Friedrichs Grangso and Gummesson, 2006). Networks are important entrepreneurial settings where formation of communities of practice occurs (Lefebvre *et al.*, 2015); innovation capabilities are developed (Batterink *et al.*, 2010); opportunities are created and acted upon (Leyden, Link and Siegel, 2014) and 'coping with difficulties' takes place (Soetanto, 2017).

MSNs are credited with a range of learning dialogues and learning opportunities (Calton and Payne, 2003; Petry *et al.*, 2011). They have a potential to enhance small business learning through diversity of learning opportunities and innovative ways of learning (Vanhaverbeke, 2001). Networks being increasingly conceptualised as notable settings for knowledge sharing (Iandoli *et al.*, 2012) and entrepreneurial learning (Pittaway *et al.*, 2015). Despite these developments, the role of stakeholder diversity, broadly characterised by variety, balance and disparity in amongst the stakeholders (Sterling, 1998), for learning in networks remains underexplored in terms of the learning process and its characteristics.

The study seeks to understand the characteristics and process of learning in an MSN setting towards *pro-environmental entrepreneurship* as a mechanism for capacity building towards sustainable regional development. Specifically, it addresses two research questions. First, *what is the role of MSNs in capacity building towards pro-environmental entrepreneurship?* The role of MSNs as mechanisms for capacity building is understood through the prism of learning where stakeholder diversity and policy-practice interface are characteristics of an MSN setting. Second, *how does the learning towards pro-environmental entrepreneurship occur in an MSN setting?* This question contributes to understanding the role of stakeholder interactions in networks for entrepreneurial learning towards environmental sustainability.

The article proceeds with reviewing the literature on entrepreneurial learning, stakeholder diversity, multi-stakeholder networks, and pro-environmental entrepreneurship. It moves onto outlining the study design and methods followed by the analytical developments and discussion. A novel framework of learning through policy-practice interface in an MSN setting is presented along with the discussion about its applicability. The paper concludes with recommendations for theory and practice.

Entrepreneurial learning and multi-stakeholder networks

An understanding of entrepreneurial learning (EL) as a socially situated activity, where the premise of learning as a social, relational and practice-based activity, is gaining prominence in the entrepreneurship literature (Harrison and Leitch, 2005). Being rooted in the situational learning theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991), the concept of EL draws attention to the role of communities which shape the learning and are shaped by the learning. As communities are subject to social dynamics including power, conflicts and negotiations of individual and social interests; so is learning. From this perspective, EL broadly refers to an approach that is social, experiential and situational (Cope and Watts, 2000; Politis, 2005; Rae, 2005).

In terms of learning relationships, EL is defined as '*an experiential process of learning to recognise and act on opportunities and of shared value creation*' Rae (2017, p.487). The relationships formed as part of and as a result of the EL are centred on translating ideas and problems into opportunities and actions. The action-driven approach to opportunities stimulates learning and has been found of value in a range of EL studies (Gorman *et al.*, 1997; Rae, 2005). In the context of issue-based stakeholder networks, such as pro-environmental networks, EL is a mechanism for mutual and multiple value creation in (Schneider and Sachs, 2017).

The experiential nature of EL is linked to practice intrinsically. The origins of experiential learning theory are grounded in Dewey (1903), Lewin (1947) and Piaget's (1967) understandings with Kolb's work emphasising the human experience as key to the learning process (Kolb 1984, 2014). The underpinnings of continual learning, reflection and reforming or transformational learning are embedded in the deeper experiential process that underpins EL. As a key attribute of EL, experiential learning is evidenced across applied and educational studies (Politis *et al.*, 2019; Secundo *et al.*, 2017). Personal and professional learning experience is advocated to create value through social participation that shapes learning (Rae, 2017). Similarly, learning can take forms of critical learning incidents which improve sense making, optimise decision making and problem solving, and ultimately facilitate entrepreneurial development (Cope and Watts, 2000). With links between EL and experiential learning, there comes considerations about self-regulated learning (Nogueira, 2019), which is amalgamated into personal and professional development of entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs build on experience that is coupled with learning processes and adaptability (Politis *et al.*, 2019).

A dynamic perspective on entrepreneurial learning has been gaining attention from the scholars including Cope's seminal work on importance of temporal phases, interrelated

processes and overarching characteristics of entrepreneurial learning (Cope, 2005). Cope argues that each entrepreneurial learning task is to be viewed as '*dynamic, contextual and cumulative*' (Cope, 2005, p.379). Building on the premise that the learning context is dynamic and unique, Pittaway and Thorpe (2012) emphasise a need to develop entrepreneurial learning frameworks applied with a specific context of learning. A combination of temporal phases, learning processes, learning characteristics and learning tasks describe a dynamic nature of EL in a particular context and informs the understanding of mechanisms by which learning takes place (i.e how learning occurs) (Wang and Chugh, 2014).

A significance of the learning context for EL is often articulated through the situational nature of EL. The literature offers insights about a number of settings including learning experiences of SME owners on university-led education programmes (Gordon *et al.*, 2012); peripheral locations shaping learning experiences (Rae, 2017); entrepreneurship clubs and societies providing opportunities for 'learning by doing' and social learning (Pittaway *et al.*, 2011); and start-up competitions offering learning environment for prospective entrepreneurs (Passaro *et al.*, 2017). Networks attracted some attention as a context for EL including studies of networks as sources of innovation enhancing practices (McAdam *et al.*, 2007; Saunders *et al.*, 2014); EL dynamics in advanced supply chains (Rhodes and Carter, 2003); and learning networks as mechanism for organisational development (Tell, 2000).

A learning perspective challenges the dominant resource-based theorising of networks and extends the view of networks as social structures. Jack *et al.*, (2010) argue although resource dependency is a significant factor in joining a network, social factors which develop over time such as affinity, ties and trust are as valuable to the network participants. A view of a network as a learning system extends the argument emphasising the social value of the networks alongside the resource value. In this view, MSNs provide multiple opportunities for

societal learning, change and collaborative action towards addressing major societal challenges (Waddell, 2017).

The literature which recognises multiple stakeholders as a feature of entrepreneurial ecosystems is growing. Rocha *et al.* (2021) view entrepreneurial ecosystems (EEs) as arenas of relational connectivity and conversations in amongst the stakeholders. These conversations are deemed to be a 'vital strategic policy intelligence' and inform policy learning (Bramwell *et al.*, 2019). Interactions in amongst the institutional stakeholders such as regional governments and higher educational institutions impact the effectiveness of public and social services and add to the maturity of the EEs (Wei, 2022). University-industry-government relationship characterises a value creation potential of the EEs and stimulates entrepreneurial activity through R&D investment and collaborative projects (Erina *et al.*, 2017). Pugh *et al.* (2021) argue that learning, and pro-active support thereof, is crucial within the EEs and should inform the policy that supports and encourage entrepreneurship within regions.

Stakeholder diversity is increasingly understood as a feature of entrepreneurial learning. Applying three characteristics of diversity - variety, balance and disparity (Sterling, 1998), to the network stakeholders gives us the following stakeholder diversity characteristics operationalised in the study. *Stakeholder variety* refers to a number of stakeholder categories in a network for example micro businesses, small-sized businesses, medium-sized businesses, large businesses, business support agencies, local government, and NGOs. *Stakeholder balance* is a way in which the stakeholders are distributed in amongst the stakeholder categories. For example some networks might have the majority of large or small businesses in its configuration. *Stakeholder disparity* refers to a degree and nature to which stakeholder categories themselves are different from each other. The latter involves a qualitative characteristic of diversity and could be expressed through the ways stakeholder understanding, knowledge, interests, power, and culture differs.

The literature exploring the effects of stakeholder diversity is growing. Cuppen (2012) views stakeholder diversity as a central feature of stakeholder dialogues which informs design of a constructive conflict for resolution of wicked sustainability issues. Large multi-stakeholder partnerships are useful mechanisms for building capacity by developing and leveraging the diverse perspectives and resources of partner organisations (Clarke and MacDonald, 2019). Variety of environmental stakeholders is a notable source of environmental capability development (Baranova and Meadows, 2017) and learning for sustainable development (Halme, 2001). Johannisson *et al.* (2007) reports on the value of a stakeholder diversity in offering opportunities for knowledge transfer and renewal in the context of sustainable development of an industrial district. They argue the network provides multi-faceted insights into socio-economic complexity of the district where diverse and often polar views create a rich understanding of the regional sustainability. Although the study argues the value of a stakeholder diversity for knowledge creation in a network, the stakeholder range under study is narrow. A processual view of the learning mechanism limits undertraining of MSNs as learning settings. Whilst some scholars conceptualised the role of stakeholder diversity in the studies of entrepreneurial learning, these attempts are rare (Table 1).

Table 1: Stakeholder diversity and entrepreneurial learning literature

Role of stakeholder diversity	Learning characteristics	Study
Providing learning opportunities by participating in entrepreneurial education and training	Non-formal and informal learning. Inter-organisation cooperation and collaboration for learning.	Galvao et al., 2020 Marques, 2015
Feature of stakeholder dialogues for constructive conflict resolution	Learning through constructive conflict.	Cuppen (2011)
Developing entrepreneurial skills	Stakeholders as external stimuli for learning.	Ramsey et al., 2011; De Massis et al., 2012
Feature of an entrepreneurial ecosystem	Informal; inter-organisational; collaborative learning.	Bischoff et al., 2018
Entrepreneurship policy-education interface	Business-educator collaborations. Experiential learning.	Lindh and Thorgren, 2016

Ramsey *et al.* (2011) studied primary, secondary and tertiary stakeholders in developing enterprising higher education graduates and highlighted the significance of the primary stakeholders in shaping the enterprising skills. Stakeholders are viewed as external stimuli for innovation and enterprise development through learning (DeMassis *et al.*, 2012).

Contribution of the stakeholders representing various elements of an entrepreneurial ecosystem to EL through informal learning activities, inter-organisational and collaborative work was reported by Galvao *et al.* (2020) and Marques (2015). Formation of a 'stable, extensive, long-term stakeholder relationship' and effective stakeholder management approach is necessary for collaboration of diverse stakeholders for learning (Bischoff *et al.*, 2018, p. 38).

Despite these advances, the literature provides limited insights into the role of stakeholder diversity for entrepreneurial learning. Where a stakeholder theory framing is applied, the treatment of stakeholders is transactional i.e focusing on a linear stakeholder- network relationship rather than relational dynamics in amongst the stakeholders in the network. Such a narrow approach results in limited considerations about the role of stakeholder relational dynamics and stakeholder diversity for learning in networks. The study adopts a latter approach to conceptualising the role of stakeholder diversity for entrepreneurial learning in networks. Social exchanges, tensions and power dynamics in MSNs become sources of learning and have a potential to shape and be shaped by the capacity building efforts towards addressing the environmental sustainability concerns.

Pro-environmental entrepreneurship

The relationship between entrepreneurship and concerns for the natural environment has been considered by a number of literature streams and is broadly defined as environmentally oriented entrepreneurship. The literature is fragmented and characterised by a variety of

terminologies including green entrepreneurship (Bennett, 1991; Melay *et al.*, 2017); environmental entrepreneurship (Keogh and Polonsky, 1998) and ecopreneurship (Schaper, 2002). Early writings argued characteristics of green entrepreneurship from the rest of the field. This approach was largely driven by a competitive strategy perspective which started to pay attention to the emerging ‘green’ markets and niches and sought to understand how to gain the competitive success in these markets. This terminology spilled over into the field of entrepreneurship as a way of distinguishing entrepreneurial activities in green markets. Scholars argued characteristics of green entrepreneurship including entrepreneurial activities that have a positive impact on the natural environment and the move towards a more sustainable future. The literature distinguishes between ‘accidental ecopreneurs’ and businesses with a deliberate intent of designing business ventures strategically focused on addressing environmental concerns (Blue, 1990). The importance of small-large business cooperation for effective recognition and exploration of the green niche opportunities is of significance in a small business context (Vickers and Lyon, 2014).

The scholars highlight the role of entrepreneurialism as a mechanism for organisational responses to environmental concerns where environmental commitments facilitate the effectiveness of such responses (Keogh and Polonsky, 1998). Whilst social norms are found to be of significance in influencing the creation of new pro-environmental ventures and policy that seeks to encourage environmentally responsible economic activity (Meek *et al.*, 2010), the policy instruments encouraging environmental orientation should be attuned to the domestic economic circumstances (Hörisch *et al.*, 2017).

A discourse of ‘ecology’ has been finding its way in entrepreneurship studies, resulting in terms such as ‘ecopreneurship’ signals scholarly ambitions to view entrepreneurship as a mechanism for addressing challenges of nature- society interfaces. As Schaper (2002, p. 26) points out ‘ecopreneurship is one of four directions within entrepreneurship domain and is

concerned with starting new ventures in association with environmentally responsible practices and values'. Libecap (2009, p. 11) sees ecopreneurship 'as the practice of starting a new business in response to an identified opportunity to earn a profit and provide a positive environmental externality'. Dixon and Clifford (2007) argue a natural fit between entrepreneurialism and environmentalism due to their focus on value generation from unlikely sources such as waste, and ability to turn challenges into opportunities.

Although the literature shows little effort to distinguish between 'green', 'environmental' and 'eco' entrepreneurship, they all can be viewed as interpretations of environmentally oriented entrepreneurship, or pro-environmental entrepreneurship. As part of environmentally oriented entrepreneurship scholarly landscape, the following novel definition of pro-environmental entrepreneurship is developed and utilised in the study; *pro-environmental entrepreneurship is entrepreneurial activities of recognising and acting on opportunities and of shared value creation towards addressing the concerns for the natural environment*. In other words, these are practices of doing entrepreneurship in ways that address concerns for Nature.

In considering the question of how the pro-environmental entrepreneurial activity can be developed, the role of multi-stakeholder networks (MSNs) comes to fore. Providing the position of MSNs as arenas where stakeholders come together to open the dialogues about environmental sustainability concerns and problem solve, they could support the development of pro-environmental entrepreneurship. This involves re-orienting the purpose of an enterprise from an economic imperative to resolving major global challenges including climate change concerns, poverty and inequality (Porter and Kramer, 2011). As pro-environmental entrepreneurship offers a promise of resolving the tensions between the economic and ecological outcomes of the entrepreneurial activity, development of the relational capital and opportunities for stakeholder engagement is of the essence. In this view, MSNs are well suited to support the collaborative and mutually beneficial value creation;

strengthen the policy-practice links; and offer effective learning opportunities for pro-environmental entrepreneurial activity.

Study and methods

Study context

The study is based on a pro-environmental network established as part of a European Regional Development Fund project delivered by a consortium of local government and a regional university located in the D2N2 LEP (Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham, and Nottinghamshire Local Enterprise Partnership) region, UK. D2N2 LEP is located in the East Midlands and one of 38 LEPs working across England. The LEPs oversee the provision of business support for growth and levelling up productivity. The LEPs set out and oversee the implementation of the Local Industrial Strategy and Strategic Economic Plan as key policy directive of sustainable regional development.

The project, referred in this paper as Low Carbon Midlands Project (LCMP), provided support to the local pro-environmental businesses to strengthen business performance at the green market niches; to attain an Environmental Management Accreditation of choice; to enter green supply chains; and to reduce carbon through energy efficiency grants and process improvement techniques. The LCMP business support interventions included bespoke training and consultancy for SMEs targeting carbon reduction and green business growth; ‘Green Growth Accelerator’ programme supporting SME access to the regional green supply chains; energy audit and energy efficiency grants; generic carbon literacy training and networking events. The project awarded over 250 energy efficiency grants total value over £1.6 million and leveraged over £2.2 million of private funding towards carbon reduction interventions. It provided business support to over 80 SMEs through low carbon consultancy, R&D, clean growth and circularity support interventions.

The establishment of the network was an integral part of the LCMP and aimed at supporting small business learning and engagement with pro-environmental practices, and regional capacity building towards a low carbon economy. Since its establishment in October 2016, the network grew on average at a rate of five per cent per months and it currently comprised of 149 network members as on March 2021. The network was hosted by a regional university with a long-standing tradition in HE, FE and enterprise development. Eighty four per cent of the network participants are SMEs, where the micro firms¹ comprise the majority at 91 businesses; 26 small and 9 medium-sized firms respectively. The other network members represented stakeholders from the government, business and civic community thus confirming the tripartite characteristic of the multi-stakeholder network (Roloff, 2008). The breakdown of the network participants is presented in Table 2. The majority businesses in the network were located in rural areas; one in four network businesses were urban businesses. Forty five per cent of network members are located in Derby and Derbyshire, 31 per cent in Nottingham city and Nottinghamshire; the rest are located mainly in Leicestershire and Staffordshire.

Table 2. Pro-environmental network: participant analysis

Network participant	Number
Local Councils	5
HE and FE providers	5
Chamber of Commerce	2
Charity and Community Interest Groups	5
LEP and the Growth Hub	2
SMEs, including	

¹ Micro firms are defined as enterprises that employ fewer than 10 persons and whose annual turnover does not exceed EUR 2 million. Small firms are enterprises that employ fewer than 50 persons and whose annual turnover or annual balance sheet total does not exceed EUR 10 million. Medium-sized firms are enterprises that employ fewer than 250 persons and either have an annual turnover that does not exceed EUR 50 million, or an annual balance sheet not exceeding EUR 43 million (European Commission, 2003).

Micro	91
Small	26
Medium	9
Large companies	4
Total	149

The network was set up to support SMEs with accessing or strengthening their presence within the local low carbon and environmental goods and services markets as well as reducing the ecological footprint and enhancing the pro-environmental practices. The network organised a regular informal networking and large-scale events including green marketplaces and annual regional sustainability summits. Over time, the network established itself as a platform for bringing policy makers, businesses, regional universities and other environmental stakeholders in the region together. It became a sustainability forum which supported business engagement with various working groups representing local government, the LEP, the Chamber and local communities.

Study methods and data analysis

A single qualitative case study methodology was utilised to explore the characteristics of EL in the MSN setting. An exploratory qualitative case study (Yin, 2003) offers distinct advantages in the exploratory approach where multiple perspectives are sought in a unique, often complex but real organisational context (Thomas, 2011). As a research strategy, case studies have a naturalistic context that gives the researcher the opportunity to tackle complex social issues holistically (Piekkari and Welch, 2018). As an exploratory study into an under-researched area, the qualitative case study design is aimed at investigating the EL through a descriptive approach supporting the single case study of a phenomena.

The study deployed two data collection methods: semi-structured interviews; and collection of secondary data through review of the business support records and support outcomes. 15 semi-structured interviews were undertaken during the period of October 2019-May 2020. Twelve out of 15 interviews were with businesses that were supported by the project; and the rest were with institutional environmental stakeholders that joined the network during the course of the project. The characteristics of the study participants are detailed in Table 3. All of the interviews were undertaken at the research participants' premises and lasted on average 47 minutes. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim resulting in over 250 pages of interview material.

Table 3. Study participants: descriptive characteristics

Name	Size	Sector	Years of operation	Position
Timber Recycling	Micro	Waste and Recycling	15	Managing Director
AeroGreen	Medium	Manufacturing	26	Environment and Wellbeing Manager
EcoFashion	Micro	Retail trade	1	Business owner
BioCup	Micro	Hospitality	4	Business owner
Steel-Fabrications	Small	Manufacturing	18	Business owner
Electro-Bikes	Micro	Retail trade	4	Business owner
Eco-IT	Micro	Professional services /IT	5	Business owner
Rural Green Standard	Micro	Professional services/ Environmental Management	5	Regional Manager
EV-Freight	Micro	Professional services/ Fleet management	7	Managing Director
Electro-Trade	Small	Wholesale trade	15	Business owner
IT-Tech	Micro	IT and infrastructure	3	Business owner
CreativeCo	Micro	Professional services /Advertising and marketing research	2	Business owner

Chamber of Commerce	Large	Professional services/ Business support	37	Manager
Growth Hub	Large	Professional services/ Business support	3	Manager
City council	Large	Local government	82	Council officer

The majority of participating SMEs were micro businesses, two small businesses and one medium-sized business. Eight of the businesses were operating in services sector and only four businesses were operating in manufacturing sector. The participants from a local council and business support agencies were interviewed to ensure a wider representation of the network stakeholders. The participants were mainly enterprise owners who managed their businesses with an exception of medium-sized and a small-sized businesses, a council and business support agencies.

The interview schedule included the following areas of questioning: nature and characteristics of learning undertaken as part of the business support interventions; the value of the network for learning; the role of network in supporting pro-environmental business practices and behaviours; challenges and limitation of the network as a learning setting; and role of stakeholder diversity for learning in a network setting. The interview schedule probed the scope, characteristics and mechanisms of learning towards pro-environmental entrepreneurship.

A documentary analysis of the business support records was conducted including the initial business support scoping, intervention progress notes and evaluation of the support interventions per a business studied. Wider network activities were also analysed including the work with a broad range of environmental stakeholders in the region such as public consultations on environmental policy and decarbonisation initiatives and an annual regional sustainability summit. A documentary and interview analyses were undertaken utilising the thematic analysis (TA) as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a method of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) with the data. The application of the TA is deemed

to be valuable in gaining insights into people’s experiences and in enabling the construction of ‘particular phenomena in particular contexts’ (Braun and Clarke 2013, p. 121). The data analysis followed the stages of TA such as: data review, data coding, themes development and finally refinement of the key themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis started with identification of themes about the role of stakeholders for entrepreneurial learning in a network setting. The analysis considered what learning has occurred and the impact of learning on the study participants and the businesses. A deep exploration of the aspects of learning the participants found most valuable and the role of stakeholder diversity of a network relative to the learning occurred.

Analysis

Access to knowledge in MSNs

An MSN as a setting for EL presents a unique opportunity for small businesses to access the pools of knowledge, skills and expertise in an issue-focused format. In fact, the literature on external support for small businesses is linked to an early observation made by Pfeffer and Salancik (2003) about firm’s high dependency on the external resources for their continued existence. In the context of a pro-environmental network, the knowledge research participants were able to access could be broken down into three distinct domains: *technical, relational and sustainability*. Although these domains were identified by Heugens (2003) as areas of skills in environmental management literature, the author extends the application of these domains to the analysis of the knowledge available in a pro-environmental MSN setting. Table 4 presents analysis is of the knowledge domains towards pro-environmental entrepreneurship accessible in the MSN setting.

Knowledge Domain	Sub-domains	Illustrative examples
Technical	Environmental Management Systems (EMS) and	‘Seeing how other organisations work and how they manage

	<p>Environmental Management Accreditation (EMA) Carbon footprinting Environmental risk management and assessment Circularity: principles and tools Water management Recycling and reuse Energy efficiency Resource efficiency Sustainable procurement Green supply chain management Green tendering Green product design Green funding and finance Business and environmental strategy Green marketing and branding Digital and social media use</p>	<p>things, how they manage projects, how they manage finances, how they manage reporting has been useful just for my own professional development.’ (Steel Fabrications)</p> <p>‘[MSN] is great opportunity to be able to tune in to have specialist people within the environmental sector.’ (Chamber of Commerce)</p> <p>‘It’s having the know-how, having the technical people who know how to do it [access to grants] ... there is a lot of grants out and there is a lot of business support out there, but knowing how to access it.’ (IT-Tech)</p>
<p>Relational</p>	<p>Business to business Business to policy Business to regulators Business to public</p>	<p>‘What it [network activities] has allowed us to do it make a bit more of a robust, make collaborations with other SMEs. It has allowed us to be thought provoking and I think that is what it needs to be. It is thought provoking and sometimes you just need to step away from your business and actually think about it is a different way and I think that is what has helped.’ (TechnoGreen)</p> <p>‘We’ve met some very good contacts through it that we’ve networked with and found some of the sustainable development things have been quite nice. We’ve met some business from that, so that’s been quite useful. Seeing how other people perceive the</p>

		<p>environment, and seeing that some people, it is just a – not a genuine belief, but it’s a tick-the-box exercise. I find quite strange, and to quite a big level with some of the quite high-level companies there being a bit of blurring of the lines when it comes to ‘being green’.’ (Electro-Bikes)</p>
<p>Sustainability</p>	<p>Change management Stakeholder engagement Pro-environmental behaviour Pro-environmental decision-making Problem-solving Collaborative/partnership working</p>	<p>They [network participants] all know they’ve got some common ground - they all care about the environment. They all care about the Peak District. So here they are, hoping to trade with each other and if not have a really good chat about how best to get customers to not turn the heating up, leave the windows open and go out walking for the day (Rural Green Standard)</p> <p>‘Whether those are individuals or whether they are businesses or local authorities or whoever, they do look to the network as a kind of repository of knowledge...Somewhere to go to develop partnerships that can be really mutually beneficial and somewhere that has a lot of reach and influence.’(Electro-Trade)</p>

Technical knowledge is about ‘redesign of product or service delivery processes in order to minimise the impact on the natural environment’ (Heugens 2003, p.302). The technical knowledge includes broad areas of environmental impact minimisation such as pollution prevention, waste management, re-cycling by-products of production processes, and innovation in less polluting processes and products. When choosing which technical area to

prioritise for learning, the businesses often chose the areas that allowed them to achieve either a better use of market opportunities and/or an improved 'bottom line' position. The relevance of the skills development to exploring and acting on opportunities was an important premise for businesses to engage with the learning opportunities within the network. The network provided a myriad of opportunities including 'the opportunity to meet some other experts' (BioCup), 'the opportunity to do some marketing stuff' (Electro-Trade) and 'the opportunity to work with new clients introduced through the network, like NGOs and councils, we have not worked before' (Electro-Bikes).

Despite attracting a high interest from the businesses, needs for technical knowledge and skills were not easily recognised on joining the network. Awareness raising about the technical expertise and the impact on environmental performance was put in place to encourage an active engagement in learning. Many of the network businesses developed competences in environmental management 'things that we were suggested to do here is to improve the heating and keeping the heating costs down.... We've moved suppliers as well, so that we've got reduced costs on that' (Electro-Bikes). Some businesses were keen to develop skills that would assist sustainable business growth such as green marketing and branding. These areas were in demand as they 'bring clarity in your own mind as to what your message is going to be, what you're trying to say and what you're trying to achieve' (IT-Tech). Despite having an indirect impact on the ecological footprint, marketing and social media skills has attracted the highest demand from the small business as they were seen as having a wide-reaching, beyond environmental agenda, impact in supporting enterprise growth and development. Attractiveness of the network was linked to the technical expertise on offer. The diversity of the stakeholders able to share the technical knowledge and expertise was an important characteristic of the network and provided a 'great opportunity to tune in and to have access to specialist people within environmental sector' (EV-Freight).

Relational knowledge allows firms to develop value-adding relationships with a broad range of stakeholders. Sharma and Henriques (2005) note that both internal and external stakeholders are critical for a successful adoption of sustainable business practices in SMEs. As well as citing the roles played by the employees, managers and business owners, external stakeholders, such as suppliers, society, government, academia and customers are also significant in encouraging pro-environmental practices.

The analysis revealed the relational skills development as one of the main areas that attracted SMEs to join the network. Many businesses commented on the initial interest in building the relationship with similar businesses for knowledge sharing about the green products and services and learning about the latest technologies in energy and resource efficiency. For many businesses, the network provided a useful arena for exploring potential business opportunities as ‘this is something that may lead to a potential collaboration in the future’ (ElectroTrade).

Alongside the business practicalities, network participants appreciated the collaborative learning opportunities that came about through exchanging the experiences of pro-environmental practices, problem sharing and problem solving. A network as ‘a nice place to moan about stuff’ became a welcome distraction from day-to-day routines and offered a useful place to explore the ‘bigger picture’ and to reflect:

You become blinkered in what you do and then you just carry on and you do what you're doing and forget about the larger picture. The areas that you should be focusing on rather than just, you know, lets focus on the work rather than the future.
(ElectroTrade).

The participants commented that collaborative learning interactions would often spill over outside the network. In this way, the businesses would connect outside the network to explore the joint business opportunities and share the knowledge. These unintended effects of

learning enhanced the creations of ‘fringe’ activities that were self-organising and extended a ripple effect of learning towards the network periphery (Rae, 2017).

Relational skills development identified as important network feature by many of the participants. According to Electro-Bikes, ‘having different support and being able to speak to other small businesses in a similar situation, share ideas, has been quite good’ (Owner, Electro-Bikes). Several participants acknowledged the importance of building relationships with environmental stakeholders outside the business peers. They included city and county councils, the Chamber, business support providers, green community groups and other NGOs:

Local government, we've had several conversations with numerous local governments locally as well as further down south. We're working with them, we're talking to them, I wouldn't say the doors are opening wide at the moment, it's a new experience working with essentially the public sector (Electro-Bikes).

According to EV-Freight Managing Director, building relationship with customers is about communicating environmental credentials of a brand ‘it's very important for us to keep in touch and to have the brand, not from a sales point of view but just to, just to make customers aware that what we do is ethical, we're passionate about it’ (EV-Freight). The importance of relationship building with larger companies was valued by the network stakeholders:

It [learning within the network] allows you to think on a wider scale. Wider scale to similar organisation as well as higher. Some of the bigger ones we would not be able to reach of what they do. It's allowed us to be more collaborative with other SMEs.... If you are an SME, you are alone in the sector. You do not have a bonus of being in a bigger group, so it [network] does allow you to talk with other people with the same remit and actually bounce ideas of each other which allow you to increase your professionalism and awareness. (Environment and Wellbeing Manager, AeroGreen).

These findings signal a significance of the stakeholder diversity for the development of the relational skills in the network settings. The research materials show the disparity of stakeholder knowledge and practices enhanced the technical skills development and enriched

learning about the pro-environmental practices of other organisations. When talking about learning, businesses were interested in other stakeholders' pro-environmental initiatives 'what they think and what could work'. By interacting with others, they developed confidence in 'pitching for business'. They valued opportunities to be motivated by others in the network as 'to stay motivated is hard when you run a family business'. For many business it was important to 'connect with like-minded environmental people' and to 'bounce ideas around'. The stakeholder variety, i.e. a number of stakeholder categories, helped to develop 'awareness of others and [our] position when compared with them'. The stakeholder variety contributed to building the network participants' confidence and enriched pro-environmental entrepreneurial opportunities through the network relations.

Sustainability knowledge allows for dealing with economic and ecological problems simultaneously (Shrivastava, 1995). Sustainability knowledge involves reflexivity about embedding humans in rather than detaching from the nature (Allen *et al.*, 2019). Such knowledge helps organisations to develop and implement proactive environmental strategies where care for the natural environment lies at the heart of the direction organisation is set to pursue over the long term (Teh and Corbitt, 2015). The knowledge is attuned to the institutional logic of sustainability and is a notable factor in achieving a win-win scenario between economic and environmental demands of an enterprise (De Clercq and Voronov, 2011). Pro-environmental network provided opportunities for sustainability knowledge development including building a shared understanding about environmental sustainability:

I think it was nice from our point of view to be in a workshop where people are, you know, thinking the same as what we're thinking, and they've all got that common goal to kind of reduce that carbon footprint.... It really helped us to develop, to go onto that next stage in that respect, so it was very good (E-V Freight).

The other stakeholders in the network commented on opportunities to engage with businesses on city and county-wide agendas in addressing the clean growth challenge as one of the

‘grand challenges’ set in the UK Industrial Strategy (DBEIS, 2017). The network was seen as an arena for consultations about the city-level ambitions towards Net Zero:

They [city council] had quite a few consultations already with businesses that I been involved in. This is very much about of them trying to get the message out there what they are trying to achieve. It comes back to my other point that they recognise that they can’t do it on their own. It is all well and good to say this is what we want, but in order for that to happen businesses need also to be on board with that. (Manager, Growth Hub).

In this instance, the city council engaged with the business community to secure businesses buy-in towards a new carbon neutral strategy. This type of stakeholder management approach is useful for large scale multi-stakeholder initiatives towards solving complex problems especially in the area of environmental sustainability (Gray and Purdy, 2018). The consultations can also be viewed as a mechanism for building a shared understanding about the challenges and implementation strategies across the networks. For the local councils, the network facilitated engagement with the business community towards the development of a county-wide approach in addressing the climate change concerns ‘because ultimately the council can’t just do it by itself as we don’t have the resources, and it is not just the council’s responsibility (Council Officer). For the Chamber, the network was seen as a ready-made pool of expertise to call upon in addressing the membership requests. Additionally, the engagement with the network was part of the chamber’s membership engagement strategy on sustainability agenda ‘the network has a great set of contacts and the knowledge you have is really useful for us to start those conversations’ (Manager, Chamber of Commerce).

The analysis confirms the role of the MSN as a learning setting for small businesses to access the knowledge and information (Taylor and Thorp, 2004; Jones and Macpherson, 2006). To learn successfully, they needed support with ‘unravelling’ of the problems they were tackling in order to identify the specialised skills and knowledge required. The findings indicate

businesses needed effective signposting to the pools of knowledge and information they require.

The experiential knowledge identification process was preferred by the businesses due to the applied nature of entrepreneurial learning (Cope and Watts, 2000). The knowledge identification was driven by the opportunity identification and acting on opportunities. It was also observed that the originally non-committal businesses to the network learning opportunities changed their attitude to fit with the emerging business opportunities.

In terms of the knowledge capture, the MSN offered ‘the right mix’ of stakeholders for knowledge development and enhanced a) attractiveness of the network from EL experience perspective, and b) offer a variety of learning opportunities to pursue simultaneously business growth and environmental aspirations. The businesses in the study viewed engagement with the local government, the regional LEP and Growth Hub, and the Chamber as an opportunity to gain knowledge from the environmental stakeholders with a strong institutional power base. For example, businesses commented on learning ‘what works and what does not’ from some ‘high-level companies’. Additionally, taking part in public consultations about the local industrial strategy and priority areas for funding supported policy learning and informed business about the regional clean growth policy agenda. Association with strong institutional stakeholders enhanced the network legitimacy and the associated learning. The variety of learning opportunities is linked to the stakeholder variety and stakeholder balance in the network and the flexibility around the learning modes, learning styles and learning processes.

Access to pro-environmental entrepreneurial practices in MSNs

The network participants had numerous opportunities to observe and engage with varied pro-environmental entrepreneurial practices of businesses, policy makers and other stakeholders in the network. Some of these practices included new venture creation with a pro-

environmental focus. For example, a recycling of a coffee waste from independent coffee shops into compost, 'it's great to be able to sound things off. The whole Eco-Coffee thing, if it hadn't had been for the network I think I would have just folded that altogether actually' (Owner, BioCup). The venture creation has been in between unlikely partners – an independent coffee shop owner and an owner of an engineering company 'I would never in any other circumstances come across Steve from Steel Fabrications. I can't think of any connection that I would have naturally between me and him. The chances of our paths crossing, never mind ending up running a business together, are pretty slim' (Owner, BioCup). The connection between these businesses, operating in starkly different sectors, was made possible by the network. The initial attraction was to connect with businesses and other stakeholders with similar values and aspirations of care for the natural environment. The managerial learning as part of venture creation process is characterised by becoming more open to diverse business opportunities through finding business partners with shared values of pro-environmental enterprise. This finding illustrated how stakeholder disparity, i.e., degree and nature to which stakeholder categories themselves are different from each other, becomes a source of entrepreneurial learning and enhanced entrepreneurial opportunities. In the case of a venture creation between BioCup and Steel Fabrications, there is a great deal of disparity between the two businesses in terms of sector belonging, business model and market presence. Yet, values of a pro-environmental enterprise that have drawn businesses to the network supported the development of the business alliance.

When reflecting on the venture, BioCup owner talked about being inspired to make an impact in the community: 'it [network learning] compounds my beliefs; it supports my beliefs; and it helps me to share with the rest of the team. It makes me want to have an impact on my reach, so whether that's through my family or my business'. Here the features of entrepreneurial learning through pro-environmental venture creation is linked to a desire to make a difference

and positive impact in the community. The *impact-driven characteristic* of entrepreneurial learning is revealed in environmental sustainability context.

Study participants acted on entrepreneurial opportunities emerging within the pro-environmental network. Many advanced their business growth strategies through enacting various pro-environmental practices and contributing to sustainability initiatives across various stakeholders. For some businesses, it was about expanding the portfolio of service: ‘we’ve got a bike hire fleet offer and that come from the network’ (Electro-Bikes), and venturing into new markets where an interest for green produces and services was growing ‘from one of the exhibitions, we’ve got a contact into police force that was looking for eclectic bikes for community policing’ (Electro-Bikes). The local councils tapped into the network ‘for potentially developing net-zero implementation approached and other future work’ and ‘selecting working partners’ (Officer, City Council). For a company specialising in electric fleet management, the network provided a platform and a marketing focus which led to securing a dealership with a major US-based manufacturer of the electric cars. The US company ‘were appraising the brokers and they approached us based on our profile on social media and the reputation in the market and said, ‘we like what you do’ (EV-Freight). The exposure to the sectors businesses would not normally consider contributing were one of the unintended consequences of the experiential learning opportunities in the network. Such learning experiences reaffirmed the pro-environmental focus of the network stakeholders and strengthened the capacity building towards pro-environmental entrepreneurship.

Alongside the environmental focus, some of the businesses set up collaborative R&D projects, forged business ventures and established social entrepreneurship initiatives. These initiatives supported local communities including projects with the local schools ‘on carbon reduction awareness training and renewables’ (EV-Freight), collaborations with NGOs on biodiversity projects and ‘trying to connect the people when they actually live with the

nature' (AeroGreen). These projects broadened the remit of pro-environmental entrepreneurship and contributed to sustainable development agenda in the areas of education and community development.

The network participants found the practices of networking and 'problem sharing' particularly useful. Small businesses welcomed the opportunity to talk about the challenges they faced with others in the network. They also benefited from others sharing their experience of dealing with the challenges:

If you are an SME and you are just doing this alone, you don't have the bonus of being in a bigger group. It does allow you to talk to other people in the same remit and actually bounce ideas off each other which helps increase the professionalism. It is all that sharing of the good practice that I think is the biggest support. (AeroGreen).

The practices of entrepreneurial networking aided the confidence of small businesses to connect with the environmental stakeholders with high institutional power such as local councils and regulators. Networking in both formal and informal settings has a strong influence on entrepreneurial activity (Batjargal, 2010). The network provided a 'great opportunity to tune in and to approach specialist people within environmental sector' (EV-Freight). For some businesses it was a chance to reflect on strategic direction and to make the necessary adjustments: 'it's shifted our mind-set and made us more open to looking at what's out there and working with people that are out there' and this, in turn, encouraged businesses to be more proactive in their business strategies by 'driving the market forward rather than just letting the market pull us along and be swept by it' (Managing Director, Electro-Trade).

Study respondents learned that not all businesses approached pro-environmental practices in the same way. The network provided opportunities to see 'green practices that were quite nice' and 'how other people perceive environment'. They observed that 'for some people, it is just not a genuine belief, but it's a tick-the-box exercise' and to a great surprise of the businesses interviewed this approach was 'at a quite high-level companies'. As the Director

of Electro- Bikes put, ‘they are on one hand trying to be green, and then on the other hand, you know, they're not [laughs]. There has been a bit of blurring of the lines when it comes to it [being green], and I think all businesses are like that to a degree’. Such a pragmatic observation shows that business adhere to different standards when it comes to pro-environmental practices. The network opened opportunities to observe the ‘tick-box’ and ‘blurring’ approaches to pro-environmental practices, and gave space for business to reflect and to internalise their own approach when compared to others.

An officer of a local city council said networking on environmental sustainability agenda is ‘really important because businesses are much more likely to listen to other businesses’ (Officer, City Council). For the Chamber, the networking provided an opportunity ‘to get together in a room with other like-minded businesses is worth its weight in gold’. The Chamber manager acknowledged that without the network they ‘would never be able to get close to companies of various sizes and might not be able to do any work with them’. The mutually beneficial access across the network participants encouraged the environment where ‘we support each other and we kind of get each other’s mindset’ in addressing the sustainability challenges (Officer, City Council). A stakeholder variety and stakeholder balance are important characteristics of the network that attracted contribution from the regional institutional stakeholders. The network provided a useful platform for capacity development towards pro-environmental entrepreneurship through confidence building, collaborative opportunities and networking.

Access to stakeholder dialogues in MSNs

The MSN was initially established to develop pro-environmental entrepreneurial practices and to accelerate decarbonisation of small businesses. As the network grew, it attracted a variety of regional environmental stakeholders. The stakeholders from policy, regulatory,

local government, education, NGOs and professional communities became an active participants in the network activities and an integral part of the business support provision. The diversity of the network stakeholders shaped the network learning revealing the multi-faceted relational landscape of the regional environmental sustainability agenda. By accessing stakeholder dialogues in the network, the businesses raised awareness about the latest policy initiatives on climate change, funding and tendering opportunities, and collaborative projects towards sustainable regional development.

The main areas of entrepreneurial learning were associated with stakeholder roles, interests and power dynamics. The network offered its participants opportunities to connect and to explore the positions of various stakeholders on environmental policy and regulatory compliance. The latter was opened to interpretations, particularly by the large businesses, because of ‘blurring of the lines when it comes to being green’. The stakeholder conflicts and tensions revealed through working of the MSN. The tensions about the lack of active engagement from policy and regulators, and limited support for regional businesses with a proactive environmental stance has surfaced. For instance, AeroGreen, a medium-sized manufacturing company in an aerospace sector, criticised policymakers’ reluctance to change ‘we are all targeting ourselves quite harshly and trying to support our environmental policies and procedures. And we are doing all of this work, and then we find that the other side isn’t really pulling their weight’ (AeroGreen). The lack of urgency and a superficial approach towards supporting pro-environmental businesses was also highlighted:

There is no real urgency to it which is a shame. That was part of a networking event and that opened our eyes a little bit because they were like, ‘Oh we are looking at this’ and we were all going, ‘Yes but that is not... we are not really doing it are we? We are just putting a plaster on it. (Environmental and Wellbeing Manager, AeroGreen)

The dialogues about the regional clean growth policy engagement with practice provided a useful contextual background about the relational dynamics of the environmental

stakeholders. Small businesses commented that although their awareness of the regional clean growth policy and pro-environmental business practices has grown, 'it is not at the level it is needed to be to achieve these big ambitions and goals we are aspiring to'. These policies are seen outside the remit of 'busy working lives of businesses' and the core business activities. Limited relevance of the clean growth policy to businesses, both large and small, is linked to a weak buy-in from the business community:

What do they [policy documents] mean in practical terms? What are we going to see? and What comes out of them?... We talked about the Industrial strategy at our manufacturing conference last year. We had a large multinational company and a small local company speaking at it and they both said the same thing - that it does not mean anything - nothing that was relevant to them. (Manager, Chamber of Commerce).

Study participants commented on a vague narrative of the regional clean growth policies including the lack of measurable outputs, KPIs and clear signalling of responsibilities and collaborative opportunities. Another challenge identified was a growing number of strategy documents that 'do not talk to each other' in terms of the timescale and scope of activities. For example, a city strategy targets net zero by 2028 whilst strategies at a county and LEP level target 2024, 2030 and 2050 horizons.

The network provided a platform for businesses to project their voice in rapidly developing clean growth policy initiative and to critique the policy approach towards sustainable regional development. Many respondents commented on politics at various levels in the region (city, districts and boroughs) that limit the collaborative efforts towards resolving the climate change concerns. Regional political landscape was described as highly fragmented and having 'quite different approaches across the local governments ... whether it is HS2, travel infrastructure. It is very difficult to get a single voice' (Chamber of Commerce, Manager). A lack of a unified voice from the local authorities on climate change, net zero and energy agendas is seen as one of the main constraints to progress in these policy areas. Stakeholder

interactions in the MSN allowed for these tensions to surface and to be explored by the network participants through the stakeholder engagement strategies.

The issue of pace of change was considered important in the local authorities' response to climate change. Although 'most of the local authorities have declared climate emergencies, when you dig down to it - you do not see any changes in day-to-day processes, in fact, in some places, they go in retrospect...' (Business owner, ElectroTech). The overarching theme is that of policy community not doing enough to support businesses operating in a more sustainable way: 'they fund the projects that are quite bound by funding regulations. There is an opportunity with new development funds moving forward to be more inclusive... I think there is a long way to go' (Manager, Chamber of Commerce). Policy and business support communities need to do much more to reach out to businesses on the environmental sustainability agenda.

Research participants talked about the lack of clarity and consistency in environmental targets set out in the policy documents. The lack of urgency in addressing the climate concerns and in supporting pro-environmental action at a local government level was frustrating for the regional businesses:

'...the bigger decision makers - they are not completely supporting it and there needs to be a bit more clarification of where we are going. All our targets keep changing, air pollution gets another target. It's almost like everything always gets another couple of years. It's like, 'Oh we are not there, oh just give it a couple more years'. I am not saying they are not doing anything... if you want to a 'buy-in' you have to show you are making the changes, you have to show that you are supporting it and you have to show waves of change...' (Environmental and Wellbeing Manager, AeroGreen).

Similar observations were expressed by small businesses and showed dissatisfaction with the reluctance of the policy community to sustain efforts towards the environmental commitments. Such an approach widens the policy-practice gap and undermines sustainability leadership in the region.

The analysis shows the entrepreneurial learning in an MSN is enriched by the exposure to diverse stakeholder dialogues that reveal the stakeholder interests, power and institutional tensions. The network provides a platform to explore complex problems associated with the sustainable development challenges across multiple stakeholder groups. The MSN allows to articulate the varying, and often conflicting, perspectives on the nature of environmental sustainability agenda and strategies for sustainable regional development. It provides a useful platform to reveal and to explore the policy-practice gap and to inform the pro-environmental entrepreneurial strategies.

Discussion

Policy-practice interface and entrepreneurial learning

The study findings demonstrate MSNs are rich learning settings where policy-practice interface supports entrepreneurial learning. As MSNs develop, the policy-practice interface changes in response to the changes in the stakeholder composition and the evolving nature of the inter-relational stakeholder dynamics. In the study, the policy-practice interface reveals the attitudes of the practitioners towards the clean growth regional policy. This finding extends understanding about the characteristics of entrepreneurial learning in the MSN setting which include exposure to the stakeholder dialogues and through them to the policy-practice interface. Such an exposure is of a particular importance to orienting pro-environmental entrepreneurship. Specifically, research participants commented on a policy-practice gap which led to businesses becoming ‘disillusioned’ with the policy initiatives at the national and regional levels. Further widening of the policy-practice gap could hinder policy credibility and weaken the buy-in for environmental sustainability initiatives from the general public and the business community.

The study shows the policy-practice interface informs the opportunity recognition and entrepreneurial action. For many businesses, the opportunities became apparent as a result of participation in the network activities. Alongside the businesses, the opportunity recognition was also important to other network members including the local government, business support agencies and universities. As the pro-environmental network provided focused, yet diverse learning opportunities for tackling the environmental concerns, the network acted as an issue-focused learning setting allowing for a greater recognition of information and entrepreneurial opportunities (Kirzner, 1973).

The network participants acted on opportunities emerging within the pro-environmental MSN and informed by the policy-practice interface. They advanced business growth strategies through enacting pro-environmental practices and contributing to the initiatives across the network. Study participants commented on an applied nature of learning within the network and ease of access to the network participants which facilitated the opportunity recognition. Alongside the environmental focus in entrepreneurial action, the network businesses supported community and biodiversity projects. The MSN was credited with raising a sense of urgency to act upon the environmental concerns as well as offering the opportunities to learn about the proactive environmental strategies. As urgency is recognised as one of the three dimensions of stakeholder salience, alongside legitimacy and power (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997), the network harnessed small business awareness about the relational dynamics of environmental stakeholders and attitudes towards climate change and environmental sustainability.

The study extends the literature on entrepreneurship and policy (Robson *et al.*, 2009; Heinonen and Hytti, 2016) by showing how the policy-practice interface offers opportunities to inform both the regional entrepreneurship policy and entrepreneurial practice. The study adds to the literature which problematises the relationship between entrepreneurs and policy

makers, and highlights the urgency for evidence-based policymaking and a greater involvement of practitioners in policy strategising process (Smallbone, 2016). The study acknowledges the value of stakeholder dialogues as mechanisms that reveal and construct the policy-practice interface. Such dialogues can be mutually beneficial for both policy makers and practitioners. For policy makers, they offer opportunities for policy learning that feeds the development of the practice-informed policy mixes. For entrepreneurs, the stakeholder dialogues provide valuable environmental insights which help to orient enterprise development and growth strategies. They offer a chance to inform the policy process and to gain the associated reputational benefits.

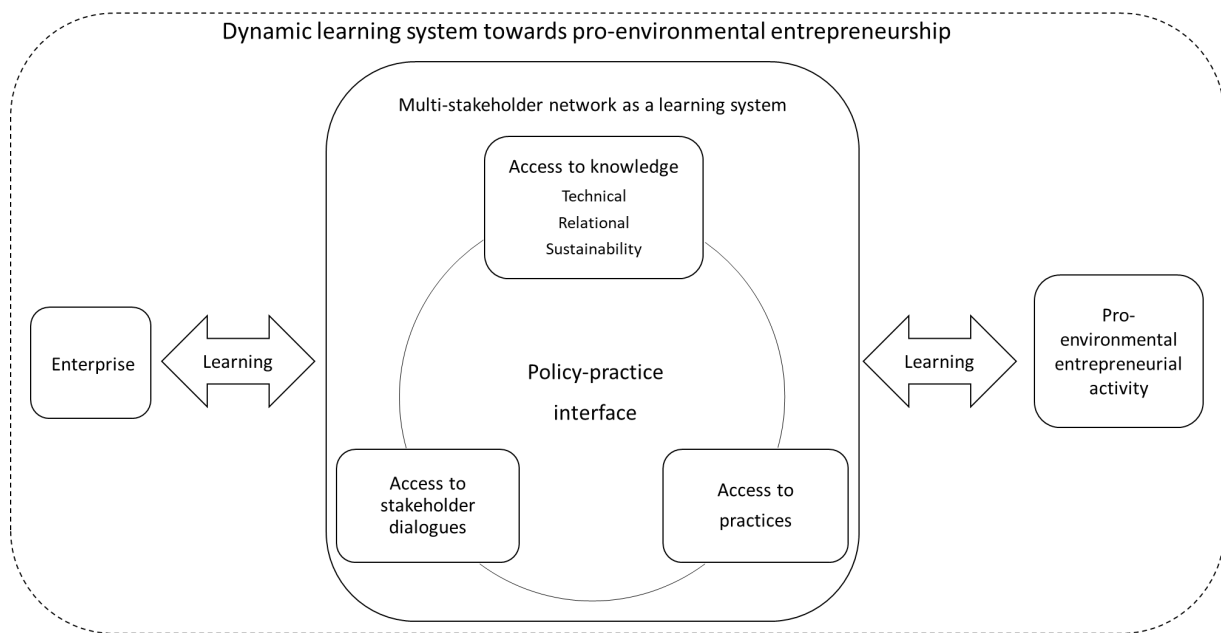
Learning from policy-practice interface is a useful policymaking approach that helps advancing the complex policy agendas including regional sustainable development and climate change adaptation. The role of the MSNs in this learning is notable as they act as platforms where significant policy actors and practitioners come together and engage in the stakeholder dialogues. Stakeholder diversity, expressed through a variety of stakeholder dialogues and disparity of stakeholder views and practices, enriches the stakeholder dialogues and informs the stakeholder learning. Such dialogues reveal the policy-practice gap and offer opportunities for policy innovation towards sustainable development (Jordan and Huitema, 2014).

MSNs as dynamic learning systems

The study findings confirm the position of MSNs as effective learning settings characterised by the access to knowledge, practices and stakeholder dialogues. The pro-environmental MSN attracted the participants with aligned interests often seeking deployment of proactive environmental strategies through a multiple stakeholder engagement. Such a network provided an environment where the entrepreneurial opportunities flourished and

entrepreneurial action intensified. Combined with a focus on developing pro-environmental practices and addressing the climate change concerns across a wide range of stakeholders, the MSN supported the development of pro-environmental entrepreneurship.

The MSN contributed to the development of technical, relational and sustainability knowledge. Development of the relational knowledge and skills was particularly noted by small businesses as they often have difficulty in constructing dialogues with large organisations, government and policy makers (Baranova et al., 2020). The stakeholder dialogues informed the network participants of the regional environmental stakeholder landscape, clean growth policy and regulations. As businesses advanced their pro-environmental practices, they contributed back to the network and strengthened its overall potential for learning. Other network participants, in turn, benefited from the access to the participants that advanced their practices which further supported the development of their pro-environmental stance. These reciprocal patterns of development can be understood as a dynamic learning system. In this view, policy-practice interface forms an integral part of learning in an MSN setting and supports development of the pro-environmental entrepreneurship. A conceptual view of *a dynamic learning system towards pro-environmental entrepreneurship* is presented in Figure 1.



Learning towards pro-environmental entrepreneurship could happen in a variety of settings: one-to-one work with environmental professionals; formal training delivered as part of the business support package; through various funded project and the university provision; and entrepreneurial networks. These settings could replace the MSN element in the proposed framework in Figure 1. However, due to a distinct tripartite characteristic of MSNs in relation to stakeholder variety including representation from government, business and civic community (Roloff, 2008), MSNs are uniquely positioned to support learning through the stakeholder diversity and policy-practice interface.

Stakeholder network diversity, expressed through a variety, balance and disparity of the stakeholders, is a notable characteristic of networks as learning settings. Such characteristic is revealed through a composition of network stakeholders and is expressed through a variety of understandings, perspectives, interests, practices and relational dynamics of the network stakeholders. Tensions and conflicts amongst the latter are useful learning mechanisms for policy and practice learning. Such learning is particularly potent in the area of environmental sustainability, where multi-stakeholder collaboration and partnership working pave the pathways for sustainable development goals (UN DESA and TPI, 2020). From this

perspective, MSNs offer significant opportunities for the development of entrepreneurship that supports sustainable development.

The network setting has an appeal for entrepreneurial learning towards environmental sustainability which is rooted in pro-environmental practice. As the environmental focus of the network does not discriminate against sector, maturity levels, location or ownership structure, a wide range of small businesses could engage with these networks. Effective engagement allows for an access to pro-environmental practices, skills, knowledge and expertise across a variety of stakeholders. This could lead to an enhanced collective capacity of businesses to work in environmentally sustainable ways.

The deliberate vs emergent network development dimension comes into play when discussing the role of the MSNs in policy-practice interface. The MSN under study is characterised as a deliberate network i.e. set up as part of an EU-funded project to support pro-environmental practices of small business. Although the exposure to policy makers and other regional environmental stakeholders was not the focus of the network, they become a prominent feature of the network overtime. It opened the opportunity for policy learning and provided evidence-based insights to inform the local industrial strategy and policy development. Although established networks have their appeal in terms of the quality and strength of the network ties and the insights developed over time, they are likely to attract the 'usual suspects'. This could limit the engagement and responses to the fast-changing policy agendas of climate change and energy security from less engaged stakeholder groups such as local communities, public and conservation professionals. Policy engagement with new and emergent networks could provide fresh insights and effective pathways for underrepresented groups such as female and ethnic entrepreneurs to project their voices (Carter *et al.*, 2015). The benefits of engagement in either deliberate or emergent pro-environmental networks for

policy makers are notable. They must become a feature of the effective policy-mixes and much needed governance mechanisms towards sustainable regional development.

Conclusion and recommendations

The study offers novel insights into entrepreneurial learning in MSNs towards pro-environmental entrepreneurship through application of a dynamic perspective on learning.

Theoretical contribution of this paper is threefold. First, the paper confirms characteristics of entrepreneurial learning in MSNs through the access to a variety of knowledge, practices and stakeholder dialogues. In this view, the stakeholder diversity becomes an important factor in shaping the network characteristics conducive to learning and entrepreneurship development.

The study extends understanding of the role of multiple stakeholders in entrepreneurial learning by conceptualising diversity of the network stakeholders as a learning characteristic. As the stakeholder diversity shapes the network learning opportunities through the access to pro-environmental entrepreneurial practices, knowledge and stakeholder relational dynamics, it becomes a mechanism for entrepreneurial learning in MSNs.

Second, the entrepreneurial learning in MSNs is informed by the policy-practice interface and as such expose the policy-practice gap and orient the entrepreneurial behaviour. This conceptual development extends the literature on policy learning and entrepreneurship (Bramwell at al., 2019; Jolley and Pittaway, 2019). Articulation of the policy-practice gap by the network participants presents learning opportunities that informs capacity building towards pro-environmental entrepreneurship.

Third, the study offers a view of MSNs as dynamic learning systems that bring together environmental stakeholders and support sustainable regional development. This development responds to the calls for strengthening the dynamic learning perspective of entrepreneurship

(Cope, 2005) and a greater recognition of the role of the networking context in enterprise development (Zahra and Wright, 2011).

In theoretical terms, the study strengthens an understanding of MSNs as learning settings where diverse stakeholder dialogues become a characteristic of learning towards pro-environmental entrepreneurship. They help to navigate stakeholder relational dynamics in the fast emerging and complex policy landscape of environmental sustainability. Stakeholder dialogues frame policy-practice interface and reveal power dynamics and tensions in amongst the environmental stakeholders. They uncover the policy-practice gap and could be utilised to test the stakeholder engagement strategies, policy adoption and policy implementation mechanisms.

In light of these conceptual and analytical developments, the recommendations for practice can be drawn.

- Multi-stakeholders networks are useful platforms for learning and capacity building towards pro-environmental entrepreneurship. They need to become a prominent feature of the pro-environmental business support provision in the regions and nationally.
- Pro-environmental entrepreneurship needs to become a mainstream idea of entrepreneurship where the entrepreneurial practices, process and identities are inconceivable without the care for Nature. Enterprises of all sizes, sectors and localities must recognise and act on integrating the pro-environmental ethos into everyday entrepreneurial practices and decision-making.
- Business support agencies are encouraged to work with a wide range of environmental stakeholders to design, deliver and advance support for pro-environmental businesses. The MSNs can be useful mechanisms to foster

representation of diverse stakeholder and policy learning towards sustainable regional development.

- Business support interventions are to draw on knowledge, practices and stakeholder dialogues as characteristics of learning towards pro-environmental entrepreneurship. This could support a more holistic approach in the design and delivery of the pro-environmental business support beyond a narrow focus on energy and resource efficiency.
- Policy makers and local government are advised to pay a close attention to MSNs as systems for capacity building towards pro-environmental entrepreneurship. The engagement in such networks from regulatory, public and policy bodies is needed to strengthen the responses to the environmental concerns and to catalyse the role of entrepreneurship in sustainable development.
- Stakeholder diversity is important for the development of effective collaborative and partnership mechanisms as pathways towards Sustainable Development Goals (UN OWG, 2014).
- The learning from the policy-practice interface is of significance to the design of the effective policy mixes. Policy makers are encouraged to actively seek evidence-based feedback mechanisms, such as MSNs, and instruments to inform the policy learning and innovation for sustainable regional development.

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