Social Sustainability and the City

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Abstract

Over the past 25 years, sustainability has become a key consideration for city governments. However, many sustainability initiatives have remained dogged by the concept's nebulous character. The development of the triple-bottom-line conceptualization of sustainability – environment, economy, society – has been seen as potentially offering a solution to this problem. This paper reviews recent engagements in academic and policy debates with the least examined of the triple-bottom-line: *social sustainability*. It begins by asking if a concern for the social sustainability of cities is anything new. This leads into a review of the ways in which the concept of social sustainability has been developed in the urban literature. Here, varying relations to environmental debates are identified and the intersections between sustainability and contemporary policy thinking flagged. A cursory review of current engagements with social sustainability by city governments, something mostly confined to the Anglo context, flags how issues of definition and application distinguish those approaches developed. In conclusion, the question of whether engagements with social sustainability conform to critiques about the post-political nature of sustainability is considered.

Introduction

Despite the now widespread usage of sustainability, there remains a great deal of debate over what the concept does and should actually mean (Evans and Jones, 2008). Sustainability, it seems, has now become a prefix for almost anything: sustainable 'hair', 'chocolate', 'friendship', and so on. What unites this widespread usage is the notion of transformation, that, for example, 'sustainable hair' is better than the 'old hair'. This type of widespread application has meant it is harder to hold Marcuse's (1998, p. 106) argument that ''[S]ustainability as a goal in itself, if we are to take the term's ordinary meaning, is the preservation of the status quo'' as the prefix is so commonly used to signify a positive transformation (Keil, 2007; Maloutas, 2003). Therefore, we must consider sustainability's everyday usage not simply in terms of maintenance or status quo, but rather in a more nebulous normative sense. Sustainability, in its everyday meaning, signifies a *sense* of change.

Increasingly this change has come in three varieties: environmental, economic and social. Since the Brundtland Commission's report *Our Common Future* (1987) popularized a holistic understanding of anthropogenic climate change – that is, the economic and social activities of developed nations are largely responsible environment change – sustainability has become an expansive and slippery concept. With three elements (a.k.a. three-legged stool or triple-bottom-line sustainability), a variety of conceptual understandings have been developed. An approach growing in popularity has been to separate out the various elements of sustainability; developing policies and programs to deal with each independently (Littig and Griessler, 2005). This approach is considered problematic by some. For example, Evans et al. (2009, p. 686) have argued: ''The core approach of sustainability, embodied in the metaphor of the three-legged stool of economy, environment

and society, conveys the holistic ethos of sustainability''. A dissected sustainability clearly risks losing this pivotal ethos. Yet, the divided treatment of sustainability remains in progress.

This paper reviews how the *social* element of sustainability has been approached within the context of both academic and policy debate. Focusing primarily upon the Anglo context, where social policy issues are often considered as de facto urban (Cochrane, 2006), the review identifies how a collection of longstanding and more recent concepts have been used to populate the 'empty' concept of social sustainability. The paper then provides a cursory review of how this conceptual fragmentation has been reflected in the urban policy arena, showing how different definitions and applications have resulted where the concept has been adopted. The political implications of the concept's varied development and deployment are considered in conclusion.

A new question?

Questions about the sustainability of urban communities are as old at the city itself. From Plato's Athens to Marx's Manchester, the potential for urban inequalities to foster destructive social antagonisms has been a consistent concern. However, the particular issues that give rise to such concerns have consistently morphed and mutated. This stated some issues have been more persistent than others. For example, the rise and rise of capitalist urbanism has witnessed continued debate over the form and longevity of cities. And, of course, post-apocalyptical visions of cities remain a staple of popular culture. Take Alfonso Cuarón's film *Children of Men*. Here, Cuarón constructs a narrative around the biological and, consequent, social breakdown of humanity. Using London as the film's principle setting, *urban* society is presented as broken down; filled with random violence and warring nationalistic sects.

Urbanism, whether depicted in political philosophy or film, has therefore consistently been subject to questions of sustainability. Maintaining growing agglomerations of peoples and their activities is a persistent problem in a variety of senses (e.g. cultural relations, employment, etc.). However, it is only recently that many of these tensions have been thought of as sustainability issues per se. It is therefore necessary to ask what this framing has meant for the ways in which we understand urban social issues. In the next sections, it will be argued that a series of particular issues appertaining to current attempts to make cities socially sustainable have emerged, but that questions remain over the utility of the concept.

Making sense of social sustainability

Discussions of social sustainability, particularly within urban literature, have been largely divorced from environmental debate. For example, in an extended discussion of social sustainability, Stren and Polese (2000) define it as: ''*development (and/or growth) that is compatible with the harmonious evolution of civil society, fostering an environment conducive to the compatible cohabitation of culturally and socially diverse groups while at the same time encouraging social integration, with improvements in the quality of life for all segments of the population*'' (p. 16–17 – emphasis in original). This mirrors Yiftachel and Hedgcock's (1993) earlier definition: ''the continuing ability of a city to function as a long-term viable setting for human interaction, communication and cultural development'' (p. 140).

The move to divorce social sustainability from environmental issues, and indeed to reject a holistic approach to sustainability (Evans et al. 2009), immediately presents the

question of what the concept therefore entails. Unlike environmental sustainability where certain normative judgments are implicitly attached – that is, that the consumption of environmental resources should respect the needs of future generations – social sustainability carries little implicit meaning (see Maloutas, 2003; Marcuse, 1998). This has been reflected in other attempts at defining the concept. For example, McKenzie (2004, p. 12) offered the following definition: ''a life-enhancing condition within communities, and a process within communities that can achieve that condition.'' This offers little guidance, presenting more definitional questions around what might constitute a life-enhancing condition.

Maloutas (2003) has argued that because of this lack of normative content, even when social sustainability is viewed in isolation it continues to be informed by environmental thinking. He argues a process of 'de-socialization' and 're-socialization' has taken place within social sustainability debates. Here, the withdrawal of social goals from sustainability debate is viewed as politically necessary under neoliberalism as the ''legitimacy of sustainability is heavily dependent on the prominence of relations to nature in the widely accepted form of the need to preserve natural resources'' (p. 168). It is only within this context that Maloutas (2003) sees it possible to 're-socialize' sustainability where ''social objectives are reintroduced, but as subordinate to the prime goal'' (p. 168). This politically pragmatic environmental framing of social policy is seen as part of ''the general withdrawal from radical objectives of social equality and justice in favour of the less ambitious objectives of social cohesion, solidarity and inclusion'' (Maloutas 2003, p. 168).

Yiftachel and Hedgcock's (1993) discussion of urban social sustainability provides an example of this type of environmental framing. They argue, using rhetoric clearly derived from environmental debate, that ''the concept of urban social sustainability conceives the city as a backdrop for lasting and meaningful social relations that meet the social needs of present and future generations'' (ibid. p. 140). Following this, they outline the concept's normative content: the ''socially sustainable city is marked by vitality, solidarity and a common sense of place among its residents. Such a city is also characterized by a lack of overt or violent intergroup conflict, conspicuous spatial segregation, or chronic political instability'' (p. 140). Here then, both the environmental framing and social objectives Maloutas (2003) finds symbolic of a turn away from more progressive social policy are clearly present.

More recently, in-vogue social policy language has entered discussions of social sustainability. An example of this is Bramley and Power's (2009) discussion of social sustainability in respect to urban form and housing in the UK. They adopt the following twofold definition: ''social equity issues (access to services, facilities, and opportunities) and issues to do with the sustainability of community itself'' (p. 32). In terms of the latter, they argue that ''sustainability of community'' remains quite nebulous, but that ''this clearly maps onto the concerns both of the government and of academic writers, particularly those addressing issues of social capital and cohesion'' (p. 32–33). As such, Bramley and Power (2009) fill the concept of social sustainability with a set of more familiar ones, namely social equity, social capital and social cohesion. The latter being social policy concepts strongly associated with New Labour's urban policy program in the UK (Kearns, 2003).

While many have concentrated on developing social sustainability for policy purposes, others have rejected this and emphasized its political utility. Baehler (2007) has argued that social sustainability is concerned with the fundamental tensions of democracy, as identified by Alexis de Tocqueville (1956 [1835]): ''we might venture to define social and political (or ''nationhood'') sustainability as the ability of a society to resist internal

forces of decay while also maintaining and reproducing the background social, cultural, and institutional conditions necessary for healthy democratic social relations to flourish'' (Baehler, 2007, p. 27). Here then, different concerns, those such as equity, consensus and security, come to be recast as social sustainability.

These differing attempts at defining social sustainability demonstrate how an array of other, usually more familiar, concepts are consistently used to provide signification. Furthermore, there has been little consistency in either the combinations of, or emphasis placed on, these subsumed concepts. All of which suggests that social sustainability has, and is, operating as little more than a container; a fashionable conduit for a set of long-standing and in-vogue social policy discourses. It is therefore worth briefly exploring how policy-makers charged with applying social sustainability have engaged with this problem[1].

City dealings with social sustainability

Over recent years, a growing collection of cities, primarily in the Anglo context, have adopted the concept of social sustainability and attempted to craft a variety of policies around it. In doing so, these cities have been faced with the requirement of generating a working understanding of the concept. As such, the definitional issues faced within the academic literature have been confronted in policymaking. Structures of governance have been important in dictating how this conceptual issue has been faced and, indeed, how varied approaches have been. In the UK, urban policy remains under the national government and, as a result, social sustainability issues have been – mutedly – encompassed within national policies such as Sustainable Communities (Raco, 2007) and the Urban Renaissance (Kearns, 2003). In North America, this is not repeated and social sustainability has become an important policy-framing device for some cities. This is mirrored in Australia and New Zealand where social sustainability has become a defined and applied urban policy concept (Baehler, 2007; McKenzie, 2004).

In those cities that have adopted social sustainability as an urban policy concept, the issues captured under its rubric have varied. They have included social mix (Vancouver, Canada), liveability (Boulder, USA), affordable housing (Ottawa, Canada), community services (Adelaide, Australia) and street life (Dubai, UAE). Such a varied list of issues does suggest that there is no single understanding or raft of policies that has emerged around the concept. This stated two key distinctions in the ways in which the concept has been defined and applied are important to note.

The current usage of social sustainability in urban governance is distinguished by a division between those who define the concept and those who do not (see Davidson, 2009). With regards to the former, a number of definitions with varying degrees of specificity have been developed. Perhaps the most notable attempt has been in Vancouver, Canada, where the city government adopted a detailed definition developed in cooperation with the metropolitan authority, Metro Vancouver. In this they set out three major components of social sustainability: ''(1) basic needs such as housing and sufficient income that must be met before capacity can develop; (2) individual or human capacity or opportunity for learning and self development; and (3) social or community capacity for the development of community organizations, networks that foster interaction'' (City of Vancouver, 2005, p. 3). In order to direct thinking around these components, the city also adopted four guiding principles: (1) equity, (2) social inclusion and interaction, (3) security, and (4) adaptability (ibid.). As has been argued elsewhere (Davidson, 2009), such a set of principles are potential staging posts for political debate. Of course whether these

stated principles convert into progressive change, which many in Vancouver would argue they have not (see Eby [2007] for discussion), significantly depends on questions of political action, power and implementation (Baeten, 2000).

At present, this type of detailed conceptual thinking is rare within urban policy circles. More often, definitions have been either vague or non-existent. For example, San Gabriel, California (City of San Gabriel, 2009) uses the following definition: ''Invest in neighborhood conservation and community building'' and Adelaide (Adelaide City Council, 2005, p. 2), in partnership with the State Government of South Australia, states: ''Socially sustainable cities are equitable, diverse, connected, and democratic and provide a good quality of life.'' Such definitions play on established neoliberal rhetoric (Keil, 2003) and offer little prospect of change. However, what both the defined and undefined usage of social sustainability indicates is that the concept requires populating. Once adopted by city governments, social sustainability has had to be filled out with other issues and concepts, such as equity, quality of life, well-being, community building and so on.

The second distinction relates to the issue of application, or more specifically whom social sustainability is applicable to. Here, there is a significant split in current policy initiatives. There are cities which have made social sustainability a targeted concern, related closely to their social welfare functions. Examples include Aalborg, Denmark, where social sustainability has become closely associated with homelessness and severe disadvantage. Similarly in Boulder, Colorado, a well-developed social sustainability strategic plan (City of Boulder, 2007) has included a significant emphasis on the 'under-served' and the 'seniors', 'youth' and 'children' populations: ''To enhance community livability by providing outreach and developing policies that address the needs of the community, including under-served, under-represented and under participating residents so all who live in Boulder can feel a part of, and thrive in, our community'' (City of Boulder, 2007 p. 5).

This contrasts to other cities where social sustainability has become a universally applied policy concept. In Grand Rapids, Michigan, in his 2005 inaugural speech, newly re-elected mayor George Heartwell introduced a new sustainability initiative. This included a significant emphasis on the social pillar. Heartwell stated: ''We must never forget that social sustainability is not a class or neighborhood issue; it is everyone's issue.'' Here, social sustainability, and the mayor's related concerns of tolerance, social equity, educational inequities, is explicitly depoliticized; removed from its class, cultural or geographical dimensions. A similar move has been made in the City of Bloomington, Minnesota, where city officials have claimed ''Social sustainability is about meeting the needs of everyone in our community, regardless of their socio-economic status'' (City of Bloomington, 2009).

The conceptual difficulties faced in the academic literature can therefore be seen as reflected in application. Social sustainability has been used to package numerous policy concepts and programs. As such, it appears the disaggregation of sustainability's principle elements has not yielded conceptual or policy gains (see Evans et al. 2008). This stated, others have argued that this type of conceptual filling-in and the free-floating character of policy concepts is a necessary aspect of policy-making. For example, Hillier (2007) has claimed largely empty concepts are required so that more complex and located discursive arrangements can be ordered:

''Master signifiers commonly found in spatial planning practice include those of public good, sustainability, smart growth, multiculturalism and spatial planning itself. The above are all empty signifiers or representations, however, which have shed succinct meanings in their own right to anchor complex and diverse arguments and discourses under one grouping' […]'' (p. 197).

Hillier goes onto argue that "these representations or 'ideological fictions' are necessary for the discourse-logical consistency of planning practice-they structure our transcendent ideas and ideals of what is and what should be 'out there' (p. 197). Perhaps then, if we follow Hillier (2007), the diversity of approaches to social sustainability is both inevitable and desirable. It simply functions as a utilitarian conceptual device – perhaps a scaled-down one that is more manageable than a holistic (i.e. three-pillar) sustainability (Littig and Griessler, 2005) – from which urban social problems can be approached. However, a recent critique of much academic and political debate has warned that the literal and figurative political spaces provided by such concepts are largely incapable of generating the required change.

Social sustainability in the post-political city

Recent critical theory-led scholarship has attacked the sustainability movement for its lack of politics. Swyngedouw (2007) has argued that "environmental issues and their political "framing" contribute to the making and consolidation of a postpolitical and postdemocratic condition, one that actually forecloses the possibility of a real politics of the environment" (p. 14). Here Swyngedouw draws upon Zizek's (1999) critique of contemporary politics, where any political demands are seen to have been excluded by a governance process that concentrates on efficiency and institutional reorganization:

> "In post-politics, the conflict of global ideological visions embodied in different parties which compete for power is replaced by the collaboration of enlightened technocrats (economists, public opinion specialists, …) and liberal multiculturalists; via the process of negotiation of interests, a compromise is reached in the guise of a more or less universal consensus" (Zizek, 1999, p. 198; cited in Swyngedouw, 2007, p. 24).

Keil (2007) has also made similar criticisms of the sustainable development paradigm. With respect to sustainability and ecological modernization, Keil argues both are "connected intrinsically to the demise of the Fordist-Keynesian regime of accumulation and to the emergence of a globalized neoliberal, post-Fordist regime under American hegemony" (p. 61).

In light of such criticism, it is necessary to relate this to current treatments of social sustainability. The first point to note here is that social sustainability has often been incorporated within the wider sustainability agendas that both Keil (2007) and Swyngedouw (2007) have criticized. As such, in certain contexts both of these critiques might be applied (see Maloutas, 2003). However, those attempts to define and apply social sustainability independently of environmental issues require particular consideration.

Overwhelmingly the social sustainability literature has not been concerned with a normative politics. Indeed, rather than ask "what society do we want to sustain" most have explored the question of "how do we sustain our society/city" (see Davidson, 2009). For example, in their discussion of social sustainability in the context of urban reform in Montreal, Seguin and Germain (2000) explored how it can be maintained and applied in a series of policy areas, including health, education and public space. Likewise, Polese (2000) views social sustainability as a series of policy choices, including those relating to housing markets, transport, competition, fiscal regimes, political autonomy, social housing and urban form.

The policy-emphasis of much of the social sustainability literature (e.g. Cuthill, 2009; Polese, 2000; Seguin and Germain, 2000) has consequently focused on technocratic issues; reorganizing programs, service provision and public campaigns. Much of this is

divorced from a politics based around redistribution, power and social change (Zizek, 1999). However, given the social subject matter, it has remained difficult for these discussions to become fully divorced from political normatives (Davidson, 2009). In short, technocratic policy talk often reveals the limits of itself. For example, when Polese (2000) presents ''seven policy choices… that can act 'upon' exclusion in an urban setting'' his argument concludes in the assertion that change is reliant on political will: ''Building socially sustainable cities is not a utopian dream, provided citizens and decision-makers are well informed and the political will exists'' (p. 332). What becomes necessary is not an instrumental concept or mode of thought (see Brenner, 2009) that can unlock technocratic fixes, but rather political action. Parallels can therefore be drawn to wider debates surrounding urban regeneration, whereby the political limitations of technocratic reform and bureaucratic reorganization have been continually revealed. Here, we find examples of local political change being short-lived (see Baeten, 2000) and local elites successfully incorporating and using new policy initiatives and discourses in order to maintain local distributions of power and resources (Keil, 2003).

Inline with these observations, Zizek (1999; 2006) has claimed that liberal democracies, such as those in the Canada, UK and USA, have reduced political conflicts to issues of cultural difference and pleas for greater citizen involvement. Issues such as growing inequality, impoverishment and indebtedness are therefore, for Zizek, transformed into populist struggles that do not seek to confront distributional issues, but rather they seek technocratic and bureaucratic solutions: ''What characterizes populism is not the ontic content of these demands but the mere formal fact that, through their enchainment, ''people'' emerges as a political subject, and all different particular struggles and antagonisms appear as parts of a global antagonistic struggle between ''us'' (people) and ''them'' (Zizek, 2006, p. 553). If Zizek's diagnosis is correct, we must draw different conclusions with regards to achieving some kind of social sustainability than Polese (2000) does. Rather than purely seek more political will, it is up to political struggle to ensure things such as inequality are corrected: ''In populism, the enemy is externalized or reified into a positive ontological entity (even if this entity is spectral) whose annihilation would restore balance and justice'' (Zizek, 2006, p. 555). The externalizing of political problems and associated notions of balance are, of course, staples of social sustainability rhetoric; for example, in the foreword to Polese and Stren's (2000, p. vii) edited collection, Ali Kazancigil, Executive Secretary of UNESCO's MOST Program, identifies the challenge of social sustainability as: ''The cities of the twenty-first century must place the citizen at the centre of public policy, reinvent the concept of the city, and realize the many ways of sharing in urban life''.

Conclusion

Within the three-pillar sustainability discourse that has emerged over the past 25 years, social sustainability has been the least examined pillar. However, over the past 10 years there has been a growing adoption of social sustainability as an independent concept, particularly by city governments in the Anglo context. Notable examples include the City of Vancouver (2005) and the City of Boulder (2007). Yet despite the take-up by city governments, what the concept means in terms of urban reform remains blurred. Most often with the academic literature, social sustainability has been concern with making urban communities more sustainable. Clearly, this is a circular argument that is made worse by the lack of normative content signified by sustainability (Marcuse, 1998). In many cases, this problem has been addressed by the use of established (e.g. equity, poverty) and more recent (e.g. social capital, social cohesion) social policy concepts.

This brings us to the question of how novel the recent engagement with social sustainability is. This paper has argued that since the very origins of the city there have been concerns over how to maintain its social life. It is therefore unsurprising that there remain concerns over the sustainability of urban societies. The recent engagement with social sustainability might therefore been seen in a long historical tradition, one concerned with the fragile nature of urban societies. And, of late, this tradition has become bound up in a discourse of sustainability, often in the context of environmental debate (Maloutas, 2003).

Yet there are elements of the recent embrace of social sustainability that are indicative of the contemporary context. These relate to a lack of politicization within both the academic literature and public policy discussions surrounding social sustainability. An absence matched elsewhere in sustainability debate (Swyngedouw, 2007) and in spite of the potentially strong normative content of social sustainability questions (Davidson, 2009). Social sustainability has therefore maintained an instrumental purpose, used to ''render existing institutional arrangements more efficient and effective, to manipulate and dominate the social and physical world, and thus to bolster current forms of power'' (Brenner, 2009, p. 202). If this does not change, it is likely that the utility of the social sustainability concept will increasingly come into question.

Short Biography

Mark Davidson is an urban geographer whose research interests lie in three core areas: 'gentrification', 'urban policy, society and community' and 'metropolitan development, planning and architecture'. His research is international in scope, including work in Europe, North America and Australia. He has published authored and co-authored papers in journals such as *Environment and Planning A, Ethics, Place and Environment, Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* and *Urban Studies*. His current research includes a continued examination of new-build gentrification, a theoretical exploration of gentrification-related displacement and the empirically informed consideration of sustainability as a key policy concept. He has held fellowships at the Nelson A. Rockefeller Centre for Public Policy and Social Science, Dartmouth College, USA, and the Urban Research Centre, University of Western Sydney, Australia. Currently, he is an Assistant Professor in the Graduate School of Geography at Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts. He holds a BA (Hons) and PhD in Geography from King's College London, UK.

Notes

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