

Sustainable Brownfield Regeneration: Redrawing the Boundaries of Expertise

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INTRODUCTION

In order to enhance the 'sustainability' of brownfield urban regeneration it is increasingly argued that there needs to be a wholesale re-drawing of the boundaries of expertise. The original objectives of the sustainable development discourses included the idea that powers and responsibilities should be devolved away from professionals, bureaucrats, engineers, and scientists and given to empowered 'lay' communities. In turn this delegation of responsibilities would require communities to develop their own understandings of how social and technical processes operate in order for their inclusion to be effective. They should be able to identify particular problems and play a central role in developing practical, and workable solutions. This shift in thinking reflects wider trends within the social sciences and public policy spheres more broadly in which there has been a greater questioning of traditional models of expertise. Some writers talk of a new era of *post-modernism* where 'certainties' and faith in science and technology have given way to a new era of uncertainty and the celebration of multiple truths and forms of knowledge.

However, the practical barriers involved in implementing these new agendas are significant. For at the same time as the propagation of 'local knowledge' has become a sustainable development priority, many forms of technical knowledge have, ironically, become more complex and esoteric. In some ways, as Giddens (1991) reminds us, the power of *expert systems*, that is experts working together in an organised way, have become more pervasive as technologies become increasingly complicated and beyond the remit of lay communities. Some also argue that there now exists a wider distrust of scientists and scientific knowledge as high profile cases, such as BSE or global warming, have demonstrated that there are obvious limits to scientific understanding. Whilst this may act as a spur to community empowerment, it may also undermine the position of experts to such an extent that their roles and knowledge become undervalued.

This short paper explores some of these themes in relation to the government's sustainable communities and brownfield regeneration agendas. It begins by examining the discourse of the sustainable community before moving on to a discussion of expert-lay knowledge in the development process and the example of Salford Quays.

WHAT IS A SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY?

The core features of a sustainable community (SC) and an unsustainable community are outlined in Table 1. Within a SC community expert-lay relationships are to be redefined so that the latter become more active in shaping the contours of local governance and develop new relationships with planners and others to develop more effective and efficient policy measures. As the Egan Review (ODPM, 2004) points out SC can only be delivered if professionals adopt new ways of interactive working and delegate appropriate powers and resources to locals and their knowledge.

Table 1: The Central Features of Sustainable and Unsustainable Communities

Criteria	A Sustainable Community	An Unsustainable Community
Economic Growth	Flourishing economic base; built on long term commitments; stable; and inclusive of broad range of workers.	Domination by dependent forms of development; lack of employment opportunities; vulnerable; insecure, short-term; and divisive.
Citizenship	Active citizens and communities; long-term community stewardship; effective political engagement; healthy voluntary sector and strong social capital.	Passive and dependent citizens and communities; lack of community engagement or ownership; low levels of voluntary activity and/or social capital.
Governance	Representative, accountable governance systems; balance of strategic, top down visionary politics and bottom up emphasis on inclusion,	Closed, unaccountable systems of governance; over-reliance on passive, representative forms of democracy; lack of visionary politics; parochialism.
Community Characteristics	Broad range of skills within workforce; ethnically and socially diverse; mixture of socio-economic types of inhabitants; balanced community; well-populated neighbourhoods.	Absence of skills within workforce; ill-balanced communities of place; high levels of (physical) separation between groups; lack of diversity; formal and informal segregation; lack of population.
Urban Design	Diverse architecture; accessible public spaces; higher urban densities; provision of broad range of amenities; buildings that cater for a range of needs; 'self-contained' communities; the creation of 'place'.	Uniform, zoned, architecture; closed, gated and inaccessible public spaces; absence of community facilities; urban sprawl; 'placeless' suburban development.
Environmental Dimensions	Re-use of brownfield sites; minimisation of transport journeys; good quality public transport	Expansion into greenfield sites; maximisation of transport journeys; car dependence and the absence of public transport
Quality of Life	Attractive environments; high quality of life; strong pull for a range of social groups.	Low quality of life; strong push for a range of social groups.
Identity, Belonging and Safety	Sense of community identity and belonging; tolerance, respect and engagement between people of diverse backgrounds; low levels of crime and anti-social behaviour.	Lack of local associational culture and ownership of public space; intolerant and divided local politics; high levels of crime, disorder and fear.

(Source: adapted from ODPM, 2003)

However, building-up the relationships between 'experts' and lay communities is fraught with difficulties. There are often very different perspectives over the visions and priorities of brownfield development and how it should proceed. There are particular difficulties over the following:

1. *Development time-scales*: Sustainability places a new emphasis on the *longer term* implications of actions taken in the present for citizens and communities of the future. As such it draws attention not only to questions of how development should be implemented but also *when* particular objectives should be prioritised and at what point(s) in the development process. The whole concept of sustainability requires new forms of imagined trust in which new timescales are established through which the 'benefits' of development projects are to be delivered. Communities can no longer expect or demand that their immediate needs should be prioritised. Instead, those needs have to be understood as part of a longer-term agenda of change so that 'practices and institutions based on promise allow for the securing of a future event in the present' (Adam, 1994: p.139). In practice the emergence of the sustainability discourse raises the possibility of a new *politics of time* in which the coming into being of particular types of (urban) space becomes an explicitly politicised and power-infused process. Experts and development interests may have particular perspectives on what they define as a sustainable time period whereas others may have more immediate needs.

2. *Definitions of Risk:* Authors such as Alan Irwin (1995) have identified the different conceptions of risk that exist in urban areas between 'experts' and 'lay' communities. Risks and the acceptance of risks are defined by particular contexts. The evidence shows that they often feel *less* at risk than the official definitions applied by experts. This partly results from the convoluted processes through which sites are labelled 'contaminated' in the first place and the loosely defined nature of the term. At the same time other social aspects of a site, such as its associations with crime, may be uppermost in the minds of local people, rather than the physical dangers that scientists may highlight. Often there can be a real sense in which experts become frustrated with what they see as the lack of knowledge on the part of lay communities and lay communities become frustrated with the narrowness of experts' perspectives.
3. *Brownfields, Heritage and Place:* At the same time as experts may see brownfields as a problem to be addressed, tackled, and made safe, the wider meanings associated with brownfields vary significantly from place to place and for different groups. They can be, at the same time, empty places ripe for development and sites that play an important role in people's perception of their local areas. Similar points have recently been made by English Heritage, for example, in its criticisms of the SCs plan and its simple, top-down definitions of areas such as the Thames Gateway which has been labelled a problem place when, in reality, sites within it possess enormous cultural and historic value. The Environment Agency has also been critical of the plans for their failure to address issues of urban biodiversity and the role of brownfields in providing habitats for urban wildlife.
4. *Openness to Alternative Perspectives?* One of the recurring problems with expert-lay relationships is that people do not approach subjects as 'blank slates'. All citizens and communities approach topics from perspectives forged from their own experiences. People often feel they know in advance what their views are about particular topics, before they hear the 'evidence'. This lack of openness may be a real barrier to a more inclusive set of lay-expert relationships. In the same way the assumptions, perceptions, and priorities of development may be odds with wider community needs and there may be little ground for interests to adapt their perspectives.

The remainder of the paper uses the example of Salford Quays in Greater Manchester to illustrate some of these wider points.

THE SALFORD QUAYS DEVELOPMENT

The redevelopment of Salford Quays (SQ) has been one of the highest-profile examples of urban regeneration in the UK. The SQ project emerged in a context of development and decline in an area whose fortunes have always been closely tied to its docks. Until the late 1960s Salford Docks had a successful history as an inland port following the opening of the Manchester Ship Canal in 1894. Local industry thrived and communities of workers migrated into the area, attracted by the availability of work and the unusual stability of local dock labour. However, by the early 1970s changing shipping technology and trade patterns saw activity in the docks decline. Their eventual closure in 1982 symbolised the wider process of de-industrialisation that was affecting Greater Manchester and other industrial cities and the area became blighted by high levels of unemployment. In the neighbouring area of Ordsall, which had supplied many of the dock workers, unemployment was registered at 32% in 1985 compared to 15% in Greater Manchester. Social problems increased and Salford became a classic example of a deprived inner urban area with relatively high rates of crime, drug-abuse, and (selective) out-migration. In the case of Ordsall these culminated in a series of riots in the summer of 1992.

The visible extent of decline in Salford made it a target for policy-makers from the mid 1970s onwards. In 1978, for example, parts of Manchester and Salford were designated under the Inner Areas Act and in 1981 a significant portion of what was to become Salford Quays (as well as land in Trafford Park) became an Enterprise Zone for a ten year period. In 1983 Salford City Council (SCC) purchased the dock site and associated land (a site of 37ha.) from the Manchester Ship Canal Company and even at this early stage the idea of a water-based development, influenced by North America ideas, emerged on to the agenda. The subsequent redevelopment of SQ required a large input of up-front finance. The bulk of this funding was provided by central government with a £25million rolling grant from 1985 -1990/1 from the Derelict Land Grant. This was used for land and water clearance and remediation. Money also came from the Urban Programme for the provision of infrastructure, landscaping and roads. SCC were so successful in putting together development bids that in the period 1985-2002, £145million in public funds were

sunk into Salford Quays, including a £65million National Lottery Grant for the Lowry – a performance arts theatre and gallery.

The role of experts has been critical to the shaping of development agendas in the area:

Policy-makers, planners and specialist consultants: In SQ these actors have set out local development visions and used their resources and technical knowledge of the planning process to implement the strategies. As our research indicated policy-making in Salford during the 1980s and into the 1990s was dominated by a relatively small group of local political actors and their technical staff. The focus at the outset was primarily on encouraging 'confidence' within the development community in order to kick-start development. There was less concern with 'sustainability' issues and a greater emphasis on mixing communities by encouraging the in-migration of middle class residents.

Developers and investors: the resources and visions of investors have, of course, been critical to the development. Their relationship with local communities and the locality in general has been complex. On the one hand, they are focused on making a profit in the short term and in Salford Quays a number of developers approached the area in this way. However, building a sense of place was also important for longer term investors and those in the property industry for whom returns depended on the longer term attractiveness of the area. Some developers and investors have therefore developed more open and transparent development agendas, involving discussions with local actors/communities.

Scientists, Technicians and Engineers: the role of scientists in turning SQ from a brownfield problem into a flagship development site has been considerable. Technologies, such as water aeration, have been developed in the area to enable it to become an investment space. In SQ the technical input of scientists has been more concerned with the early stabilisation of markets to attract investment, rather than any wider community need.

Other State Officers: a range of other experts have also been called upon to help deliver local regeneration. The actions of the Police, for example, have become essential to the success or otherwise of the developments. Similarly, others such as those working for RDAs, the area's museums, and other social services all have critical roles to play in shaping the contours of subsequent rounds of development and expansion.

The research examined the relationships between these groups, their development agendas, and local communities. It identified the following findings:

Community Perspectives: there were two principal community groups in SQ – existing residents in Ordsall and the new communities of in-migrants who had purchased accommodation in the SQ developments. In general there were two main criticisms: first, little had been done to consult existing residents on the plans for SQs and as a consequence there was little in the way of community 'ownership' of the development. This failure to consult had generated local scepticism over the objectives of the redevelopment. Second, the new in-migrants also felt that little was being done to canvass their perspectives on the area and their needs. There was a sense that the development had thus far failed to develop much of a 'sense of place' as this had not been a development priority for any of the experts involved in drawing up and implementing the plans. Rather than creating a sustainable community in the sense outlined in Table 1 the developments had thus far generated a large amount of property-led development but had done little in the way of creating active and inclusive communities.

Engagement with Planners and Developers: The mechanisms through which local people could influence the actions of experts (and could find out about the projects that were going on around them) were in the main absent and little was being done to rectify this – despite the new sustainability rhetoric. There had been little attempt to explain to local residents what the main contours of development were and what it was seeking to achieve. The research found that locals had many fears about the development – some of which were corroborated by the research interviews, others of which were not. There was little awareness of how decisions had been made, who was making them, and what influence local action could have. For example, in Ordsall many respondents feared that the process of development encroachment would lead to the longer term destruction of their communities and their forcible exclusion. Little effort had been made to address this fear, a process that in itself reinforced the perception.

Engagement with Scientists and Development Experts: The links between these experts and local communities however, were very weakly developed. Scientists were employed for a particular purpose and they carried out their task efficiently and without much recourse to wider concerns or issues about what should be done in the area.

The Politics of Redevelopment: whatever the wider concern with building sustainable places, the politics of redevelopment in sites such as SQ always required decisions to be made over who benefits from development, at what stage in the process, and with what socio-economic impacts. Consequently, the research indicated that the politics of time should be enhanced and made more explicit i.e. debates concerning the phasing of development and when different groups can expect to experience the benefits of a redevelopment. The idea of a win-win development that characterised much of the hyperbole surrounding SQ exemplifies how this process may take place in practice.

CONCLUSIONS

The discourse of sustainability brings the promise of new, more open and accountable relationships between experts and lay communities. It is premised on a 'breaking open' of decision-making making them more inclusive and effective. However, our research has found that at present these relationships are characterised by widespread mis-understandings and differences of opinion. In SQ there have been few mechanisms established to assist in the process. What is required is a greater emphasis on politics and engagement, with all participants aware of the role that their knowledge plays in the development process and what the implications of their decisions are.

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