
Editorial

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1 Introduction

When the term 'sustainability' first came into play, it was associated with 'the characteristic of a process or state that can be maintained indefinitely' (Jabareen, 2008, p.181), looking at ways to enhance and strengthen the carrying capacities of supporting ecosystems (International Union for the Conservation of Nature, 1991). More recently, 'sustainability' has come to encompass a broader connotation, an 'overarching political value' (Buckingham and Theobald, 2003; Parra, 2010, p.492) or more in general, a statement suggesting why something needs to be done and how it should be done. This

shift in discourse has occurred as a result of how ‘sustainability’ has been conceptually framed in relation to wider debates about ‘sustainable development’. The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs” (WCED, 1987). It reframed the notion of ‘sustainability’ as one underpinned by a core set of ‘values’ shaped by competing interests between ‘the economy, environment and equity’ (Berke, 2002; Winston, 2009, p.1782), or to what Campbell (1996) referred to as the ‘sustainability triangle’. What remains problematical still today, however, is the operationalisation of the process of ‘sustainability’ and of the values underpinning its definition. Competing interpretations and conflicting conceptions about the goal of ‘sustainable development’ raise questions about how it should be understood and about what it implies for policy and planning (Redclift, 2005). With economic, environmental and social goals framing decisions on the use of land and on the management of natural resources, planning has become crucial to how ‘sustainability’ is both interpreted and delivered on the ground.

Central to planning, thinking and practice, sustainability is writ large in the policy and academic literatures, with explicit references to planning widely available in key international documents, reports, statements and goals. As an academic discipline and a professional practice, through research, policy and legislation planning explores a broad range of issues that are central to discourses around sustainability, such as the interlinkages between natural and human systems including questions of environmental justice. Planning provides mechanisms for delivering sustainability as well, by ensuring informed, participatory and accountable decision making in managing change and development, whilst preserving and enhancing environmental values and resources. It explores the impacts that a development issue raises, the way in which solutions are negotiated and decisions are made, and the extent to which current planning systems are aiding or hindering the goal of sustainable development, by promoting economic, social and environmental values.

Sustainability is, therefore, treated as a ‘golden thread’ that runs through planning in its every shape, form or mechanism, based on the view that tackling societal problems and the impacts of people’s behaviours and attitudes towards the natural and socio-economic environments is an inherent mission of planning for sustainability. However, over the last two decades sustainability has also become somewhat of a cliché and an ideological construct (Luke, 2005), evoking critical questions in planning research and practice. For example, has sustainability enhanced the credentials of policy-, plan- and decision-making? Following the motto ‘think globally and act locally’, has it provided the basis for unravelling power struggles and for legitimising ‘greener governance’? Has it helped to make planning processes and their outcomes more environmentally and socially just and equitable? With the emergence of climate change as the most critical and urgent issue that needs moral and legal radical action at all planning levels and consideration through planning mechanisms and tools, has the planning discourse moved on from debates about contested sustainability? Should the centrality of sustainability as the overarching principle guiding the formulation, implementation and delivery of policies and plans be reconsidered or reevaluated?

Many of these issues and questions were debated at the UK–Ireland Planning Research Conference hosted by Newcastle University from 1 to 3 April 2009 in Newcastle upon Tyne (UK). One of the main purposes of this annual conference is to act as a stimulus for debating and addressing critical and emerging issues for planning and,

moreover, to provide planners at the outset of their careers in academia and practice with a platform to display their current interests and research. This Special Issue brings together some of the papers presented at the conference to provide the trans-disciplinary readers of the *Int. J. Sustainable Society (IJSoc)* with an introduction to the role of planning in managing our changing environment and modern societies' problems in the quest for sustainable development. Furthermore, in line with the journal's vision, this Special Issue aims to contribute to the discussion between academics and practitioners on how we can advance our understanding of sustainability and on how planning can help to address, mitigate and perhaps prevent major societal, economic and environmental concerns by delivering more sustainable policies and plans.

2 Themes explored in the Special Issue

With this Special Issue, our intention is to stimulate critical reflective debate and exploration of the 'balances' between the multifaceted dimensions of sustainability through the breadth of planning, as both a field of study and a profession of practice. We have selected a diverse range of contributions for publication, which collectively explore how the relationships between physical spaces and places and cultural norms could change to deliver more sustainable outcomes; and individually, how the adoption of sustainability principles and practices can foster more creative planning solutions.

The opening paper by Bagaen investigates how power, influence and inequality in planning processes can affect the creation of socially and environmentally sustainable communities. Drawing on post-rational planning critiques and on the techniques of discourse analysis, Bagaen contributes to this debate by unpacking the hidden power dynamics used by participants in a public local inquiry on an urban development in Scotland. He demonstrates how an apparently transparent process designed to offer an equitable resolution of planning disputes can be pervaded by power plays, and how planners can be vulnerable to the influence of power. The underlying assumption in the paper is that a planning discourse cannot be understood without taking context into account; this includes the values and power embedded into the language and body of written information used to inform the conclusions of planning applications. Thus, for Bagaen, if planning is to support the creation of sustainable communities by challenging social inequality, power and empowerment, then it is crucial that planners broaden their horizons and be prepared to acknowledge the role of power in decision making, and be aware of how (their) bias and dominant assumptions can transcend into the planning language and communications. This reflects a theme evident in many of the papers contributing to this Special Issue, that a key challenge for the achievement and fostering of sustainability is related to the way in which planning engages with political, moral and ethical concerns, and demands that those who are charged with deploying controls over the use of space deliver more sustainable outcomes.

The next three papers examine the challenges of engaging with 'sustainability' in contexts beyond the UK. Allin looks at how the delivery of sustainable planning outcomes is challenged by complex organisational and social governance structures. To address this challenge and the complexities of a sustainability-driven policy agenda, perhaps a new understanding of what (spatial) planning is about, how it works and what it is supposed to do is needed. Reflecting on the formal land use planning system in Germany and on the need to meet the country's post-industrial demands, this is the

argument put forward by Allin in her paper. Through the application of a technical-rational framework, she explores the extent to which traditional planning instruments, reliant on prescriptive zoning and master plans, can meet the changes of time and still cope with evolving governance actor networks for urban development. How can the scope of formal land use plans be broadened at different levels of planning intervention? Allin attempts to answer this question by suggesting amendments to the model of German local land use plans, exploring the dilemma between a model criticised for being too inflexible, rigid and limited in scope yet able to guarantee certainty and reliability; and a more strategic and time bound model capable of addressing aspects of sustainability, urban growth or decline and urban regeneration, whilst offering flexibility and responsiveness towards rapidly changing directions.

Picketts and Curry provide an insight into the gradual awakening of the planning profession to the implications of global warming. The need to manage and plan within changing contexts and directions should not exclude the consideration that individual, professional and organisational norms and practices should also change in support of planning for sustainability. In their paper about adaptation to climate change in northern British Columbia (Canada), Picketts and Curry alert planners that they can no longer rely on the past as a proxy for the future, and on established skills and knowledge. Looking at the implications of global warming for a northern community located in an environment which will become more hazardous over time as the climate becomes more volatile, the authors suggest that planners, academics and other practitioners need to collaborate more closely together, crossing disciplinary, professional and organisational boundaries, norms and cultural assumptions, to develop capacity, skills and knowledge to tackle what is now known as the biggest environmental threat to date. Planners need to work more closely with their communities, as well, to ensure that they become more resilient to the impacts of climate change, they capitalise on the positive impacts and maximise adaptation and mitigation cobenefits.

With her paper, Gullino refocuses our attention on the role of social inclusion and on how creative planning solutions can promote social sustainability. By equating 'social sustainability' to a 'provision of diverse, physical resources for communities' (such as mix of housing stock), she expresses deep concerns into how the 'social' dimension of 'sustainability' has been interpreted in policy initiatives. As a result, Gullino argues that such strategies often regard 'people' and their 'activities' as passive in making 'sustainable places'. Alternatively, she demonstrates, through an examination of the interactions between people and artwork in public places, that social sustainability is not about making 'static' spaces to control how people should behave, but rather to allow people the flexibility to interact with other people in unpredictable and engaging ways. Gullino's paper provides a refreshing insight into what she terms 'urban spaces of movement' and on the role that public art can play in humanising facilities intended to promote more sustainable systems of transport. Her arguments demonstrate the need to take on board this aspect of urban planning in creating more congenial spaces. They also stimulate us into thinking about how planners, and other professions charged with making urban development processes more sustainable, should consider the impact of their policies on the social interactions that tie urban spaces together.

The final paper by Mell evaluates the effectiveness of community forest programmes as an instrument of environmental sustainability. Mell's paper offers a rural counterpoint to Gullino by evaluating the efforts made in recent years to adapt the Community Forest Programme promoted by English legislation to serve as an instrument of sustainability.

Originally designated in 1990 to demonstrate how improvements to the physical landscape could support economic and social regeneration in post-industrial communities, these partnerships were forced to adapt to a withdrawal of funding sources in 2007. Mell considers the effectiveness of subsequent efforts to promote green infrastructure planning as a central component in the management of community forests. Drawing on specific case studies, his research reveals considerable variations in adapting to change and developing a new role model for these facilities. Two interesting questions are engaged in Mell's paper:

- 1 How do actors and institutions, charged with delivering 'sustainability' goals/targets, respond and adapt to uncertainty? How do the questions of scale affect the manner in which 'sustainability' plays out on the ground?
- 2 How might policy initiatives be developed so that the notion of 'sustainability' serves to link up 'community well-being' and 'access to and control of natural resources'? Through an in-depth examination of these questions, Mell points out the importance of 'resilience', as a core value underpinning policy initiatives to achieve 'sustainability'.

3 Future directions for research and reflection

Putting together a Special Issue on the theme of 'sustainability and planning' has been a pretty ambitious task indeed. This Special Issue demonstrates, as warned by O'Riordan (1993) and Jacobs (1991), due to its vagueness anything can be claimed to be delivering 'sustainability' and promoting 'sustainable development'. Although a certain extent of agreement has been reached on its definition, 'sustainability' remains still today a contestable concept difficult to operationalise and open to different interpretations. But what does this entail for planning and its future directions of research and practice?

A recurring message in the papers included in this Special Issue appears to be the idea of 'change' in relation to planning for sustainability. On the one hand, in line with the planning literature and established planning traditions, planning is explored as a tool or instrument for/of change reacting to impulses of governmentality and of wider development agendas, and its effectiveness is evaluated. Here, planning is portrayed as a mechanism that can respond to changing environmental, social and economic values and can facilitate change to foster sustainability and more sustainable outcomes. On the other hand, a more reflective message that is emerging from the Special Issue is the need for change to occur within planning, as both a field of study and profession of practice. The papers offer insights into the way in which planning can be exercised as a form of control through the languages it uses, the organisational and social governance networks it relies on, and the breadth of scope it embraces and the skills required, affecting the extent to which principles of sustainability are guiding the formulation and implementation of planning policies.

In light of emerging critical sustainability challenges, such as climate change and human security, and of increasing calls to join efforts with other professions to address such challenges, is there a need to reevaluate planning as a mechanism for delivering sustainability? In terms of skills and knowledge and underlying norms, is planning equipped to take into account the new material realities of science and technology, the critical natural environment and their social consequences? Since the 'think globally and

act locally' catch-phrase's popularisation, planning has been attempting to implement one of the inherent contradictions in the delivery of 'sustainability'. Prompted by the need to assist governments in the transition towards a low-carbon economy, planning has been combining top-down approaches in the quest to meet international and central government targets, with bottom-up approaches empowering society to shape how it ought to be to pursue sustainability. On this basis, for those planning regimes where there is no overriding central power to shape the development pathway (e.g. Canada), can local initiatives make up for the lack of central direction and nevertheless deliver sustainability? Equally, where there is strong central planning power (e.g. the UK and Germany), does this disempower local initiatives or diminish the local emphasis and make the process of planning for sustainability more a matter of simply adhering to central guidance and avoiding any locally based initiatives such as green infrastructures? In addition, there are calls for planning to be more open to, and stimulated by, 'collateral' thinking, by collaborating more closely with other fields of study and professions charged with making urban development and environmental management processes more sustainable, to create new avenues of inquiry or new ways of problematising social phenomena and negotiating solutions that cut across disciplinary and professional boundaries. As suggested by some of the ideas in this Special Issue, further creative and interdisciplinary approaches are needed to effectively take into account the impacts of policies on the social interactions that tie urban spaces together and to modify the relationships between physical spaces and cultural norms to deliver more sustainable outcomes.

In other words, given the top-down, bottom-up and side-ways or collateral pressures through which planning is attempting to deliver sustainability, can it help to 'square the sustainability circle'? Consistent with some of the ideas presented in this Special Issue, Robinson (2004) argues that the problem of squaring the circle can be solved by using an approach that is more integrative, goes beyond technical fixes and established professional and disciplinary norms, incorporates a recognition of the social dimension of sustainability and engages local communities in new and creative ways. We hope that with this Special Issue the 'planning contribution' to the ongoing debate about sustainable society captured in the *IJSSoc* can bring new ideas and stimulate productive debates amongst its trans-disciplinary readers, setting the basis for more creative thinking and practice.

Our contributors reflect the healthy state of the planning academy and profession at present. The new generation of planners has been trained, not simply to reconcile conflicting land uses, but to shape the spatial pattern of development in ways that offer more sustainable outcomes. The challenges they face are epitomised by the topics covered in this Special Issue. What they demonstrate, above all, is that statutory planning together with its academic foundations addresses an exciting portfolio of issues, posing demanding problems and raising questions that require further research and reflection. There is no doubt that solutions to these problems and answers to questions require an investment of human capital of the nature displayed here and, as reflexive practitioners, planners possess the required tools and skills for creating political dialogue and framing opportunities for choice.

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