

	<p>ESRC Research Seminar The Governance of Eco-City Innovation www.westminster.ac.uk/ecocities-esrc</p>
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Seminar 1 (20 May 2011)

Eco-City Governance: defining the research and policy agenda

Synthesis Report

The first in this series of Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded seminars was hosted by the University of Westminster in London on 20 May 2011. It brought together researchers, policy experts and practitioners to discuss contemporary international eco-city developments. A series of talks explored the historical context of the eco-city, examined a wide range of case studies, and considered the phenomenon from a range of theoretical angles. The key aim of this launch event was to stimulate discussion of what the parameters of the debate should be informing the evolving research and policy agenda; and to facilitate networking among researchers, practitioners and policy-makers. In turn, this will inform the subsequent events in this two-year seminar series.



Problematic

Despite – or because of – its widespread adoption around the world, the term ‘eco-city’ continues to elude definition. If it is understood as no more than a fashionable ‘umbrella’ label, adopted cynically for its vague yet positive connotations, and applied to a heterogeneous mass of unrelated initiatives, its significance as a social phenomenon is questionable. Alternatively, if it is understood as a collective label denoting a variety of genuine efforts by researchers, policy-makers, practitioners and civil society actors to advance our knowledge and practice of urban sustainability, it merits more in-depth comparative analysis. The fact of eco-city diversity need not preclude the identification of some common tendencies, even if these are only inconsistently observable. To capture these, the challenge would be to draw up a single but multi-dimensional analytical framework within which individual eco-cities can be positioned, thus facilitating international comparisons and contrasts, but without abandoning the notion that the eco-city is a coherent object of study. In short, there is definitional work to be done to *identify the key dimensions of eco-cities and eco-city governance*.

But as well as categorising the ‘what’, it is important to understand the ‘how’. Insofar as eco-cities emerge from and evolve through political processes, it is relevant to ask *which theoretical and conceptual perspectives are most useful for analysing eco-city governance*.

Achieving these goals might allow us to chart the trajectory of the eco-city in all its multiplicity. But there is also a question of evaluation - how success should be defined and measured. In other words: *how do/would we know whether eco-city initiatives achieve urban sustainability?*

These questions framed the preliminary seminar, along with a further, more practical question for consideration throughout the series: *what are the implications of all this for local, national and international policy-making?*

Summary of Key Discussion Points

The following section summarises key points emerging from the various presentations. For reference, the seminar programme and presentations can be downloaded from the seminar webpage (www.westminster.ac.uk/ecocities-esrc).

There was broad agreement on several fundamentals:

- that the eco-city phenomenon should be understood as a multiple ongoing process of innovation, rather than defined in any one way. The presentation of a wide variety of international case studies both illustrated this multiplicity and fleshed out the analytical framework suggested by Simon Joss (University of Westminster), which categorises eco-city dimensions into urban structures and relationships, policies, socio-political discourses, and concepts/ideas/visions. Attempting to map the eco-city phenomenon in this way helps as a means of discerning key characteristics and dynamics and, in turn, asking how eco-cities can meaningfully be distinguished from ‘normal’ cities.
- that it makes sense to examine the links between eco-cities and their stated purpose of urban sustainability – even if the latter has never been satisfactorily defined, and is itself, in the words of Yvonne Rydin (University College London), a “multiply complex problem”.
- that certain political conditions appear to favour or hinder the emergence of eco-city initiatives in particular places; these relate to the degree of fragmentation of urban governance, and the level of agreement between different stakeholder groups. The coincidence of a strong local political leader with functionaries and residents sharing the leader’s vision was posited, for example, as particularly propitious for eco-city development. The point here is not the self-evident one that projects are more likely to proceed when all interested parties are in agreement, but rather that eco-cities are products of their socio-political contexts as much as they are technological-environmental experiments.

Thinking about contexts takes us beyond the dynamics of planning and implementation, into questions of *motivation*. Gerd Lintz (Leibniz Institute of Ecological and Regional Development, Dresden) explored why cities decide to become ‘eco-cities’. He presented a theoretical model of “rational environmental decision-making” which took into account both rational choice theories as

well as values and preferences, to analyse the costs and benefits of environmental policies within the city, within the region and beyond.

But if such decisions are made in a local context, they still draw on shared international discourses of sustainability – mediated though these may be through contingent socio-cultural lenses and political processes. Some aspects of eco-city practice, in other words, should translate easily from one context to the next, and possibilities for sharing experiences are therefore to be welcomed as a means to address resource capacity problems (which are cited as a barrier to eco-city development in many locations). To this end, Mark Roseland (Simon Fraser University, Canada) introduced the newly launched online ‘Sustainable Communities Research Network’, with policy-makers/planners, commercial practitioners, and academics all invited to take part. The potential value of cross-sector communication was illustrated by the case of Brøset-Trondheim – presented by Eli Stoa (University of Trondheim) – a Norwegian eco-city initiative (still in the planning stage) which has clearly benefitted from close involvement between local planners and academic researchers from the outset.

From a less optimistic perspective, the implementation of eco-cities can be presented as the result of political struggle; the outcome of conflicts between different discourses and resources; the product of the interplay of various agents differently positioned within networks of power. The way in which any given eco-city is envisioned, implemented and governed can be theorised as reflecting differing overlapping ‘framings’ of the issue; in each case, different types of local knowledge, assumptions and desired outcomes will be variously represented in policy development, as Dan Greenwood (University of Westminster) suggested. Relatedly, Elizabeth Rapoport (University College London) and Anne Lorene Vernay (Delft University of Technology) showed how eco-city diversity can be usefully explored through discourse analysis of the ways that different eco-cities envision their contribution to sustainability. Yvonne Rydin outlined the case for network analysis as a tool both for analysing the different forms that eco-cities take, and for designing tactical interventions to “reshape the linkages” in networks in favour of eco-city development.



One participant expressed the reservation that network analyses may be of less relevance in more centralised or authoritarian states. However, as Fangzhu Zhang (University of Cardiff) explored in her analysis of the eco-city movement in China, it is clear that central government incentivises but does not ‘impose’ eco-city development. Rather, local governments compete fiercely to secure access to funding and resources and the ‘green’ technology employment which eco-

cities have been shown to bring; complex networks of competition and collaboration can thus be identified. Grass-roots support for eco-cities, moreover, goes beyond instrumental calculations of

self-interest; national Chinese government has expressed unease over local enthusiasm for eco-cities, seeing in them a subversive zeitgeist which threatens their own centralised power. On the one hand, then, China's success can be ascribed to a broad alignment of central government, local government, and popular opinion. On the other, this alignment conceals an instructive tension; while promoted as a practical attempt to resolve multiple problems of urbanisation and environmental degradation, the eco-city simultaneously constitutes a threat to the political status quo.

Measuring China's 'success' by counting residential units, however, is clearly unsatisfactory. If it is accepted that the eco-city process is subordinate to the broader, and internationally accepted, goal of urban sustainability, then the well-documented difficulties of measuring sustainability undermine our ability to evaluate eco-cities. Judging each development on its own merits veers towards tautology, but standardising the criteria may not be an easily achievable goal. In the spirit of innovation, however, there is no particular reason why existing (competing) measures cannot be tested on different initiatives as the process evolves, and themselves evolve as necessary. Using the example of the BedZed initiative in South-West London, Sue Riddlestone (BioRegional, London) outlined her organisation's approach to creating sustainable urban communities through its One Plant Living/Community framework of '10 principles' (used to guide both action and measurement). In similar vein, Jennie Moore (University of British Columbia) outlined the successive eco-city initiatives pursued by Vancouver (Canada), including the 'EcoDensity Charter' and the more recent 'Greenest City' initiative; and she explained the current work by Ecocity Builder (Richard Register's eco-city organisation) to develop the 'International Ecocity Framework and Standards'.

Measuring success is further problematised by a lack of clarity over the desired 'city-ness' of eco-cities. How well do existing eco-city visions square with the social discord and tension present in actual cities? We might expect any assessment of sustainability to include a social element – at least a summary measure of health and happiness. Yet the term 'eco-city' focuses attention, Mark Roseland suggested, on the environmental aspects of sustainability at the expense of the social (and economic). Significant environmental changes may, furthermore, depend on anterior social changes; social change, conversely, cannot be predicted from specific interventions in the built environment. In any case, it was agreed that not enough is yet known about the social lives of eco-cities, and that further research was needed.

Eco-cities are, then, plainly more than autonomous technological interventions; their socio-political dimensions mean they cannot be replicated and expanded at will – and therefore questions of scale arise. The widespread initial objections to the UK government's proposed eco-towns for England act as a reminder of the risk of 'top-down' eco-city planning being received as anti-democratic, its normative aspects being seen as authoritarian, its provocatively asserted 'cityness' an affront to a constructed notion of rural life. Equally, it was noted that the West should be wary of imposing the eco-city model (in whatever guise) onto developing countries. If, alternatively, the impetus for the eco-city is most strongly felt at local level, this is a problem when – as in the UK – local authorities are systemically discouraged from risk taking. One policy strategy might be for national governments to encourage eco-city development through 'nudges' rather than coercive mandate. Risks to local authorities might be minimised, for example, by facilitating 'revenue neutral' local tax shifts in favour of eco-development. 'Nudges' are already built into the local philosophy of the Brøset-

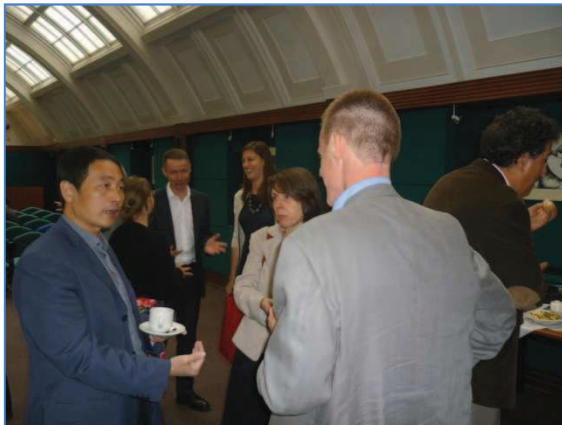
Trondheim eco-city initiative, as “an area where it is easy to live an environmentally friendly ‘low-emission’ life”, and reflected in the BioRegional principle of “making it easy to do the right thing”.

Outlook

These discussions paved the way for the future seminars in the series which will explore: eco-cities’ internal policy co-ordination and integrated systems management (Seminar 2; October 2011); their political frameworks and management (Seminar 3; February 2012); their social embedding and resonance (Seminar 4; May 2012); and the possibilities and limits of international co-operation and ‘good governance’ (Seminar 5; October 2012).

The first seminar as a whole was characterised by a sense of optimism, that the eco-city phenomenon represents a useful experimental process, its dynamic and multiple nature itself a source of hope, with the potential for its various successes to be consolidated through better dialogue internationally and between different stakeholder groups. But this optimism was tempered by the difficulties of identifying and measuring success, and by concerns that our political understanding of the eco-city needs to be tied back more closely to notions of sustainability which go beyond environmental innovation. Nevertheless, re-emphasising the socio-political aspects of eco-cities should not mean overlooking their technological character, as confluences of overlapping innovative systems in need of integration, and consequently, policy coordination. The challenges of managing this functional complexity, accordingly, form the basis for the next seminar in the series, to be held in October this year.

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