



Seminar 4 (30 May 2012)

Bringing eco-cities to life: community engagement, local activism

Synthesis Report

The fourth in this series of Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded seminars was hosted by the University of Westminster in London on 30 May 2012. The event was convened by John Barry (Queen’s University Belfast) and Sarah Burgess (University of the West of England), who are partners in this ESRC initiative.

Previous seminars had explored inter-related questions of the *integration* and *governance* of eco-city innovation.¹ Certain common themes had emerged, including: the nature of the tensions between the ‘green’ and the socio-economic aspects of the eco-city; the difficulties of accommodating the lengthy timeframes required for eco-city development within existing political processes; scale issues, in particular the question of how individual initiatives (covering, for example, a small urban district) might relate to the city as a whole, and how in turn whole eco-cities might relate to their hinterlands; and the questions raised when new forms of hybrid governance arise, bringing together different institutions and organisations, in terms of public and democratic accountability. In this most recent event, the role of the public was approached from a different angle – that of local communities and activists themselves.

As Simon Joss (University of Westminster) commented in his opening remarks, this aspect of urban sustainability appears often to be overlooked by policy makers – or at least that there is a risk of it being ‘bolted on’ to the end of an essentially technocratic planning and development process. Involving local communities in the development of eco-city initiatives is, however, problematic in several ways. This seminar set out to explore these problems, drawing on the speakers’ experiences both positive and negative. Across the sessions, certain questions were repeatedly raised and debated in different ways:

How can activist groups successfully encourage the wider community to contribute towards an eco-city initiative?

¹ Synthesis reports from the first three seminars in the series (May 2011 - Eco-City Governance: defining the research and policy agenda; October 2011 - Eco-city innovation: integrated systems management & policy coordination; February 2012 – The Governance of Eco-City Innovation) are available to download from the University of Westminster International Eco-Cities Initiative web pages: <http://www.westminster.ac.uk/research/a-z/ecocities/esrc-research-seminar>

When activism takes the form of opposition to the status quo or establishment, how might the planning system, given that it forms part of this establishment, take account of such challenges in its processes?

At a practical level, if authorities or developers are attempting to engage meaningfully with local communities while planning and designing eco-cities, how might traditional problems of public participation be avoided, such that the process is constructively shaped by local expertise rather than stymied by vested interests?

Summary of Key Discussion Points

In categorising the various actors involved in the definitional work of imagining sustainable urban futures, there is no reason to view the ‘general public’, or even a given ‘local community’, as a monolithic bloc. Rather, any community is likely to contain a plurality of attitudes, ranging on any given topic from apathy to fervent activism – and different activist groups will have different memberships and agendas. The roles played by activists within this may differ, too. Activists may work individually or collectively to lobby or question institutional authorities and hold them to account. Additionally, because governments at different scales may be more receptive to introducing policies or initiatives which are clearly backed by a sizeable (or visible) segment of its electorate, activists need to work to influence public opinion and behaviour. On ‘green’ issues at least, as Christine Holloway (Winchester Action on Climate Change) illustrated, engaging the public is made difficult by a general unwillingness to countenance the idea of radical social change. Those types of behavioural and attitudinal changes with which people do more readily engage, on the

other hand, tend to have only negligible impact on the environment. Thus, while it is demonstrable that activist groups have driven or significantly influenced eco-city initiatives in many countries, there is no straightforward approach which they can adopt to guarantee that their voice will be heard.



One solution is to join forces with other activists or other stakeholders, when specific goals – such as reducing car dependency – are held in common. While this allows for a pooling of resources, however, it may raise a dilemma: in forming the coalition, activists may risk compromising some of their ideals, or “diluting their focus” in Christine Holloway’s words. This dilution may occur either in terms of policies (when other groups’ agendas differ), local relevance (if the partner organisations operate at different scales), or legitimacy (if the partner represents a different type of stakeholder – a private company, for example – which might be more widely construed as upholding the *status quo* which the activists are aiming to challenge). An alternative approach is to reprioritise issues – focusing most attention, if possible, on those which most effectively engage the public *and* have significant environmental impact. Joy Carey (Who Feeds Bristol/Transition Bristol) suggested that food systems are particularly promising in this respect. Who Feeds Bristol identified a groundswell of

public opinion in Bristol on this topic, evidently related to the city's particularly high density of supermarkets – so much so that a proposed opening of a branch of Tesco in 2011 provoked a riot. This level of engagement indicated the presence of an audience highly receptive to the ideal of a sustainable and resilient food economy for Bristol. Joy Carey suggested that this has had particular resonance because it is so obviously rooted in the needs of place (or region). The broader environmental benefits of the cause then became relatively easy to communicate – including via the slogan: “Good for people, good for place, good for the planet”.

Molly Scott-Cato (Cardiff Metropolitan University) similarly focused on the potential problems of long supply chains – including local vulnerability and the weakening of local community bonds. Not only are these increasingly the norm, but there is little mainstream political impetus to change the situation. But this situation is a contingent one. It does not prevail to the same extent in all countries; in the UK specifically she interpreted it as essentially an inheritance from the colonial system – further bolstered though it may have been by neo-liberal globalisation. Molly Scott-Cato suggested that ‘cities’ have even come to be defined as places reliant upon other people’s land – in other words, as places defined by the complexity of their supply chains. She proposed that this understanding of the city might be overturned through a bioregional approach – an embedded economic system which logically allows for no expansion. If, as she argued, population expansion historically has occurred during periods when the connection between people and the land has been lost, then large modern cities may well be fundamentally incompatible with sustainability. The model of the market town might be better suited to the development of more local supply chains. Equally, the need for people to live close to where their resources are may mean that many settlements in inhospitable territories, whose inhabitability currently depends on large supplies of imported fuel (for heating and air-conditioning), may not be feasible in the long-term. Accepting these arguments would entail a fundamental rethinking of the nature of current urban settlement. But whether or not this normative vision is desirable, it does not answer the question of *how* the historical process leading to current forms of urbanisation might be reversed. Existing democratic processes may simply reflect existing preferences for unsustainable lifestyles.

Gerraint Ellis (Queens University Belfast) made a case for the potentially transformative role of the planning system in this respect. Even if “planning has become a dirty word”, it still retains great potential to effect social change, and occupies a unique position in many countries’ regulatory structures. In the UK, for example, unlike most publicly accountable institutions, it has not been deregulated; its vision, meanwhile, goes far beyond that of the electoral cycle. Its historical mission, moreover, was a radical one of intervening in the built environment to effect significant social change – even if it was later incorporated into the state apparatus. Planning still clearly has an important role to play in delivering typical goals of ‘eco-city thinking’ such as reducing car dependency and facilitating low-carbon development. Within it is embedded a very strong ethic of participation – however problematic this has traditionally proven in practice. In theory, then, it provides a forum for imaginative public debate about how the built environment, and society more widely, might change for the better in future.

In practice, however, planning’s reformatory role now tends to be overshadowed by its regulatory one – mainstream discourse constructs it as an overly bureaucratic institution which needs to be made more efficient; its political nature is obfuscated. Gerraint Ellis portrayed planning generally as having become part of the so-called ‘post-political’ world, excluding the possibility of subversive debate. Eco-cities too, he suggested, in many cases manifest this post-political mindset – with notions of ‘growth’ going unquestioned and, accordingly, terms such as ‘smart growth’, ‘sustainable development’, and ‘low carbon economies’ all now consensual terms. If, alternatively, it is accepted that substantial social change cannot be achieved without difficult questions being asked, and that the transition to eco-cities will therefore be as much a political as a technological one, then there is

an obligation on both academics and practitioners to encourage a recognition that substantive progress may only be achievable on the back of robust public debate. On this view, public apathy towards, or rejection of, the eco-city derives not so much from an inherent conservatism as from the way that the debate has been framed exclusively in terms of technological innovation and economic development.

Nevertheless, the fundamental traditional problems of public participation in planning have never been resolved. Gerraint Ellis suggested that the goal of ‘participation’ – like the notion of ‘democracy’ – is inevitably elusive; its practice is defined primarily by questions of power. But the problem is not just one of vested interests or NIMBYism: among the public as a whole, planning and urban design issues – especially those relating to possible future directions rather than concrete plans – are only ever likely to be of interest to a certain segment of a local community. Fred London (John Thompson and Partners) nevertheless argued that, despite their drawbacks, and even if “95% of the population will normally not turn up”, public consultations do potentially remain powerful tools for uncovering issues and insights of which planners and developers will otherwise be unaware. He outlined a system of ‘collaborative placemaking’ founded on a goal of creating trust and creating a sense of local ownership. Particular successes were noted when participants were shown that their individual



objections are not necessarily shared by other members of the public; in other words, where the process has fostered debate between different public groups rather than simply set up a confrontation between ‘the public’ and the developer or the local authority. While making no claims that this approach will satisfactorily represent the local public in a quantitative sense, Fred London presented a series of international eco-city case

studies to suggest that active and creative engagement with the public can provide qualitative input which substantially enhances decision-making processes and accelerates negotiations.

Outlook

It seems self-evident that an eco-city whose design somehow reflects the preferences of its inhabitants (whether they already live there or migrate to it) has a better chance of being socially sustainable than one imposed upon the public against their will. In practice, however, ‘the public’, or ‘the local community’, escapes definition, and rarely speaks with one voice; the conceptual and practical problems of ‘community engagement’ have never been resolved – indeed, questions of public participation are at the heart of political and planning theory. It may be the case that recalcitrance on the part of local and national governments – or on the part of the public – to countenance radical social change, or to ‘ask subversive questions’, is indicative of a ‘post-political’ status quo. Yet the very complexity of involving local communities in planning eco-city initiatives – both in terms of benefits and risks – serves to demonstrate the importance of ‘place’ in the eco-city, raising questions about the transferability of any eco-city ‘blueprint’ which ignores the significance of location-specific activism and public agency more widely.

Yet this does not mean that the need for public acceptance and involvement necessarily functions as an impeding factor for eco-city development. Rather, just like other geographical, technological, or institutional considerations, it might be more fruitfully understood as an enabling design constraint. Insofar as local communities can play a constructive role in shaping locally relevant eco-initiatives, the challenge for eco-city developers is to work to improve existing consultation processes – the public remains a valuable source of local expertise and innovative ideas. The presence or absence of different activist groups (which may be radical or conservative, and more or less politically visible) might best be understood as one aspect of the place-specific political reality which needs to be accommodated in plans.

The questions raised in this and the previous seminars have only been partially and tentatively answered, based on a limited but growing body of empirical evidence – reflecting the current status of the eco-city as an ongoing global process of parallel experiments whose outcome is as yet unclear. The final ESRC seminar in the series, in November 2012, will therefore attempt to draw together the different strands of the discussions so far, not so much to determine a specific way forwards as to firm up a framework in which the wider debate might constructively proceed.

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