ESRC Research Seminar
The Governance of Eco-City Innovation
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Seminar 5 (15 November 2012)
'Good' Governance of International Eco-City Innovation

Synthesis Report

The fifth in this series of Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded seminars was hosted by the University of Westminster in London on 15 November 2012. The event was convened by Liza Griffin (University College London) and Simon Joss (University of Westminster).

This final event brought together the various threads of discussion from the series as a whole, to reach some overall conclusions about how 'good' governance of the eco-city might most usefully be conceptualised.

In previous seminars, the governance of eco-cities had been explored from a variety of particular angles. [1] The 'multiple complexity' of urban sustainability made the question of *integration* a particularly rich area for discussion across all four seminars. Even very localised technology-based interventions are faced with problems of connectivity with existing physical infrastructure and compliance with regulatory frameworks, and their successful implementation may be challenged by prevailing cultural and behavioural norms. When ambitions are broader, relating to the transformation of whole urban districts or city-regions, policy makers and practitioners have to grapple with a wide range of constraining and enabling socio-political factors. The challenge of the eco-city is, therefore, as much one of governance as it is technological; and the complexity of this challenge is only likely to become more apparent as more eco-city initiatives are developed on the ground.

Hiroaki Suzuki (World Bank) framed this governance challenge as having three key dimensions. First, that of vertical integration, ranging from local public opinion through to formal institutions at the local, regional, national and international level. Second, that development 'on the ground' is

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[1] Synthesis reports from the first four 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; May 2012 – Bringing Eco-Cities to Life: Community Engagement, Local Activism) are available to download from the University of Westminster International Eco-Cities Initiative web pages: http://www.westminster.ac.uk/ecocities

predicated on a degree of horizontal integration between different stakeholder groups related to a project – and even *within* stakeholder groups: local authorities themselves may be hampered by a policy 'silo' mentality; a wide variety of views may be evident among the general public; and so on. Third, a lack of temporal integration is commonly identified as a problem: short-term political expediency (particularly in light of the electoral cycle) may conflict with longer-term goals. Since, as Yvonne Rydin (University College London) commented, individual initiatives are inevitably 'situated' in specific socio-technical networks, in which combinations of different actors and systems are assembled in unique ways, it may appear even to be impossible to outline more general principles of 'good' governance.

But even while individual cities face very different environmental, social, economic and institutional challenges, the goal of sustainability continues to be formulated in global terms; humankind's future appears to be increasingly urban. Even if 'once size fits all' practical solutions are unlikely (and undesirable), there remains the possibility that certain high-level principles at least might be transferable. Meanwhile, the pace of international knowledge sharing, in terms of both process and technology, is only increasing. Thus, the discussions focused on the following timely questions in different ways:

> *What is 'good' governance of eco-city innovation? Should this focus on process only, or also engage with the contents of urban sustainability?*

> *How should we identify 'best practice' in terms of policy and practice, and what are the limits to the usefulness of the learning that might result from this?*

> *What are the challenges for international approaches to the sustainable city? In particular, how can the need for international 'standards' be reconciled with local, place-specific approaches?*

Summary of Key Discussion Points

The values and principles typically associated with the concept of 'good governance' were variously highlighted by Simon Joss and Yvonne Rydin. First, in terms of delivering policies, it represents an ideal of both procedural effectiveness and procedural fairness. Second, it potentially facilitates a more efficient use of resources (financial and other) – partly achieved through the creation of competition between service providers. Third, it both encourages and is dependent upon democratic participation; not only is widespread involvement in political processes itself generally understood as morally desirable, but this may also serve to build social capital and social cohesion. Finally, it relies upon, and therefore brings about, greater political accountability. And yet this 'win-win' ideal has attracted various criticisms. In part, these have drawn on empirical observations of the practice of good governance, which Yvonne Rydin suggested were in fact typically characterised by various types of trade-off. Liza Griffin argued that such outcomes should not be seen so much as superficial problems of implementation than as indicative of significant internal tensions and contradictions within the concept itself. In particular, the concept has been interpreted as a 'floating signifier': open to ongoing redefinition by elites with particular agendas, while retaining the appearance of universal validity. Simon Joss pointed out that the common tendency to elide good governance with

democracy is itself problematic – particularly given the typical involvement of potentially less accountable private sector actors in the governance structure, and because it may represent a 'thin' account of governance, failing to account fully for the role of complex contextual factors. The practical transferability of good governance in the case of the eco-city may be therefore be illusory, since the substantive aims, procedural practices, and local context will differ in each case.

Liza Griffin argued that since 'good governance' is only in fact a recent idea, we might expect it to be rooted in specifically contemporary agendas. Indeed, critical analyses of 'good governance' have aligned it with hegemonic 'neoliberal' agendas, and suggested that it serves to 'depoliticise' decision-making. Where its outcomes are 'messy', this has tended to lead to ever more elaborate codification; its failures may, furthermore, be suppressed where authorities invoke 'emergency measures' to override its principles. Liza Griffin therefore likened good governance to a 'philosopher's stone': a goal eternally elusive, but nevertheless worth striving for because it inspires experimentation and valuable learning which might otherwise not occur. Similarly, Yvonne Rydin suggested that good governance should not be dismissed on the basis of its shortcomings in practice; rather, the challenge is to acknowledge these shortcomings, so as to discuss them openly in the process of international best practice sharing. In the case of the eco-city, critical reflection during this process is particularly important since eco-cities are definitively innovative and experimental phenomena; we are only beginning to understand how their development might best be shaped.

Thus, practical experiences of the constraints placed by local contexts on eco-city governance should be used to inform the debate, rather than ignored in the hope of establishing transferable principles. Hiroaki Suzuki described the World Bank's *Eco2 Cities* initiative as an example of a framework of principles which embraces, rather than attempts to abstract itself from, contextual differences. Beginning with the principle that every city faces a unique set of challenges and opportunities, *Eco2 Cities* does not attempt to prescribe the substance of urban sustainability (for example, through the use of fixed sustainability indicators). Rather, it is primarily a procedural governance framework, which enables the substance of each initiative to be defined in a 'bottom-up' way. *Eco2 Cities* therefore provides financial and operational aid to allow this definition to take place, in locations which are otherwise lacking in institutional capacity. Such an approach is clearly an appealing one insofar as attempts to impose sustainability 'from above' are acknowledged to have a poor track record.

However, 'bottom-up' approaches were challenged by several members of the audience, based on the contention that local decision-making is never guaranteed to lead to an optimal solution, either for the locality or in a more global sense. If, as was argued, the primary problem is that of the finite, non-negotiable, limits of the earth's resources, then international technical standards must have a role to play – but, crucially, that these should take the form of 'output' targets (for example, in terms of carbon emissions); the practical means of achieving these targets would most

effectively be decided through local negotiations. On this view, it is precisely the local substance and process of sustainability which cannot be prescribed.

Nevertheless, this argument was in turn problematized by other participants' observation that international standards will always face problems of legitimacy; even if agreement is achievable within the scientific community, the process through which any implementable international standards are introduced will necessarily be a political one. Nor is any easy solution provided by the alternative of simply allowing multiple frameworks to emerge without any overall global guidance (as currently appears to be taking place); this process may be rather less 'organic' than it appears to be, actually shaped by particular – often commercial – interests.

The issue of local legitimation was also raised by Tadashi Matsumoto (OECD) in his discussion of the OECD's *Green Cities Programme*. He suggested that the valorisation of public participation, and the implementation of procedures which enable this, should not be equated with the *actual* engagement of the local public. An important part of assessing legitimacy, in other words, is to measure levels of local engagement. The city of Kitakyushu's *Green Frontier Plan*, launched in 2009 was presented as a Japanese example, where close attention has been paid to the extent

to which the plan was referred to by the wider public, as a means of evaluating its socio-political resonance.

Tadashi Matsumoto spoke in further detail of the importance within governance of monitoring the ongoing progress of eco-city developments. Echoing Simon Joss' earlier words, Tadashi Matsumoto emphasised the need for accountability and transparency in this respect. Such accountability may be undermined if results are not comparable across different cities. The issue of comparability was directly addressed by Klaus Heidinger (Siemens), in his discussion of Siemen's *Green City Index*. This index builds on the assumption that comparable measurements provide a useful foundation for international dialogue. The need for consistency is paramount in this respect – even if it is accepted that the content of measurements, and methods of measuring, will always be contestable – but the current situation is characterised fundamentally by inconsistency. The *Green City Index* aims to meet this need by providing at least regional consistency: African cities are compared against other African cities; European cities against other European ones, etc. It accepts that global consistency may currently be unachievable, with the gap between cities in the developing and developed world in particular posing too much of a challenge. Klaus Heidinger also emphasised the need for data *accessibility* as an important consideration in the encouragement of the sharing of knowledge. To this end, the *Green City Index* presents its data in highly visual ways, and structures these around 'planning language' – that is, it relates indicators to concrete actions which can be taken.

Outlook

The eco-city phenomenon is characterised by its novelty; while drawing on much older traditions within urban planning, it interprets these within a contemporary context. It is also marked by increasing internationalisation, and its often city-wide focus marks a departure from earlier small-scale and 'eco-village' experiments. And yet, it is still very much an experimental process, marked by considerable ongoing learning and cross-fertilisation. It should be accepted, therefore, that the principles of good governance of the eco-city are currently being constructed. Even if, as the academic community suggests, this process of experimentation is taking place within fixed parameters, it is nevertheless these parameters which enable the process to take shape on the ground. Any 'failure' to deliver urban sustainability should be interpreted as an opportunity to explore creatively the nature of these parameters. The short-term goal, then, should not be to define good governance in the case of the eco-city, so much as to put in place mechanisms which allow this to be defined. In this sense, the *communicative* aspects of good governance emerge as particularly significant at this stage of the process of urban sustainability.

The most pressing requirement, therefore, is the encouragement of spaces where this communication can take place, both among the disparate groups involved in policy-making and practical implementation, and between these actors and the academic community. Since the role of the academic community may precisely be that of highlighting shortcomings which policy-makers are unwilling to publicise for political reasons, or practitioners for commercial reasons, the case first needs to be made that critical analysis will in fact be in the long-term interests of both practitioners and policy makers. The role of international bodies in this respect would appear to be two-fold. First, to help persuade all actors involved about the value of critical reflection and candid sharing of best – and worst – practice. Second, to continue to strive for standardised *output* indicators; the case for these remains strong even if it seems inevitable that any consensus reached will belie a tension between scientific input and political and/or commercial negotiation. The problem of legitimacy is not restricted to the international level: allowing 'local paths' to sustainability to be defined is no guarantee that optimal solutions will be achieved. None of this, however, need hamper an iterative process of practical experimentation on the ground, so long as the limitations of different approaches are identified and used to enrich the debate. While a global governance solution remains impractical, this debate needs to be kept open, both in terms of participation and content.

Finally, it is widely recognised that 'indicators' and associated standards and frameworks serve important governance functions, one of which is to establish comparability across different initiatives and locations. They are therefore important conduits of international dialogue. Many of the more contentious issues associated with them, furthermore, closely mirror those of good governance generally – particularly, whether they should focus more on substance or process, and how the need for international comparability might be reconciled with that of contextual relevance. Future research looking in greater detail at these issues, and building on a recent international conference organised by the International Eco-Cities Initiative,[2] will therefore be carried out through a three-year international network funded by the Leverhulme Trust. Co-ordinated by the University of Westminster and involving ten partners, the research will include a systematic, cross-comparative analysis of emerging international urban sustainability indicator and certification frameworks.

Report by Robert Cowley and Simon Joss[3],
University of Westminster (December 2012)

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[2] *Tomorrow's City Today: Developing International Standards and Policy for Eco-Cities.* URL: www.westminster.ac.uk/ecocities/projects/bellagio-project

[3] Robert Cowley is a doctoral researcher at the University of Westminster, working on a thesis on eco-cities as social places. Simon Joss is the lead co-ordinator of the ESRC Eco-Cities Seminar Series.