JUSTICE, EQUITY + SUSTAINABILITY

MIT JOURNAL OF PLANNING

PROJECTIONS *volume 8*
JUSTICE, EQUITY + SUSTAINABILITY

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THE THIRD E : EQUITY AS A CONDITION OF SUSTAINABILITY

ABSTRACT

Although the linkage between redistributive justice and sustainability is debatable, a significant contribution of the sustainable development paradigm is to elevate social equity as a normative value of growth. This article posits that this paradigm comes into direct con ict with the value-free development promoted by powerful urban growth coalitions. Challenging these entrenched forces makes redistribution of power a primary condition for sustainability. This article presents a conceptual framework linking empowerment, engagement, and equity in sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

This paper identifies and argues for the theoretical relationship between sustainability and equity. Although textbook definitions of sustainability (Wheeler 2004; Portney 2003) have placed equity on the same plane as the environment and the economy, there is tension related to the dominance of any one E over the others. Despite the theoretical link between sustainability and justice being weak, recent scholarly work in the field of environmental justice is attempting to strengthen this. This paper argues that, in the seesaw between economy and the environment, distributional justice is a primary condition of sustainability. This is because redistribution creates a stable state of sustainability by impacting the primary causes of the imbalance. A deliberative process that engages the community can shift power, which leads to long-term social change. On the other hand, "sustainability" without the Third E is easily co-opted by entrenched power forces promoting value-free growth.

I. Plural Dimensions Of Development

One of the main contributions of the sustainability movement is the formal embrace of social equity as a pillar of development.[1] Equity has its own apex in many depictions of the sustainability triangle along with the environment and the economy (Campbell, 1996; Serageldin, 1993; Wheeler, 2004), often referred to as the Three Es of sustainability. Toman (1994, p. 405) concludes that "sustainability ultimately is intimately wrapped up with human values and institutions, not just ecological functions" and underscores the importance of "balance" between all views on sustainability {Toman, 1994 #45}. Clark (1995, p. 242) agrees that "an argument that rejects equity must be considered as morally reprehensible as an argument that rejects ecological sustainability". Even though the economy and the ecology have been the dominant players in the crucial "contest" on solving global problems, social welfare is a key component of environmental health because of access to health or welfare services {Clark, 1995 #137}.

Nevertheless, the term "sustainable development" has been a contentious one in theoretical debates on what constitutes sustainability (Giddings, Hopwood & O'Brien, 2002). Goodland and Daly (1996, p. 1002) staked their ground over environmental sustainability, stating: "Sustainability must not become a landfill dump for everyone's environmental and social wishes". They sought to clearly demarcate the differences between environmental, economic and social sustainability. Economic and social sustainability were critical to sustainable development as a means of reaching the goal of environmental sustainability.

But the claim of dominance of any one E over the others falls prey to the same singularity in the paradigm of growth that sustainability is attempting to overcome (Gunder, 2006). The ontology of sustainability is predicated upon reconciliation of these essential conflicts. For example, the holistic intersection (Levins & Lewontin, 1994) or Kuhnian tensions (Verma, 1996) inherent in development paradigms define the emergence of sustainability that is beyond just one or two dimensions. The emerging functional form of sustainability (see Barbier, 1987; Berke, 2002; Healey & Shaw, 1993) thus relies on "simultaneous achievement" of all the Three Es of sustainability (Jepson, 2001). The Third E, equity, is a social dimension of sustainability, often conflated with community empowerment and civic engagement.

If sustainability is recognized as a "balance" between irreconcilable ideologies {Verma, 1996 #118} or competing interests (Campbell, 1996), then there is a need for an open debate on development without the presumed "economics imperialism" {Fine, 2002 #94}. Sustainable development is therefore not just a constant-sum compromise between ecologists and economists, but a societal deliberation, partly political and partly scientific {Dasgupta, 2000 #89} that restructures the way

we develop (Carvalho, 2001). In this vein, economic productivity is inextricably linked with social welfare {Arrow, 2003 #90}, and human health with natural capital such as greenery {de Vries, 2003 #92}. There is recognition of feedback loops between the social welfare, natural resource base and economic development {Dasgupta, 2002 #91}.

With sustainability, planners have redefined the reductivist notion of development as growth to include socio-ecological dimensions.[2] This is a paradigm shift from positivist obsessions with technique and technological innovation {Ellul, 1967 #81}; and Lockean conceptions of social exclusion with respect to natural property. Spurred by a global consciousness that was lacking a couple of decades ago, recent writings of Hawken (2007), Shiva (2005), Massey (2007), and Korten (2006) have argued for balancing the social costs of development with the economic gains. In this genre, the conditions of the environment are webbed within social movements inextricably linked with distributional justice. Planning for sustainability has also made a significant impact on development theory by "greening" the agenda of development programs {Mestrum, 2003 #82}, and bringing into its fold as diverse subjects as transport systems {Newman, 1999 #61}, settlement patterns, labor, population, basic needs and human rights {Satterthwaite, 1997 #46; Drakakis-Smith, 1997 #58; Drakakis-Smith, 1996 #59; Drakakis-Smith, 1995 #60}.

II. Is Sustainable Development Just?

There are weak theoretical links between justice and sustainability. Dobson (1998) found that the objectives between the theories of environmental sustainability and social justice are fundamentally different as the latter is primarily concerned with distributional justice within the current generation of human species, whereas the former transcends both time and species. Cross-sectional theories of distributive justice that range from the Nozickian distribution of liberties to the Marxian distribution of income have rarely addressed issues that span across generations or across species. Even John Rawls' Theory of Justice, which talks about inter-generational equity, admits that "how the burden of capital accumulation and of raising the standard of civilization is to be shared between generations seems to admit of no definite answer" (Rawls, 1971, p. 284). Furthermore, according to Scott Campbell, justice and the environment are not necessarily compatible:

> ...nature is inherently neither equal nor unequal, and at times can be downright brutal...To gain a sense of historical legitimacy, we project our socially constructed sense of equality onto the past, creating revisionist history in which nature is fair and compassionate...The laws of nature are not the same thing however, as natural law, nor does ecological equilibrium necessarily generate normative principles of equity. (Campbell, 1996, p. 303)

The theoretical hiatus between the two has hurt planning for sustainability. With a few exceptions (e.g. the Endangered Species Act in the United States) the current body of environmental law is based mainly on anthropocentric factors as opposed to ecocentric factors.[3] And in an era of dueling property rights, conservation group's efforts to buy up land in order to protect them reinforces the need for property-owners to be compensated for providing environmental benefits (Frefogle 2007).

As justice is divorced from sustainability, equity becomes the forgotten child often adopted by the occasional advocacy planner. With some notable exceptions (Agyeman, Bullard & Evans, 2002, 2003), the equity component of sustainability is either omitted (Drakakis-Smith, 1995, Fig. 2, p. 665), or has been relegated to a subsidiary position (Daly & Cobb, 1989) both in planning theory and in practice.

This has resulted in the lackluster economic justice policies in serious sustainability programs (*see* Portney, 2003, pp. 174-5). Equity indicators are weak, superficial and non-actionable. For example, cities do not typically measure or monitor the varying environmental risks of some groups over others. Thus equity remains the most neglected component of sustainability:

> *Equity is the third and by far the least developed of the Three Es. To be sure, it has long been a focus of many community activists, labor unions and social justice organizers. However, these constituencies often have relatively little power, and equity concerns frequently take a back seat in planning and political discussions. (Wheeler 2004, 60)*

The field of environmental justice is attempting to bridge the gap between sustainability and justice by linking the origin of environmental problems to social and political drivers, such as exploitation and power (Pellow & Brulle, 2005). It has evolved from a civil rights movement in the U.S. to an international movement of environmental rights of women, colored and disadvantaged groups (Agyeman, 2005, pp. 14-19). Building up on the more recent theories by Fraser (1997), Nussbaum (2000), Sen (1999) and Young (1990), allows activists and social movements to use multiple conceptions of justice that overcome the limitations of Rawlsian redistribution to include procedural dimensions of justice such as participation and recognition (Schlosberg, 2007). Schlosberg (2007, pp. 103-163) further claims that "justice to nature" is possible by extending the concepts of distribution, recognition, participation, and capability to include both humans and nonhumans.

There is a fundamental link between economic deprivation and environmental degradation (Gandhi, 2007) that needs to be recognized within the framework of environmental ethics, that goes beyond environmental justice. Physical planning challenges are symptoms of deeper geo-social problems such as overcrowded schools and chronic unemployment concentrated in "distressed" urban areas {Pyatok, 2000 #172}. The deeply entrenched regional inequities in American cities mentioned by Orfield (1997) and Rusk (2003) cannot be solved by rezoning and design guidelines alone. This calls for a "broader agenda" that addresses class and racial issues, concentration of poverty and disinvestments, especially in the inner-cities {Katz, 2000 #174}.

It is also important to critically examine the related concept of "smart growth" through the prism of social justice. The underlying concept of sustainability that is relevant here is that land is a finite resource, which leads to con icts among uses.[4] Smart growth often ties physical planning problems to socio-economic issues such as lack of affordability and loss of community (Jackson, 1985). Yet neither Downs (2001) or Burchel, Listokin and Galley (2000) in their enumeration of smart growth principles mention social equity. Also missing from this discussion is the issue of ownership of land and property rights.

Finally, the compilation of sustainability indicators is often the yardstick of distributive justice within the practice of sustainable development. Certain indicators such as the Ecological Footprint Index (Redefining Progress) and the Ecosystem Well-being Index (Prescott-Allen, 2001) are more focused on environmental issues than their counterparts in the Genuine Progress Indicator and the Human Well-being Index. Portney's "Taking Sustainable Cities Seriously" indicator has 34 elements (Portney, 2003, p. 65) none of which address social equity issues directly, but rather indirectly (e.g. cluster or targeted economic development). Other indicators such as the Dashboard of Sustainability (International Institute of Sustainable Development) and the Environmental Sustainability Index are composite indicators with varying weights given to equity variables.

III. Redistribution As A Primary Condition Of Sustainability

> *It could be argued that the distribution of power and in uence within society lies at the heart of most environment and development challenges. (WCED, 1987, p. 49)*

Sustainable development cannot occur without redistribution of power, since it challenges the dominant power regimes promoting value-free growth. One of the most organized powers in a city is the "growth machine coalition" (Molotch, 1976, 1988). There is considerable business interest, particularly among those investing in property investment, development and real estate finance, to spearhead this coalition (Molotch, 1988). Moreover, growth policies are created through closed decision-making processes involving prestigious businessmen through a centralized system (Peterson 1981, 132). The planner relents, because elected officials are confronted with the systemic power of organized businesses aligned with politicians, local media, and utility companies that stand to benefit from growth. The "business-friendly" mantra of the growth machine makes value-free growth itself a virtue:

> *Perhaps most important of all, local publics should favor growth and support the ideology of value-free development. This attitude reassures investors that the concrete enticements of a locality will be upheld by future politicians. (Logan & Molotch, 1987, p. 60)*

The seesaw of power is re ected in the values underpinning development. Empowerment creates a stable state of sustainability by impacting the primary causes of the imbalance. It has been defined as a process by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their affairs (Rappaport, 1981, 1985, 1990; Rappaport, Swift & Hess, 1984). Thus, empowerment is about self-determination (Himmelmann, 1996, p. 30) and democratic participation of individuals in the life of their community (Rappaport, 1981, 1990; Rappaport, Swift, & Hess, 1984).

In the context of sustainability, redistribution of power is not only multi-dimensional, taking on a different form in different people, contexts and time; it is also multi-level, at the individual, group, and community scale (*see* Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988; Zimmerman, 1990). An example of this is the Alameda Corridor, a twenty-one mile railroad tunnel project in Los Angeles, California. The communities around the impacted corridor organized to ensure that not only were environmental impacts from the project addressed, but that residents were employed in the construction jobs created (Hartman, 2001, p. 253). This same model of organizing and some of the same actors later engaged in negotiating community benefits during the expansion of the Los Angeles International Airport (Baxamusa, 2008) and the Los Angeles Ports Clean Truck Program.

A planner that uses "sustainability" without the condition of redistribution becomes an agent for the growth machine. This is because "sustainable" development acquires political legitimacy that removes process uncertainty, a prime motivator for deliberation and community inclusion (Cohen & Rogers, 2003). In fact, the distribution of uncertainty itself determines power relations (Marris, 1996). Therefore, when a project encounters a sufficient quantum of uncertainty, it merits appropriate political support and resources for deliberation and approval. On the other hand, if a public agency offers a streamlined development approval process without accurate assessment and redress of the socio-economic impacts of new development, it is shifting the uncertainty from the developer to the community (Baxamusa, 2008).

The terms "equity", "empowerment" and "engagement" are often used without distinction, as components of sustainability. However there is a clear dynamic that occurs between these concepts, each of which has its separate theoretical foundation (see Figure 1).

Working towards equity involves addressing geo-social imbalances within a community. This motivates greater engagement of the community in planning and becomes a vehicle for empowerment. As redistribution of power occurs, this leads to a deeper consideration of equity in sustainability planning.

IV. Participation As A Vehicle Of Empowerment

In planning practice, cities in the United States with sustainability programs generally include participatory processes (Portney, 2003), and there is general agreement that these processes are necessary for sustainability (Portney, 2005; Kupcu, 2005; Wheeler, 2000).[5] This necessity is being re ected in plans, policies and development agreements, both nationally and internationally. To illustrate, an international agreement on the Mekong River in Southeast Asia demonstrated environmental management and public participation to be "inextricably inter-twined" (Mullikin, Smith & Champion, 2005). Even though some participating countries[6] in this agreement are not democratic, they have agreed to an open process, and established taskforces for soliciting public input.

However, what is not clear is the type of participatory processes that are effective and the conditions that make them effective. Effective means of involving stakeholders leading to the sharing of power into project-specific decisions is generally missing from U.S. planning system (Blackburn, 2000, p. 182). According to Kent Portney, if the sustainability paradigm is to be seriously implemented, civic participation must lead to community building that goes well beyond physical planning:

> *Locally organized public involvement efforts, whether focused on local, statewide, or*
> *national issues, not only provide mechanisms for residents to have their voices heard,*
> *and for government to respond on specific issues, they also provide mechanisms of*
> *civil society that actually change the people who participate in them.*
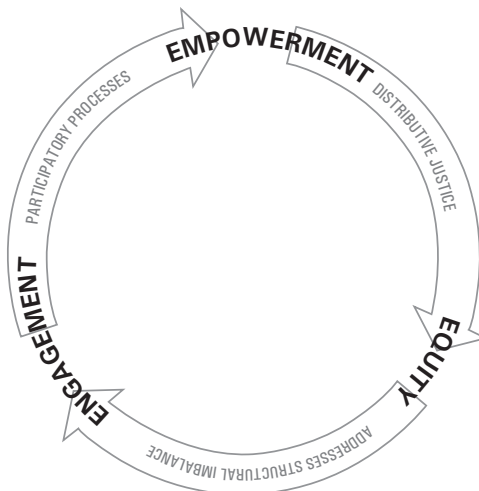> *(Portney, 2003, p. 146)*

FIGURE 1. A Conceptual Framework on the Social Dynamic within Planning for Sustainability.

The transformative qualities of civic engagement are manifest in community empowerment, wherein public policy responds to the mounting ecological and social problems amid competing political interests (Orr, 2004). The sustainable development paradigm to a great extent depends on the power dynamics within society, and the ability of the process to generate power:

> *Sustainability planning will necessarily include efforts to build alternative forms of political power though grassroots organizing, coalition, urban social movements, lobbying, occasional litigation, and political leadership. Hard- edged political organizing has always been necessary to bring about progressive change, whether in civil rights, environmental, women's or peace movements. (Wheeler, 2004, p. 239)*

Unfortunately communicative practitioners relying on public discourse techniques, particularly in the U.S., are facing an uphill battle in empowering civil society. This is partly because of the declining participation of Americans in most aspects of civic life, and especially in politics (Putnam, 2000; Macedo *et al.,* 2005). This lack of involvement in civic life has led to a declining effectiveness of democratic institutions, and in turn has weakened the justification of an affirmative state (Fung & Wright, 2001). Recent experiments in direct citizen participation seek to reverse this trend by actively soliciting participation, and empowering the civil deliberators with some action-making authority (Fung, 2001; Roberts, 2004). For example, the Habitat Conservation Planning component of the 1973 Endangered Species Act empowers local stakeholders to develop governance mechanisms and build large-scale habitat conservation plans in fragile ecosystems around the country, and, as of 2002, 379 plans covering tens of millions of acres had been approved (Thomas, 2003).

The problem in defining the role of participatory processes in sustainability planning arises from a deeper tension between the primacy of power and the primacy of process in planning theory. In order to reconcile the con icting goals of development, communicative theorists prescribe participatory processes that allow diverse interests to compete equally using rational deliberation. Where as participatory processes could transform power relations (see Forester, 1989; Fischer, 2006; Booher & Innes, 2002; Stein & Harper, 2003), alternatively, existing power structures could corrupt any process (Flyvbjerg, 1998, 2002) making participatory processes meaningless. In the latter case, planning itself becomes a vehicle for consolidating current business-dominated power regimes (Hester, 1996).

CONCLUSION

The Third E of sustainability is essentially a just distribution of power. This should not be surprising, since planning itself is a political activity aimed at redistribution of power (Douglass & Friedmann, p. 1998). Nevertheless, there is a tendency to omit this dimension in the theory and practice of sustainability. This omission is not just a compromise aimed at balancing the economic cost of providing environmental benefits, but is a Machiavellian attempt by the "growth coalition" to consolidate its power. Planners become instruments of this coalition, when they apply the "sustainable" adjective to plans, policies and projects that disempower the community. The key challenge for sustainability planning is to embrace redistribution of power, without losing its broad support amongst developers.

After a long struggle, the environmental movement has succeeded in creating global currency on issues such as climate change and natural resource protection. This currency needs to be invested in systemic change that tilts the balance of power towards a progressive agenda for generations to

come. This socio-economic agenda, however tangential to deep ecological concerns, is necessary to keep broader coalitions alive that will bolster the cause of their constituents in the halls of democracy in the United States and elsewhere.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY
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[ENDNOTES]

1. For example, the 2005 United Nations World Summit Outcome states: "...promote the integration of the three components of sustainable development — economic development, social development and environmental protection — as interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars." (Para 48, p. 12)

2. There are several examples of this shift to include broader socio-economic dimensions in planning practice. The Ahwahnee Principles for Economic Development (adopted 1997), explicitly aim at embracing social responsibility and increasing social equity. The Policy Guide on Smart Growth (American Planning Association, adopted 2002) states that an objective of smart growth is to "equitably distribute the costs and benefits of development". The California Planning Guide (The Governor's Office of Planning and Research, 2005, p. 1) states: "The planning process involves analyzing the environmental and socio-economic impacts of development and infrastructure projects."

3. This is due to policy decisions based on quantifying impacts in monetary terms (Davos, 1998, p. 384)

4 The "smart growth" movement is rooted in the early-mid twentieth century search for a compact, utopian urban form that included Ebenezer Howard, Le Corbusier and F.L. Wright. In the 1990s "smart growth" in the U.S. has emerged as a catch-all slogan for transit-oriented development, urban infill, growth management policies, anti-sprawling suburbs, and is often con ated with "new urbanist" design.

5. Cities ranking high in terms of Portney's Index of Seriousness of Sustainable Communities are Seattle, Scottsdale, San Jose, Boulder, Santa Monica and Portland. Each of these cities scored full points in the "involvement" questions, 31 through 34 (Portney, 2003, pp. 65-71).

6 Viet Nam, Thailand, Cambodia and Lao PDR.

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