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INTRODUCTION



The future of sustainable cities: governance, policy and knowledge

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this special issue is to address a conceptual and empirical gap in the existing literature on sustainable cities. Uniquely, it brings together questions about the “what” (in this case, the content and representation of urban policy) of research on urban sustainability with “how” (the social organisation of knowledge and action) through the results of collaborative and comparative work. The special issue contains curated contributions that draw upon the findings of a comparative international project funded by Mistra (Swedish Foundation for Strategic Environmental Research) through the Mistra Urban Futures Centre, based in Gothenburg. The project sought to bring together two questions that are usually treated as separate in existing research approaches. They are the “what” and “how” of sustainable cities’ debates. By working in partnership with local policy-makers, practitioners and universities, each local area entered into a process of collaborative design in order to examine assumptions, expectations, processes and the outcomes of knowledge co-production. This paper introduces the conceptual ideas behind this initiative and so provides a frame for the reader to situate the contributions. It then outlines those articles to draw connections between them and concludes with a short summary of what research and societal lessons can be learnt from the project.

KEYWORDS

Knowledge; co-production; universities; policy; governance

Introduction

Our aim in this special issue is to address a conceptual and empirical gap in the existing literature on sustainable cities. It brings together questions about the “what” (in this case, the content and representation of urban policy) of research on urban sustainability with “how” (the social organisation of knowledge and action). These elements are normally separated in the knowledge production process, and this focus provides a distinctive identity and contribution for the special issue as a whole. In particular, it highlights the significance of bringing together the content and context of knowledge and practice as both relevant to cities and excellent in research terms; the involvement of researchers and stakeholders in the formulation and execution of a research agenda; directly informing effective policy responses that are context-sensitive to places and their dynamics and challenges, as well as the formulation and provision of significant conceptual development and proposals for subsequent work between academic and policy-makers. In this article, we first elaborate on this approach and then provide a thematic overview of the contributions and conclude with some reflections for further research and collaborative lessons from the work.

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This special issue contains articles from representatives of what became known as the Local Interaction Platforms (LIPs) that comprise Mistra Urban Futures (MUF).¹ In addition to those from Gothenburg, Cape Town and Manchester, there are two further articles that challenge dominant ways of framing the role of knowledge in cities and examine the implications of the techno-economic framing of urban development. The consequence, as this special edition charts, is that the centrality of issues concerned with social justice and equity is sidelined. Finally, there is an Afterword by the current Director of MUF reflecting on the process and building upon its insights into the current phase of its work.

MUF: in search of distinctiveness

The MUF Centre is designed to be unique in terms of its scale, reach and substantive focus. Its distinctiveness is based on combining study of what is to be done in urban contexts and for what reasons (knowing “what” and “why”) with what capacities and capabilities in particular contexts (knowing “how”)? Mistra, as the funding organisation interested in supporting a distinctive centre focused on informing sustainable transformations, commissioned a feasibility report from the Centre for Sustainable Urban and Regional Futures (SURF 2007). That work was then incorporated into a joint final report to Mistra.²

The report argued that urban transitions and their implications for sustainability were poorly understood with cities viewed as victims of the consequences of climate change, the contexts for imaginative responses as well as contributors to climate change. Central to this was a shift taking place from a relational understanding within and between cities at a national scale, to an ecological security viewpoint that takes urban sustainability as being similar in form to military and economic security. In the process, different forms of anticipation, mitigation and adaptation were apparent, requiring a new approach to understanding the reasons for degrees of variation in autonomy and self-reliance by cities. At the same time, the successful translation of knowledge for urban sustainability into practice, as well as learning from practice, necessitated understanding complex multi-level contexts, operating in networks, forming partnerships and alliances with groups often excluded from the formal policy process. That raises questions: for example, in what ways are different cities mobilising resources and technologies to guarantee their futures and what implications does this have for transformations towards sustainable futures and social justice?

The work informing this report, conducted over a concerted period of time with different funders at varying scales of action, showed the research team that action is not simply about formal governance and institutions, but the cultures that inform effective organisation, who is included and excluded, how and why? There was no substitute for efforts to tackle challenges that were coherent, consistent, coordinated, and inclusive and well communicated and that avoided the importation of models for success as if context were a secondary matter over content. Underpinning and informing these processes is the production and circulation of forms of knowledge in cities. Knowledge production continues to change and the need for inter-disciplinary work with the participation of varying stakeholders and communities who need to put that knowledge into action to tackle issues of sustainability and injustice is clear (Bhaskar *et al.* 2010). With such issues in mind, another orientating question arose: what are the most effective ways, in different contexts, of ensuring that the relationship between the production, transmission, reception and use of knowledge for urban sustainability enables cities to face the challenge of climate change and social justice?

To seek to encapsulate these questions, along with an underlying ethos of co-production, the focus needed to turn to the social organisation of knowledge production in varying contexts. Initially, it was proposed that Mistra fund and set up Urban Knowledge Arenas (UKAs). Each UKA would examine two key cities of differing sizes to allow for meaningful comparison and include at least one capital, or “global” city. The UKA would then nominate persons to form a Steering and Advisory Board for the purposes of undertaking the work and obtaining buy-in from key stakeholders. The rationale for their selection would need to be clear and drawn from the public, voluntary and

private sectors. They, in turn, would then fund, in cash or kind, their engagement with resulting activities. Forums would be constituted for deliberation and feedback which comprised different communities. The proposition being that this would provide cutting-edge co-produced research and practice by bringing together different stakeholders within more collective actions. The result could then provide a distinctive and important programme of work and position Mistra as an innovator in the field of sustainability studies and interventions.

The Mistra final call for proposals in 2008 was entitled: "Rethinking Sustainable Urban Development in an Era of Globalization, Resource Constraints and Climate Change". It evoked a concern with what was happening in cities across the world, as well as an interest in how it could be improved, enhanced and rethought for the benefit of varying groups at multiple scales. It expected that the successful Centre should not only exhibit cutting-edge research, but engage in innovation, stakeholder interaction and capacity-building at local, regional and international levels. The requirement was for a progressive initiative that promoted knowledge, learning, innovation and creativity and linked urban policy and action through the deployment of methods that emphasised cross-fertilisation.

Towards this end, the Centre and what became termed its Interaction Platforms in different countries would undertake the following: act as clusters for development of knowledge and innovation for urban sustainability; form a resource base for case studies and scientific analysis; ensure a strong chain from international disciplinary excellence to local knowledge and serve as "showcases" for other cities and countries. The successful Centre was envisaged to be underpinned by a series of principles that combined academic excellence with policy and practitioner relevance; global analysis with local study; theoretical approaches with co-produced experimental work and explicitly sought to build new collaborations between varieties of stakeholders in different city-regions.

Our contribution to the content of the call was informed by experiences, comparative work and reflections funded by different agencies and research councils that had examined issues and dynamics in cities, including the boundaries and their consequences between knowledge production and reception (see Hodson and Marvin 2009, 2010a, 2010b, Perry and May 2010, May and Perry 2011, May with Perry 2011). Following submissions from consortia, short-listing and final selection, Gothenburg was awarded the grant. In response, it was then necessary to design an international project to provide a substantive vehicle for better understanding the national and city-regional contexts in which rethinking sustainable urban development could develop. Its purpose, detailed in a research design in collaboration with its partners, was to constitute a baseline for comparative learning and to understand issues in different contexts and hence inform the development of the scientific programme for the Centre.

"Governance, Policy and Knowledge in Urban Sustainability: A Comparative Review of Challenges and Transition Pathways" (GAPS) was a project conceived in relation to the distinctive elements of MUF that informed the original report to Mistra. Its ethos was to understand how sustainable urban development is conceptualised and understood in varying contexts in relation to the pressures of globalisation, inequalities, resource constraints and climate change ("what" is being done) and to illustrate the role of knowledges, policies and practices in shaping different responses to the challenges of sustainable urban development ("how" is knowledge being constructed and mobilised). The transformative nature of the Centre was embodied in an approach that kept these elements together through an emphasis upon issues, discourses and ways of knowing, as well as opening up possibilities, visions and developing locally owned interventions. The overall aim of the project was to comparatively develop innovative, excellent and context-sensitive frameworks for action which enable cities to ask questions, develop processes and mobilise capacities and capabilities to address the challenges of urban sustainability.

The initial emphasis was upon an examination of the formal policy process – the conception, formulation and execution of urban policies for sustainability within city authorities and their partners – seen against the evidence base – the knowledge, skills and expertise that cities invoke to make informed decisions about their present interventions and future trajectories. These could be examined in terms of the judgements made and considered against the issues, knowledges and practices

which did not feature in the formal process by addressing the following questions: how is sustainability being interpreted in policy terms and for what reasons; what specific policies are produced as a result; how are those policies formulated; what forms of knowledge are utilised in that formulation; what forms of partnerships, governance arrangements and institutions are in place to ensure policies are translated into actions and, finally, what views of sustainable futures and forms of knowledge are not currently included in the policy process, why and with what likely consequence for the policy process?

In addressing these questions, the design took context-sensitivity and learning in comparative research seriously (May and Perry 2018a). That requires particular attention to the concepts deployed, processes adopted and issues of appropriateness and equivalence in a learning-in-action through comparison approach. It may be encapsulated in the following ethos:

one has to take into account the possible disarticulation of space, identity and belonging, the multiple connecting actors, and the fact that any locality in a city is enmeshed in a complex set of relationships linking the local with the national and the global in a way that is felt and present in the everyday life of urban dwellers ... Research should not aim at providing ready-made models of urban governance that can be “replicated” but rather provide a model of how to work on “local” issues in “local” ways. What can be replicated are the approach and the philosophy behind it but not the procedures and activities. (Shami 2003, p. 80)

Despite the language in this quote, critical to this approach is the idea of the “framework” rather than a “model” in which cities in different contexts can ask themselves similar sets of questions about their processes, capacities and capabilities.

What becomes comparable is the process of defining, shaping, articulating and integrating different voices and visions within a city-region to contribute to more sustainable and just urban futures. The approach sought to take on board issues associated with North–South, South–North learning and a corresponding reflexivity, flexibility and commitment in the face of lessons learnt between contexts in the process of the project’s execution. Its viability and uniqueness may be summarised in the following terms: the significance of bringing together the “what” and “how” of knowledge and practice as both relevant to cities and excellent in research terms; the involvement of researchers and stakeholders in the design and implementation of the research; a strongly comparative research agenda across the LIPs to develop their mutual understanding and collective intelligence for developmental purposes in relation to projects and MUF activities as a whole and informing effective policy responses that are context-sensitive to places, their dynamics and challenges.

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the relations between “what”, “why” and “how” in terms of the relations between practices of knowledge production, political institutions, expertise and democracy and urban policy, this work goes to the heart of debates concerning recognition and redistribution and the processes of justification in relation to justice and democracy (Fraser and Honneth 2003, Forst 2014). Indeed, the distributive approach to justice – who gets what – and the question of how people are treated and their standing in such matters relates directly to how particular urban areas do, or do not, recognise and include the voices of their citizens in what counts as knowledge and the formulation of urban policy in order to counter the global tendency towards elite reproduction and techno-economic myopia.

Framing the contributions

The issues raised in the contributions to this special edition deriving from the comparative work are of particular interests to the readers of *Local Environment* and the paper authors include policy-makers who work on urban policy for city authorities. Over the last decade there has been the absence of a synthetic and holistic review of the status of sustainable cities’ thinking (Simon 2016). Whilst the journal *Local Environment* has played a critical role in publishing new work on the emergence of new logics of urban environmentalism – climate change, resilience, etc. – this is a contribution to a review of the wider implications for sustainable cities’ theory and practice. There is also a need

to not only understand, but also move beyond individual case studies and place particular urban responses within wider comparative frameworks that bring together questions about the content of policy and social context of knowledge production. Those, in turn, contribute to enabling academics to think about alternatives to the narrow techno-economic rationale for ecological interventions and assist in developing more socially just alternatives that are inclusive and transformational. Each of the articles here directly informs those ends.

Mike Hodson and Simon Marvin focus on an analysis of the changes in urban sustainability discourse and practice since 2007. They find changes manifest in particular ways. First, the global financial crisis, despite its causes, resulted in symptoms including a pre-occupation with urban economic and technical value. Second, a splintering of the sustainability discourse into sets of competing logics – urban resilience, urban low carbon transitions, smart urbanism and urban securitisation. Third, how each of these is associated with particular sets of social interests – both policy and research – which act to produce a knowledge base which justifies the rationale of those interests. That directly leads them into questions concerning the transformative potential of development towards more sustainable futures, or simply more of the same which leads to a continuity that may be termed “post-sustainability” and weakens the commitment to social justice in earlier configurations of the sustainable city.

Tim May and Beth Perry examine the issues associated with the circuits of knowledge that inform justifications for the production and reception that underlie urban development. They subject the relations between sustainability and the knowledge economy to critical scrutiny. Starting with an examination of how coalitions of interests constitute a particularly narrow conception of knowledge which focuses on the notion of the exemplar and the replicable, they uncover uneasy parallels between universities, consultancies and the desire for expert status. Urban pressures emphasise the search for innovation and models of industry-academic interactions over the constitution of more reflexive and inclusive forms of knowledge production in cities. Therefore, they examine the potential for more reflexive and inclusive forms of knowledge production and exchange to develop socially informed responses to injustice and the challenges of sustainability.

Beth Perry and Mark Atherton provide an account of practice in Greater Manchester that seeks to bridge the worlds of academia and policy. In the process they do not avoid asking difficult, but necessary, questions concerning the relations between the formulation of policy, democracy and institutions of urban governance. They examine efforts to resist the narrowing of sustainability around a low carbon agenda dominated by economic interests and the desirability and feasibility of different approaches to addressing commonly agreed challenges. The discussion examines an important issue in the process of co-production: that is, possible capitulation to the idea of consensus and a corresponding abandonment of critique. That may easily occur in situations where anticipatory actions assume only certain forms of representation of grass-roots activism will be accepted by those who are part of formal institutions.

Saskia Greyling, Zarina Patel and Amy Davison focus on the Knowledge Transfer Programme developed by the Cape Town LIP. In particular, they examine the relations between the conceptualisation of policy and the role of knowledge in informing responses to the challenge of sustainable development. Finding a gap between the knowledge that informs policies and their outcomes, they turn to the role of learning and through an embedded approach to researchers being situated in city departments, how knowledge is developed in contexts of application via a co-production methodology. Through this approach the role of tacit knowledge in shaping policy is illustrated, along with how civic engagement strategies in its formulation becomes uneven and favours particular interests. Coupled with forms of monitoring and evaluation, a “compliance-based” approach leads to risk aversion and the avoidance of those problems which need acknowledgement and inclusion for the formulation of effective policies and actions. Understanding how this occurs is a step towards more positive, sustainable transformations.

Finally, Nazem Tahvilzadeh, Stig Montin and Mikael Cullberg examine the city of Gothenburg. They illustrate the ways in which policy, focused on developing an enlarged conception of urban

sustainability that holds economic, infrastructural and social issues together within a coherent discourse, becomes a linguistic device with no transformational effects. Its power is that of mobilisation, but around a techno-economic assembly of actors and coalitions of interest advancing a “business-as-usual” approach. They argue, in contrast to this approach, that a transdisciplinary approach to knowledge co-production could not only examine these contradictions, but inform a strategy that is more transparent and inclusive. Accompanying this is the need for forums of deliberation and governance in which values, other than those of economic growth, are not only considered, but incorporated into decision-making for sustainable and just futures.

Conclusion

This special edition represents a comparative examination of the process of policy-making and the inclusion or otherwise of various groups and with what consequences for the future. The central finding is the separation between the conception and execution of policy enabling an aspatial concept of economic competition to expand at a faster rate than the realm of understanding, upon which it relies, which is constituted through deliberation and inclusion of different voices. Time and power become implicated and places lapse into passive sites of implementation, not co-participants in their collective potentials. These factors and others combine to produce effects upon the creation of a just urban commons in the relations between social, ecological and economic sustainability (Harvey 2012, May and Perry 2018b).

Injustice is planted firmly within this separation. City departments can become silos in which the economic, ecological and social are separated according to various forces exerting themselves upon the shape and content of policy. Whilst the idea of participatory decision-making is not without its issues (Smith 2009), a democratic deficit arises in the constitution of the content of policy (what) and its process of implementation (how) as if the two could be separated. Contributors examine this aspect of the knowledge-process deficit and its effects not only upon the effectiveness and efficiency of policy, but its conception and hence the future of our cities. In so doing they contribute to opening up space of potential for more just and sustainable futures.

Notes

1. For more information on MUF, see <http://www.mistraurbanfutures.org/en>.
2. Available at: <http://www.fouivast.com/download/18.50842a15119f0f4d89a8000857/Bilaga++Mistra+Sustainable+Urban+Development+Report+2007.pdf>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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