

# Searching for the Socially Sustainable City: Achieved through inducing the right mixture?

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**Abstract:** Social sustainability has become an important concept for Australian urban policy makers and scholars. Broadly defined, this involves a concern that cities and urban communities are able to be reproduced over time without inflicting unjust consequences on future inhabitants. The use of 'sustainability' in urban policy represents a significant migration for a concept that was popularized in 1987 by the global environmental issue focused Brundtland Report. However, given the lengthy influence of ecological thought on urban studies the concept's recent adoption is perhaps not so surprising. Indeed, the concept certainly offers a valuable analytical perspective from which to examine and address a host of interconnected, contemporary urban policy issues. In this paper, the recent engagement by Australian urban scholars and policymakers with social sustainability is placed within the international context of European and North American urban policy debate. The paper begins by considering the possibility of a common set of neoliberal urban issues, such as social inequality, spatial segregation, rising housing costs and social tension. All of these are seen as challenges to making cities liveable, productive and, indeed, sustainable places. The paper then focuses upon a policy response to these issues which is common to Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom: the use of tenure and planning legislation to generate new neighbourhood social mixes. Drawing upon research based in the UK which examined the roll-out of such an approach, the impacts and effectiveness of social mix legislation are evaluated in terms of social sustainability. In conclusion, the paper reflects upon unfulfilled policy objectives and some potential solutions and research directions.

## Introduction

Since the Brundtland Commission (WCED, 1987) popularized the concept of sustainability, it has spread throughout a variety of policy arenas, including urban policy. Consequently, across the globe national and local governments are implementing changes designed to make cities more sustainable places. Urban policy has proven quite adept at taking on this new rhetoric; something unsurprising given its all-encompassing nature (Cochrane, 2006). Whilst this move potentially offers significant benefits in terms of more liveable and equitable cities, the adoption of sustainability as an urban policy objective has proven riddled with problems. Sustainability – or any of its component elements – continues to prove a muddled concept; morphing its meaning from place to place; and even from section to section in some policy documents. Furthermore, the case is yet to be proven that sustainability provides a rallying call with which various urban agents can coalesce (Marcuse, 1999). More specifically, whilst environmental sustainability may be something most people can agree upon given none of us has any future if climate change continues unabated, issues of social, political and economic sustainability lack definitional clarity and are laden with actual and/or potential conflicts.

The paper examines how sustainability has been incorporated into urban policy in Australia, the USA, and specifically the UK. It begins with a discussion of the sustainability concept in attempt to find the principle utility of it with reference to the urban environment. Particular attention is then directed towards the concept of 'social sustainability' as an element of the wider sustainability agenda that has particular relevance for urban policy. This popularized concept is examined and related to some long-standing urban policy issues. In the latter sections of the paper, the UK government's recent urban policy engagement with sustainability is examined. First, the urban vision created by the Blair Labour government is outlined, and the placement of sustainability objectives within this identified. Second, recent research is drawn upon to identify how sustainable urban policy objectives are effecting urban change. Finally, some critical comments on social sustainability applicable to various governments employing the concept are offered.

## Sustainability

The Brundtland Commission's report (1987) is widely regarded as the seminal point in sustainability debate; highlighting the impending need to change human practices in order to secure a long term existence for the planet's entire population. Subsequently, the report has become mostly associated with environmental concerns. However, it also identified how this aspect of sustainability could not be divorced from political, economic or social spheres. Sustainability therefore was defined as a multi-aspect objective; a sustainable society – conceived on a global scale – is not simply about changing

environmental practices, it also involves wider changes. The limits of sustainability are therefore difficult to find; what might be sustainable political and economic practices are open to debate. They are also positional questions. For example, issues regarding sustainable economies are certainly different for western nations given their practices are also entirely responsible for global climate change concerns.

In order to conceptualize the multiple aspects of sustainability Littig and Griessler (2005) identify one and three pillar models of sustainable development. One pillar models primarily focus upon the ecological dimensions of sustainability. In these, economic and social aspects are certainly considered since they are identified as responsible for ecological change. However, issues of sustainable development tend not to overflow into wider concerns: "concepts of ecological sustainability call for a politically induced shift towards a more environmentally friendly way of life... even though such interventions can quite reasonably be expected to have positive socio-political effects, the main focus of this approach is still on obtaining the best possible ecological effects." (66). This one-pillar model certainly resembles much of the environmental-focused debate that surrounds sustainability. However, three pillar models of sustainable development reject such an ecological focus, expanding sustainable development issues into wider realms through arguing that ecological, economic and social processes are intimately related:

"The proposed equal treatment of the three pillars is based on the conclusion that human needs cannot be sufficiently met just by providing an ecologically stable and healthy environment, but that - if a society is indeed committed to sustainability - the equally legitimate social and cultural needs ought to be taken care of as well. Economic, social, and cultural conditions, efforts, and values are deemed to be resources that also need to be preserved for future generations." (ibid. 67)

This model certainly reflects that which is increasingly used within most 'sustainable' urban policy agendas where issues of social and economic sustainability are given equal, if not greater, attention.

Although a certain degree of cohesion can be found in ecological-focused sustainability debate, the same cannot be said for either economic or social forms. What might compromise a sustainable form of economic development is a posing question; one without any sign of conclusion (Marcuse, 1999). Indeed, a continued questioning of whether the neoliberal global institutions which are gaining responsibility for coordinating global economic relations can in any way promote sustainability relates closely to longstanding debate over the long-term outlook for capitalist modes of production (see Harvey, 2005). To add further complication, this debate also relates very closely to discussions surrounding the concept of social sustainability.

Although ecological and economic sustainability issues have some clear touchstones, social sustainability is a concept with little basis (Littig and Griessler, 2005). This is perhaps unsurprising given there is no agreement over what constitutes 'society' or the 'social'. Various definitions of social sustainability include:

"...a life-enhancing condition within communities, and a process within communities that can achieve that condition." (McKenzie, 2004, 12)

*"development (and/or growth) that is compatible with the harmonious evolution of civil society, fostering an environment conducive to the compatible cohabitation of culturally and socially diverse groups while at the same time encouraging social integration, with improvements in the quality of life for all segments of t]he population"* (Stren and Polese, 2000, p15-6 – emphasis in original)

"For a community to function and be sustainable, the basic needs of its residents must be met. A socially sustainable community must have the ability to maintain and build on its own resources and have the resiliency to prevent and/or address problems in the future." (City of Vancouver, 2005, [online: [www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/](http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/)])

These definitions demonstrate the variety of elements that come to be included under the rubric of social sustainability. They include the harmonious evolution of society, strengthening of communities bonds and improvements in quality of life. As such, social sustainability can quickly become divorced from environmental concerns; the formation of community and improvement in quality of life are not necessary dependent on any form of intergenerational environmental justice. Leaving this aside, the

inclusion of terms such as 'community', 'society', 'harmony' and 'diversity in its definition means that social sustainability can quickly become a vacuous concept.

For example, it can be difficult to identify just what the term capitulates. Is social sustainability a way of analyzing current social practices or a gauging point with which all policy mechanisms should be referenced and/or judged?

"The difficulties in conceptualising social sustainability are also due to the fact that there is no clear differentiation between the analytical, normative, and political aspects thereof and that people may prioritise one over another... Sustainability demands that development can no longer be seen without its natural prerequisites, as it is inseparably connected with the reproduction thereof. And this is indeed a deeply socio-scientific subject matter, not just a question of natural sciences... Therefore, the socio-scientific question in this context is: how can societies regulate and change their processes and structures so as to ensure the chances for development of future generations?" (Littig and Griessler, 2005, 69)

As urban policy increasingly embraces (social) sustainability rhetoric, it is therefore important to examine whether this simply involves the application of a political program or analytical perspective (for example, like viewing poverty as 'social exclusion'), or whether it represents a normative agenda with the support of collective agreement (such as race neutrality or equal legal rights).

If sustainability is asserted as a normative principle, a critical examination of this must take place given the obvious malleability of the concept. Sustainability can often seem like a non-political concept (Swyngedouw, 2007). After all, who could disagree with combating the potential apocalyptic scenarios of climate change? However, it is clear that sustainability in any of its elemental pillars is an inherently political concept. Environmental sustainability debate is largely concerned with the consumption habits of the western world; and therefore changing or reducing these is a matter for a select group of the world's population. It can also be argued that sustainable economic development is primarily a matter for capitalist nations struggling to confront environmental impacts, resource depletion and social inequalities. Asserting sustainability as a concept without an inherent politics has therefore to be avoided.

A number of questions are therefore presented: What might a normative social sustainability concept therefore be? What constitutes a harmonious society? What level of integration is desirable? What types of diversity are desirable and which are not? Imagining sustainability – in any of its forms – as a benign non-political objective is therefore nonsensical. Rather, the question becomes what do we want and require as a sustainable community/city. An examination of current urban policies, and the problems they identify, can show us currently how this question is being answered.

### **Urban Policy and Sustainability**

A sustainable urban future is something aimed at by both national and local governments across the western world. Now, it is claimed, cities must become sustainable places. This has involved a growing concern with social polarisation, falling rates of social participation, enduring poverty, and high housing costs. All of these have become 'sustainability' issues, alongside more familiar environmental concerns:

"This committee's vision is for Australian cities that are vibrant and healthy – environmentally, socially and economically. Working towards this goal is not the responsibility of governments alone. It is the responsibility of all Australians and must be a priority for all Australians. The committee was heartened to see the commitment and dedication displayed by many individuals and organisations." (The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2005, ix – Foreword by Dr. Mal Washer)

Stren and Polese (2000) see the 21st century as the height of these issues; as globalization, environmental change and migration, to mention just a few, pose increasing problems to various communities, and especially urban ones. They point to growing concentration of diverse groups congregating in cities across the globe and the consequential issues that arise. These issues involve inequity, social tensions, and racially motivated violence. What unites them is the common concern that this current state of affairs is unsustainable; it must be changed if urban societies are to be just and liveable places over both the short and long term.

In the US, a number of initiatives have been introduced with the intention of creating sustainable urban spaces. In 1993, the federal government established the 'President's Council on Sustainable Development' which was designed to explore paths to sustainability via public-private partnerships<sup>1</sup>. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) established 'Sustainable Development Challenge Grants' that were designed to stimulate community development initiatives that would bring about both economic prosperity and environmental improvements. The Housing and Urban Development department (HUD) also classifies its brownfield redevelopment programme as a sustainability initiative. This has involved a significant collection of public subsidies being used to clean up contaminated sites, increased urban densities through new development, and increase usage of public transit.

In Australia, there has been a particularly significant embrace of the sustainability concept. A raft of initiatives has been introduced designed to make new housing development much more environmentally sustainable (see Crabtree, 2005). This has involved the incorporation of sustainable energy sources (e.g.: solar panels), localized food production (e.g.: community gardens), and water conservation systems. There has also been a paired embrace of social sustainability. In the late 1990s a series of urban-focused sustainability initiatives were introduced with the intention of matching previously established environmental sustainability programmes (Blair et.al., 2004, 7). The main policy areas developed included: 'Sustainability and Urban Design'; 'Flora, Fauna and Biodiversity'; 'Emissions – Ozone, Greenhouse Gas and Energy Use'; 'Water Quality Management'; 'Storm Water Management'; 'Water Supply Management'; and 'Waste Management'. This collection of programmes certainly demonstrate the particular environment challenges posed to Australia cities, however, they also show an integration of various pillars of the sustainability concept; with social, economic and environmental concerns being woven together in a sustainability agenda.

The UK's sustainable cities agenda has been less driven by environmental concerns and more by social ones. In 2000, the Blair Labour government introduced its Urban White Paper (UWP) (DETR, 2000). This document set out a new direction for England's cities under the banner of 'urban renaissance'. Subsequently, in 2003 the government produced an explicit sustainability-focused policy document as an addendum to the UWP: 'Sustainable Communities: building for the future' (ODPM, 2003).

### **Urban Renaissance and Sustainable Communities**

The Labour government's UWP was intended to be a step-change in urban policy. Informed by the government-commissioned, Richard Rogers-led Urban Task Force, the UWP set out the urban renaissance agenda (DETR, 1999). This comprehensive programme looks to re-orientate attitudes towards urban living, create better designed urban spaces, increase urban densities, re-use brownfield sites, address abandonment and undersupply issues, and create cohesive, participatory urban communities. All of this, and much more (see Imrie and Raco, 2003), is intended to be generated in a 'sustainable manner':

"We are determined to ensure that policies link together in a sustainable way to provide services and opportunities that will make people from across the social spectrum want to live, as well as work, in our cities." (DETR, 2000, 3)

Sustainability in the UWP is therefore about more than environmental concerns; it is about providing urban environments which contribute to all sections of the population:

"This White Paper explains how our towns and cities can function as economic powerhouses, helping to achieve the Governments core objective of increasing sustainable growth and employment for all and bringing benefits not just to their own population but to the surrounding region." (ibid., 3)

An emphasis on both sustainable urban economies and societies is therefore central to the urban renaissance. Furthermore, this connection between economy and society is coupled with political concerns:

"...people have a right to be involved in deciding how their town or city develops. Real, sustainable change will not be achieved unless local people are in the driving seat right from the start. Successful cities are founded on participative democracy;" (ibid., 5)

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<sup>1</sup> The body continued to advise President Clinton until it was disbanded in June 1999.

In line with the Blair government's particular brand of Third-Way-ism, there is a clear intent here to produce a 'joined-up' form of sustainability:

"We also have to bring together economic, social and environmental measures in a coherent approach to enable people and places to achieve their economic potential; bring social justice and equality of opportunity; and create places where people want to live and work. These issues are interdependent and cannot be looked at in isolation. For instance, there are close links between housing, health and education. That is why moving towards more mixed and sustainable communities is important to many of our plans for improving the quality of urban life." (ibid., 5)

The UK's urban sustainability agenda therefore has many strands and many expected outcomes; the concept of sustainability appears therefore to have been stretched extremely far across all three pillars.

The 2003 Sustainable Communities document (ODPM, 2003), and subsequent 'Homes for All' (ODPM, 2005a) and 'People, Places and Prosperity' (ODPM, 2005b) provided clarification of some of the sustainability rhetoric in the UWP. First, it offered a definition of sustainable communities:

"Sustainable communities are places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, and offer equality of opportunity and good services for all" (ODPM, 2005a, 74)

Sustainable urbanism is defined here as concerned with desirability, needs, quality of life, environmental responsibility, planning, public services, and social equality. Apart from environmental responsibility, all of these concerns have been omni-present features of urban policy both in the UK and beyond. So, why are they framed in terms of sustainability? The government offered the following explanation:

"A wider vision of strong and sustainable communities is needed to underpin this plan, flowing from the Government's strong commitment to sustainable development. The way our communities develop, economically, socially and environmentally, must respect the needs of future generations as well as succeeding now. This is the key to lasting, rather than temporary, solutions; to creating communities that can stand on their own feet and adapt to the changing demands of modern life. Places where people want to live and will continue to want to live." (ibid, 5)

The distinctive part of the sustainability agenda is therefore thought of as a commitment to intergeneration responsibility. However, responsible long term planning is nothing new (Marcuse, 1999). What might make this distinct may not therefore be substance, but rather a new discourse for mobilising a similar set of ideas.

It is also worth noting the phrase: "[to] creating community that can stand on their own feet and adapt to the changing demands of modern life". Such sentiment certainly echoes widespread concerns that certain social groups – but especially poor populations congregated in cities (see Wanquant, 1999) – have difficulty sustaining themselves. Although a short phrase, this certainly resonates with the views held by some (see Murray, 1984) about persistent poverty and welfare dependency. As the prescriptions for a sustainable urban future are further outlined, this particularly spatial set of ideas about social problems (and their unsustainable nature) and their consequent solutions are found to be central to the UK's current urban social sustainability agenda (Levitas, 2005).

Figure 1 shows the government's criteria for a sustainable community. Elements identified include a buoyant economy, active politics and community participation, well-designed spaces and a particularly vibrant and diverse neighbourhood community.

Figure 1: The requirement of a sustainable community outlined in *Sustainable Communities* (ODPM, 2003, 5)

- A flourishing local economy to provide jobs and wealth;
- Strong leadership to respond positively to change;
- Effective engagement and participation by local people, groups and businesses, especially in the planning, design and long term stewardship of their community, and an active voluntary and community sector;
- A safe and healthy local environment with well-designed public and green space;
- Sufficient size, scale and density, and the right layout to support basic amenities in the neighbourhood and minimise use of resources (including land);
- Good public transport and other transport infrastructure both within the community and linking it to urban, rural and regional centres;
- Buildings – both individually and collectively – that can meet different needs over time, and that minimise the use of resources;
- A well-integrated mix of decent homes of different types and tenures to support a range of household sizes, ages and incomes;
- Good quality local public services, including education and training opportunities, health care and community facilities, especially for leisure;
- A diverse, vibrant and creative local culture, encouraging pride in the community and cohesion within it;
- A "sense of place";
- The right links with the wider regional, national and international community.

The government's sustainable communities programme is therefore very much a particular vision of a neighbourhood community; one symbolised by harmonious and collective economic, political, social and cultural well-being. This vision parallels the version of social sustainability outlined by Stren and Polese (2000):

*"Urban policies conducive to social sustainability must, among other things, seek to bring people together, to weave the various parts of the city in a cohesive whole, and to increase accessibility (spatial and otherwise) to public services and employment, within the framework, ideally, of a local governance structure which is democratic, efficient and equitable."* (16 – emphasis in original)

These interpretations of sustainability are therefore premised on different groups coming together to form a cohesive whole within a better planned, serviced, and governed city. Social sustainability is therefore given a spatial element; groups are required to come together within a particular spatial environ<sup>2</sup>.

### **Social Mixing and Sustainability**

Before social mixing policies are examined, it is important to preface the discussion with a small caveat stating that the Blair Labour government's emphasis on this is not purely a sustainability issue. It certainly relates to many other aspects of the government's wider agenda; just as it is designed to do (see 'Joined Up Thinking'). The start and end of sustainability issues are therefore difficult to define. However, the neighbourhood vision created in the image of 'sustainable communities' is, at will be argued, very much based upon a particular set of socio-spatial processes.

New Labour's urban renaissance and sustainable communities program hinges upon the vision of socially mixed communities. This involves an ambition to both reform the social-spatial structure of the city – therefore changing levels of social segregation and altering the social balance of many neighbourhoods – and generate greater levels of co-operative social interaction. In doing so, the problem of unsustainable neighbourhoods; those which are economically unproductive, lack social

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note there are other, and central, aspects of the Sustainable Communities agenda not outlined here. These include housing affordability, low demand, housing construction regulations, and a programme for rural communities (see Raco [2005] for a more in-depth discussion).

cooperation, and are not liveable places, can therefore be addressed. Randolph and Wood (2003) explain the thinking behind this 'neighbourhood effects' approach:

"The idea that social disadvantage is exacerbated by spatial concentration of disadvantaged populations is often now referred to in terms of 'neighbourhood' or 'area effects'. Put simply, the concentration of poverty in local areas creates a social milieu that reinforces aspects of disadvantage and actively reduces an individual's ability to move out of poverty or disadvantage." (ibid., iii)

The government's attempt to revitalize and create new forms of neighbourhoods – sustainable communities – is therefore partially motivated by an attempt to reduce socio-spatial segregation and strengthen the 'social tissue' in deprived neighbourhoods (Uitermark, 2003, 531). Here, the government's sustainability vision merges with its social exclusion programme. New Labour expects the stocks of social capital accrued through new social balance and increased cooperative engagement to generate benefits for all. In a similar fashion to the ways in which others have claimed environmental sustainability to be a post-political discourse, this neighbourhood vision and promotion of social mix(ing) again neglects to consider the inherent conflicts which may potentially develop. For example, increasing the diversity of a neighbourhood may certainly worsen social conditions (e.g.: worsen race relations), produce little change in social networks (Butler and Robson, 2003), or indeed, produce processes of gentrification which displace poorer groups (Davidson and Lees, 2005). A social mixing neighbourhood vision therefore relies on some form of collective community to develop; the sustainable community vision must transcend conflicts and neighbourhood communities must become cohesive units. Social cohesion therefore becomes a pivotal requirement for both the urban renaissance and sustainability.

### **Reflections of London's Experience: Infill housing, neighbourhood communities and the prospects of a sustained future**

London's recent rush of urban development has taken place largely under the urban renaissance and sustainable communities umbrella. There has been vast redevelopment of brownfield land throughout the city; new development has been at higher densities; and affordable housing allocations secured through PPG3 have ensured greater social diversity in many neighbourhoods. Much of the government's urban policy agenda has therefore been put into place. Of course, many of the objectives within this policy structure will take a long period to develop; things such as 'sustainability' and 'community' – however defined – will undoubtedly take a long period to achieve. This stated a cursory exploration of the initial implications of this agenda's impacts is important to make.

The first point to note is that an emphasis on high-density, brownfield development has certainly changed the social balance of many urban neighbourhoods. Large numbers of middle class residents are therefore now living in areas that were either dominated by working class and/or deprived populations. A clear example of this can be seen along London's River Thames (see Davidson and Lees, 2005). Here, many areas that were once home to dockers and industrial workers are now becoming increasingly populated with higher income groups. As a result, some dramatic changes to the social geography of London have been generated.

At this point, changes to the social geography of the city encouraged by the current urban policy framework are at a pivotal stage. If urban policy is successful, we may see these newly counterpoised communities start to generate the types of socially sustainable communities outlined earlier. For example, the spatial proximity these groups now find themselves in may convert into social associations. Incoming groups may begin to cooperate in such things as urban regeneration programmes (as also encouraged in new participatory governance structures), local politics, school governance, community events, and so on. Unfortunately, recent research suggests this is not what is occurring.

In Butler and Robson's (2003) examination of gentrification in London, they found that incoming middle class residents shared very few relations with incumbent communities. The term they adopt to describe this situation is "social tectonics"; a state whereby different urban communities simply brush by one another. Davidson (resubmitted) has found similar social relations. In this study of social mixing between residents of newly developed apartment complexes and existing neighbourhood residents, much lower levels of social cohesion were found between new, mainly middle class residents, and existing lower income communities. Furthermore, levels of social cohesion within new apartment communities were found to be much higher than between development and surrounding residents, suggesting separate, enclave-like communities are developing. In both studies, the spatially-based

methods of social mixing promoted under the banners of 'Urban Renaissance' and 'Sustainable Communities' appear not to have generated the forms of social interaction/mixing expected.

It is therefore relevant to ask what the consequences of the current failure of policies to generate the types of social mixing, and ultimately communities, expected might be. Of course, this may simply mean that the social geography of the city has been altered, with little negative or positive consequence for social sustainability. However, a lengthy literature demonstrating the strong dialectical relationship between space and society should not push us to this conclusion. Firstly, it is important to note that the juxtaposition of different social groups can have particularly negative consequences; indeed, it can lead to particularly unsustainable urban communities. Western cities are littered with examples of how incoming immigrants arriving into certain urban areas have created social tension, and at worst violent clashes (Amin, 2005). Such events should warn against simply using spatial measures to engender forms of social change.

Second, a vast gentrification literature has demonstrated how reinvestment in devalourised urban spaces can lead to complete transformations in neighbourhood composition. As processes of gentrification have spread, this issue should be at the forefront of many cities concerns. Social mixing plays into this issue through promoting, and indeed sometimes instigating, streams of reinvestment into run-down urban areas. Without relevant guidance and planning policies, this reinvestment can quickly turn a neighbourhood from a no-go area, into a hot spot and upcoming area (Wyly and Hammel, 1999). The result for incumbent communities can be soaring housing costs, loss of community and retail services, and diminished control to levers of local governance. The objective of current social sustainability agenda constructed around notions of social mixing therefore has to be to safeguard the tenure of lower income communities in areas undergoing this process.

Related to this, a lack of social mixing may also have implications for the social policy aspect of UK urban policy. The UK government has aggressively pursued social sustainability via an inclusive community agenda. Through this, it intends for socially mixed neighbourhoods to become cohesive units. Yet if mixing does not occur, this may result in the social policy objectives of government remaining unfilled. Making 'unsustainable communities' – those defined as 'socially excluded' – sustainable may therefore prove difficult, given spatial proximity to more affluent groups will certainly not engender job opportunities, 'cultural change' (a dubious notion at best) and educational achievement. Conceived in the government's own terms of 'social capital', without transference of this much-celebrated possession via social interaction, the prospects for 'unsustainable' communities appear bleak.

Current urban policy frameworks therefore appear not to have achieved the social and community objectives intended. The creation of more socially mixed – largely in terms of income groups – neighbourhoods does not appear to have created the types of communities the government envisages as sustainable places. As Australia increasingly embraces a three-pillar model of sustainability, these are conclusions which should be noted.

### **Considering Social Sustainability**

I want to briefly conclude this paper with some comments on the concept of social sustainability. At the start of this paper, the general concept of sustainability was outlined, with a three pillar model being identified. One of these pillars was 'social sustainability'. In discussion of this concept, it was difficult to find a defined set of principles that it is composed of. Definitions of it vary, and it includes any number of concepts, such as community, society, and inclusiveness, that themselves have no clear definition. Conceived in New Labour's terms, sustainable communities appear to resemble harmonious, mixed, economically productive neighbourhoods. Yet, what exactly makes them 'sustainable' or why 'sustainability' is an important way in which to conceive of these aspects remains unclear. Some critical reflection of the concept is therefore warranted.

The objectives of harmonious, cooperative communities where unemployment, deprivation and underachievement are absent are clearly agreeable goals. Why then present them as 'sustainability goals'? As Marcuse (1999) explains, the concept of sustainability certainly does not automatically incorporate these goals:

"Programmes and policies can be sustainable and socially just but, unfortunately, they can also be sustainable and unjust. On the other hand, unsustainable programmes may be very just but, fortunately, some very unjust programmes are also unsustainable" (103)

Sustainability clearly does not guarantee positive returns; any number of bad, or worse unjust, social policies can be potentially sustainable.

There is also the problem of current interpretations of social sustainability being conceived in particularly apolitical terms (Swyngedouw, 2007). Urban policies designed to bring people together so they can work in a much more inclusive fashion – cooperate as a harmonious community – negate the issue of whether these groups have lines of conflict that are not easily resolved:

“It suggests all humanity has similar interest in “sustainable housing” or “sustainable urban development”; that if we simply recognized our common interests everything would be fine, we could end poverty, exploitation, segregation, inadequate housing, congestion, ugliness, abandonment and homelessness. Yet, in these areas, the idea of universal acceptance of meaningful goals is a chimera. Housing and urban development are conflict-laden arenas: what benefits one hurts another.” (Marcuse, 1999, 104-5)

Urban policies have little to say about these conflicts. Therefore, where does this leave the concept of social sustainability? The first thing to note is that in terms of environmental sustainability, the city clearly has a central role to play in ensuring continued human inhabitation of the planet. Making urban life more sustainable – in terms of resource usage, transport, energy, etc – clearly requires high priority. Yet, in terms of social sustainability the placement of the concept, and its utility, appear much less clear. Questions about what constitutes a sustainable society and whether such an aim is useful/desirable will require continual revisiting if the concept is to have any utility.

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