Rethinking Sustainable Cities

Simon, David

Published by Bristol University Press

Simon, David.
Rethinking Sustainable Cities: Accessible, green and fair.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/80067.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/80067

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Sustainable urbanisation has moved to the forefront of debate, research and policy agendas over recent years. There are numerous reasons for this, differing in precise combination across countries and regions. Among the most important of these is a growing appreciation of the implications of rapid urbanisation now occurring in China, India and many other low- and middle-income countries with historically low urbanisation levels. Much of this urbanisation is emulating unsustainable resource-intensive patterns from high-income countries, with the demonstration effect enhanced by greater global mobility, globalisation of architectural and urban planning consultancies and construction firms, and the power of the media and information and communications technologies.

Similarly, the related challenges posed to urban areas and regions worldwide by climate/environmental change have now become more widely understood and the urgency of taking action increasingly appreciated, even in poor cities and towns. This constitutes remarkable progress from a situation of just a few years ago when such arguments
fell on deaf ears since the problems were held to be too distant in the future compared to meeting immediate demands for scarce resources. Almost everywhere, the realities of fluctuating and unpredictable weather patterns, and especially the increasing frequency and severity of extreme events, as well as extensive loss of life and both economic and environmental damage, are changing perceptions among elected urban representatives, officials and residents alike.

A key marker of the increasing importance of urban issues is how they have risen up the international agenda. This is symbolised by the inclusion of a specifically urban Goal (no 11) – to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable – in the set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the UN at the 2015 General Assembly. The SDGs have now replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) from 2016 (Parnell, Chapter Four, this volume; Simon, Chapter Three, this volume). Unlike the MDGs, the SDGs were formulated through an unprecedentedly lengthy and diverse consultative process involving national and sub-national governments, international agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the private sector and community organisations in every country. Importantly, too, the Goals apply to all countries, regardless of per capita income or position on the Human Development Index. This demonstrates the shared fate of humankind in the face of sustainability challenges, be these related to inadequate access to the resources for meeting basic needs and an acceptable quality of life or to excessive consumption and the associated health, resource depletion and environmental problems.

Symbolically, too, given their consistently growing demographic, economic, environmental and socio-cultural importance worldwide, cities and other sub-national entities were mentioned explicitly for the first time in the Paris Agreement reached at COP21 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Paris in early December 2015. This gives special recognition to the role of urban areas in meeting the climate change challenges. Meanwhile the New Urban Agenda, launched officially at the Habitat III global summit in Quito, Ecuador, in October 2016, and which will shape global efforts to promote more sustainable urbanisation and urban areas
for the following 20 years, has been under active preparation through UN member states and diverse stakeholder groups worldwide.

That the importance of urban sustainability is now receiving wide recognition represents the first prerequisite for progress towards that objective. However, therein lies a double paradox. While it might at first sight seem feasible to make well-resourced, orderly towns and cities in high-income countries more sustainable, changing the entrenched resource-intensive, high-consumption economic processes and lifestyles there, and the power relations and vested interests bound up with them, will require immense effort, finance and political will. Conversely, to many people, the widespread poverty, resource and service deficits and chronic traffic congestion of large, fast-growing cities in poor countries represent the ultimate challenge or ‘wicked urban problem’. Yet, although powerful vested interests exist there too and can be highly resistant to change, the example of Lagos under the previous governor, Babatunde Fashola, demonstrates how an energetic champion untainted by personal corruption, committed to the cause and possessing the right connections can bring about remarkable results in a relatively short period, even in the face of some of the most severe problems in any megacity.

Naturally, though, however sustainable or otherwise, cities do not exist as isolated islands of bricks, concrete, steel, glass, tarmac, corrugated iron, wood and cardboard. Indeed, they form integral parts of wider natural and politico-administrative regions, as well as national and supranational entities, on which they depend for resources, waste disposal, human interaction and the circulation of people, commodities and finance. Urban areas can lead or lag in sustainability transitions but ultimately sustainable towns and cities exist only as components of more or less sustainable societies. This is both a truism and shown historically, with evidence accumulating from various ancient urban-based societies on different continents (Simon and Adam-Bradford, 2016). This further complexity creates ‘boundary problems’ since the interactive systems span often numerous administrative areas, complicating yet further what are already complex development, economic, environmental, political, social and technical challenges.
Sustainability is itself a complex and contested notion at all spatial scales, containing diverse elements, some relatively easy to measure and others more qualitative. Moreover, like development, sustainability has the triple characteristics of being simultaneously a normative aspiration, a state of being and the means of attaining that state. It has been theorised, appropriated, used and abused in numerous discourses and practical applications, to the point that some critics claim that – also like development – it has lost any usefulness. Some of these complexities are examined in the urban context in Chapter Three, especially the differences between ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ sustainability discourses, policies and practices and the need to integrate economic, socio-cultural and environmental dimensions within holistic approaches.

Distinctiveness of this book

While the literature on various aspects of urban sustainability is substantial and growing apace, the immediate justification for this book is its originality and the absence of any comparable volume. Most existing books adopt specific conceptual approaches, deal with particular countries or regions, and/or focus heavily on environmental and/or economic aspects. Many of the books on equity/fairness within sustainability (such as Agyeman, 2013; Agyeman et al, 2003; Atkinson and Wade, 2014) are not specifically urban in focus. Some of these issues, as well as broader concerns relating to urban inequality and poverty, are well covered elsewhere, with a range of theoretical and more applied emphases (see, for instance, Myers, 2011, 2016; Pieterse, 2008; Pieterse and Simone, 2013; Satterthwaite and Mitlin, 2014; Tannerfeldt and Ljung, 2006). However, the early books on sustainability challenges in cities, which appeared some two decades ago (such as Pugh, 1996; 2000) reflect the thinking and concerns of that time, whereas debates and our understanding have moved on. Many more recent urban titles provide general introductions to the role of urban planners or urban planning principles and practice, nowadays increasingly emphasising sustainability (for example, Rydin, 2011).
Others focus on particular aspects of planning (city centres, neighbourhoods) or the UK (for instance, Flint and Raco, 2011; Imrie and Lees, 2014). Hodson and Marvin (2014) has some similarities to this book, especially with respect to elements of green agendas, but also a focus on energy and other themes. Accordingly, the importance of and reasons for organising this book around the three key dimensions of sustainable cities, namely accessibility, greenness and fairness, are set out below. The final section of this chapter provides an overview of the rest of the book.

This compact book seeks to make a signal contribution to the understanding of sustainable urbanisation agendas through authoritative interventions contextualising, assessing and explaining clearly the relevance and importance of three central dimensions of sustainable towns and cities everywhere, namely that they should be accessible, green and fair. These three dimensions inform the work of Mistra Urban Futures (MUF), an international research centre on sustainable urbanisation based in Gothenburg, Sweden, and operating through transdisciplinary co-design/co-production research platforms there, in Skåne (southern Sweden), in Greater Manchester (UK), Cape Town (South Africa) and Kisumu (Kenya). These platforms bring together groups of researchers from universities and research institutes, parastatals, local and regional authorities and official agencies to identify shared problems and to undertake joint research to find and then implement solutions. A new partnership in Asia and/or Latin America is planned in 2016/7 in order to establish a research presence in most continental regions, which will enhance MUF’s ability to undertake comparative research into principles and guidelines of good practice and thereby to influence urban sustainability agendas at all spatial scales.

In order to assess the state of the art and to inform the second phase of its research programme in terms of intellectual coherence, MUF has undertaken substantive reviews of the existing literature in relation to accessible, green and fair cities. The nature of this work lends itself to wider distribution in order to inform evolving urban sustainability debates and policy dialogues worldwide. Many of these debates came together in the preparatory process for the
Habitat III summit in October 2016 and the ‘New Urban Agenda’ for the following two decades within the UN System and – at least as important – outside it. That constitutes the context and rationale for this book as local, national and international policymakers and practitioners grapple with the twin challenges of building numerous new urban areas (sometimes dubbed ‘the cities yet to come’) and new urban segments in growing cities while also redesigning old urban areas and segments in accordance with emerging principles of good urban sustainability practice in different contexts around the world. Equally, these principles are increasingly finding a central place in university courses and professional training modules on sustainable cities and urban design. Hence this book should also be of value in the classroom.

The three thematic chapters survey the origins, evolution and diverse interpretations and applications of the respective dimensions – accessible, green and fair – in different contexts internationally and how they inform current debates and discourses, as set out below. In order to provide more integrated coverage and minimise overlap, cross-referencing has been included where appropriate.

In order to enhance the accessibility and usefulness of this book, a selective annotated list of relevant websites provides information on internet resources in different aspects of the theory, policy and practice of urban sustainability to the diverse audiences at which this book is aimed, not least urban practitioners.

**Organisation of the contents**

In Chapter Two, ‘Accessible cities: from urban density to multidimensional accessibility’, James Waters advocates the concept of ‘accessible cities’, where accessibility is the freedom or ability to obtain goods and services and urban opportunities of various kinds to facilitate human wellbeing. Multiple dimensions of the concept are discussed, as well as how it might be achieved in different contexts. In these terms, accessibility constitutes an advance over density, a more limited but widely used term – not least within World Bank and UN-HABITAT discourses and policy documents over many
years – to describe a key urban characteristic in diverse conceptual and normative framings that include density of social networks and employment and other opportunities. In physical terms, purported benefits of high-density development include efficiency and reduced environmental impact, agglomeration and economic benefits, as well as improved social equity but the evidence is mixed and trade-offs occur. Moreover, in some contexts, especially within poor areas of certain South and Southeast Asian metropolises, excessive population density is problematic. Accordingly, this chapter reflects the intellectual journey of MUF over recent years, having initially adopted the UN-HABITAT focus on density but now advocating multifaceted accessibility – which also chimes with the appropriate mobility/accessibility target and indicator in SDG 11.

In Chapter Three, ‘Green cities: from tokenism to incrementalism and transformation’, David Simon picks up the discussion commenced in the opening section above in explaining how sustainability concerns in relation to urban areas have arisen, evolved and been applied over time and in different socio-spatial contexts. Utopian thinking and urban design, as manifest, for instance in the Garden Cities Movement, date back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Explicit urban greening initiatives can be traced back to the 1980s, although its widespread emergence in discourse and practice is much more recent. The diversity of meanings and associations attached to urban greening – indicative of its appeal in numerous contexts – is examined. Various ‘weak’ or instrumental approaches to urban greening can be distinguished from ‘strong’ versions that imply more fundamental transitions and transformations. In this regard, deployment of a threefold division of socio-economic, socio-technical and socio-/social-ecological analytical frames is helpful in aiding understanding. The value of the ecosystem services approach to valuing natural assets within urban areas is assessed, including in relation to green and green–blue infrastructural agendas.

A key driver behind the recent popularisation of city greening initiatives is the imperative of addressing climate change and reducing disaster risk (DRR).
Conventional thinking has bifurcated climate change actions into tackling mitigation versus promoting adaptation (see, for instance, Bicknell et al, 2009; Bulkeley, 2013; Bulkeley et al, 2013). Recent evidence shows that this is an artificial division and that carefully targeted interventions can achieve both and also provide health and other co-benefits. Paradoxically, too, a portfolio of individually modest and incremental interventions can have aggregate effects where the whole becomes more than the sum of the parts and hence has important transformative value. Nevertheless, the challenges of political will and resources to move beyond key thresholds of investment and inertia are very real in urban areas of all kinds and degrees of socio-technical sophistication. Conversely, grand high-tech eco-city schemes may prove elitist and of very limited replicability and longer-term sustainability, at least to the majority of poor urban residents.

Susan Parnell starts Chapter Four, entitled ‘Fair cities: imperatives in meeting global sustainable developmental aspirations’, with questions about what an increasingly urban world implies for fairness at the national or global scale in the twenty-first century. She then traces divergent and contradictory intellectual and practice-based traditions that the notion of fairness in the city implies, including work on urban equity (rights, opportunity, access, affordability); justice (electoral, procedural, distributional, and enforcement); redistribution (urban welfare and post conflict); the public good, the good city and the right to the city. The central argument is that ideas and practices about fairness and social, economic, environmental and spatial justice in the city vary over time and space. On the one hand, there is appropriate concern about rising exclusion and the withdrawal of social protection in some centres (typically in older, more affluent cities) and from new urban nodes (largely in the global South). On the other hand, counter-tendencies and new innovations support the utopian aspiration that cities will provide a better future for the millions of new residents who will call them home.

The book ends with a substantive concluding chapter, in which Henrietta Palmer and David Simon pull together and assess the central strands of the book’s intellectual and practice-oriented arguments about
accessible, green and fair cities. They relate these to the recurrent utopian thinking within urban planning and design, highlighting the challenges that these imply in relation to operationalising a coherent, if not truly holistic, urban sustainability agenda in different contexts.

References


