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Perspectives

How to cite:

Castán Broto, Vanesa. “Green City Promises and ‘Just Sustainabilities.’” In: “Green City: Explorations and Visions of Urban Sustainability,” edited by Simone M. Müller and Annika Mattissek, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* 2018, no. 1, 55–63. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/8467.

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Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN (print) 2190-5088
ISSN (online) 2190-8087

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Green City Promises and “Just Sustainabilities”

Introduction

Visions of green cities as engines of sustainable economic growth are misplaced. Green cities are not just about offering green investment opportunities such as environmentally friendly construction, sustainable transport, and waste management solutions. Rather, they also hold the potential to advance urban futures that engage with the needs of citizens, address questions of social and environmental justice, and work with existing urban natures. Achieving this new green vision means recognizing and building on existing arguments about urban sustainability: First, sustainability is not about incremental progress, but about the radical transformation of current urban development principles. Second, the challenges of environmental sustainability are interlinked with the struggle for social justice, and achieving sustainability often entails high political costs. Third, delivering green cities requires recognizing the specific socioecological context of urbanization, rather than imposing particular development models on cities.

Green Cities Today: The Need for Radical Transformation

The last three decades of research on sustainable development have shown continued efforts to deliver sustainable agendas at the local level. This body of work highlights the immense effort, political will, and financial investment still required to activate green transformations in any part of the world (Simon 2016), and reveals that a vast range of activities and actors could potentially bring about sustainable transformations.

Yet, there is growing skepticism towards radical agendas of transformation. As other pieces in this volume show, greening the city has become a way to create new economic opportunities. In this discourse, “green” refers both to the interlocking of natural features in cities through urban planning and design, and the possibility of using such green measures as engines of economic growth (Telma 2016). Coupling environmentalism and economic development is, for the most part, a conservative discourse in which green cities emerge as a tool to further the green economy.

Bikers in the metropolitan region in Santiago, Chile, where the rising interest in sustainability initiatives has also been used as a marketing device. Photo by Jose Luis Stephens/Shutterstock.com.



Such a perspective leaves little room for maneuver: in the best of cases, green cities entail little more than the use of sustainable technologies and resource-efficiency measures. In the worst cases, advocates use green labels as a mere marketing and posturing device. For example, scholar Martín Sanzana Calvet has tracked how an array of green-city-inspired phrases and images is used to sell houses in gated compounds in the peri-urban areas of Santiago de Chile. Sellers routinely provide misleading information on the environmental performance of the developments (Sanzana Calvet 2016). Developers adapt to new sustainability discourses without fundamentally shifting construction practices. These forms of green washing do not advance sustainability.

Delivering sustainability requires dealing with wicked problems in which environmental planning objectives become moving targets: before achieving any particular sustainability outcome, new sustainability challenges have already emerged. Simon (2016) and colleagues highlight that cities exist within larger political and administrative regions and that their transformation towards sustainability can only happen as part of broader transitions towards a sustainable society. Achieving a green city is not merely a question of delivering specific sustainability projects in transport, housing, and services; it is also about

catalyzing broader cultural changes and fostering the development of institutions directed towards reimagining society and the economy. Green efforts should look at the city as a site for radical material and cultural changes, where sustainable visions of a green society can be enacted for the benefit of deeper cultural, institutional, and social transformations.

In cities such as Lagos (Nigeria) or Durban (South Africa), we see concrete examples of how changes to society and governance can be harnessed to deliver a green city in a relatively short period (Simon 2016). Durban's efforts to mainstream climate change action, for example, have demonstrated that sustainability action and social development can be advanced in tandem (Roberts 2008).

Linking Environmental Sustainability and Social Justice

Embedded in the need for radical transformation is the issue of social justice. In an effort to address the inequality that has emerged with sustainability efforts, geographer Julian Agyeman proposes a radical agenda of change to deliver what he calls “just sustainabilities” in cities. The discourse of just sustainabilities prescribes four policy principles for local sustainability action: addressing well-being and quality of life; meeting the needs of present and future generations; enabling justice and equity in terms of recognition, process, procedure, and outcome; and living within ecosystem limits (Agyeman 2013). An evaluation of the implementation of these four principles in more than two hundred cities around the world showed that local actors—including governments, businesses, and communities—incorporate different principles of just sustainabilities in current practices of environmental planning (Castán Broto and Westman 2017). However, initiatives that incorporate the four simultaneously are extremely rare. The biggest deficits in implementing socially green policies relate to the lack of participation and recognition of marginalized voices, and to real efforts to take into account the limits of ecosystems in public policies and environmental planning.

I would advocate cautious optimism about the possibilities of delivering just sustainabilities in urban areas (Castán Broto and Westman 2017). Empirical studies of climate change governance in different cities suggest that the results of experimentation are ambiguous and depend on how initiatives unfold in context (Bulkeley, Castán Broto, and Edwards 2015). However, there are good examples of initiatives that put participation and recognition at the center of achieving sustainability.

A well-known example is the long-standing Orangi Pilot Project (OPP) in Karachi, Pakistan. Initiated by Dr. Akhter Hameed Khan in the 1980s, the project involved local residents in solving the problems in their neighborhood. Hasan (2006) explains that participatory research led to the identification of four major challenges: sanitation, employment, health, and education. In 1988, four independent programs were developed to address these issues, one of which was the Orangi Pilot Project Research and Training Institute (OPP-RTI). Its most important program is a low-cost sanitation program that builds on the idea of partnerships between people and the government, assuming that “communities can finance, manage and build internal sewerage development provided that they are organized and supported with technical support and managerial guidance” (Hasan 2006, 451). Those “internal” developments (sanitary latrines inside homes, underground sewers in lanes, and neighborhood collector sewers) are then linked to publicly financed external infrastructures such as trunk sewers and treatment plants. More than two million people have benefited from the program, not only in Orangi but also other settlements in Karachi, and cities, towns, and villages across Pakistan (OPP-RTI 2018).

An important feature of the low-cost sanitation program is that the design of the sanitation system followed existing sewerage channels, which have developed more or less informally following natural drainage channels (Hasan 2006). The features of urban nature were able to support sustainable systems that have improved people’s well-being, and living conditions in the neighborhood in general.

In the case of OPP-RTI, harnessing local knowledge was key to delivering a successful, large-scale program that put people’s basic needs at the center of achieving sustainable development. There is, however, a political cost to socially-engaged sustainable development. When Perween Rahman, long-serving director of the OPP-RTI, was assassinated in 2013, presumably because of her land-rights activism, Professor Diana Mitlin wrote:

... their OPP’s vision of the city was one based on justice—in the last few years they had been working with communities to support their mapping of their homes. These were communities whose longstanding residency was under threat. Powerful groups sought to evict them and take over their land for their own gain. OPP both studied the problem and worked with these communities to improve their mapping skills, enabling them to advance their legitimate claims to their homes with the authorities. (2013)



Residential areas near a lake in Bangalore, India. Photo by SNEHIT/Shutterstock.com.

The example shows that delivering urban sustainability requires a strong commitment to community participation and justice, sometimes at great risk to those who promote them. Further, it reveals that we cannot develop green cities by treating the city as a blank canvas. Initiating action first requires a case-by-case assessment of existing structures and institutions within a city, to determine their capacity for realizing transformative, environmentally respectful, and socially progressive visions. Making something “green” is not just about covering unused spaces with vegetation, or even about preserving environmental quality—it is about advancing a political movement for radical change to transform human relationships with the environment and resources as the only means to redress the gross inequalities that threaten humanity’s and the Earth’s future.

Understanding Sustainability Action within Socioecological Contexts

Alongside purpose-built green spaces, cities contain an array of ecosystems that may host, with or without planning, different forms of vegetation and wildlife. These may be areas of recreation, social interaction, or innovation. Such urban ecosystems can be valuable, not least because urban populations may be dependent on them. People living in cities may, for example, play key roles in protecting green areas and water resources. In Bengaluru, India, communities have traditionally managed a network of water tanks of immense ecological importance. In the last half century, however, urban development has increasingly threatened this blue network (Unnikrishnan and Nagendra 2018). Ben-

galuru today depends on long-distance water transfers that create political conflict, and on a dense network of private boreholes that are depleting the city's water resources. Local scholars see the restoration of the existing community-managed network of water tanks as a more sustainable and socially just alternative for managing water resources. Citizens have turned towards different forms of activism to ensure the protection of water resources (Nagendra 2016).

Cities are vital in facilitating key processes of resource management that may hold the key to supporting an increasingly urbanized world population. Among urban development planning scholars, green city ideals are promoted hand in hand with people-oriented ideals about cities' futures. Since about one-sixth of the world's population lives in urban areas with limited access to basic services, such scholars suggest that greening activities in cities in less developed regions should provide tangible opportunities for the poorer and more marginalized sectors of the population.

The informal sector—that sector of the economy not monitored or taxed by formal institutions—is integral in managing urban resources (Guibrunet and Castán Broto 2016). Scholars argue that we cannot achieve a green transition without the incorporation of a highly gendered informal economy sector, from street vendors to waste collectors (Brown and McGranahan 2016). In countries as diverse as Brazil or India, there are millions of waste pickers who facilitate the reuse and recycling of approximately 20 percent of cities' waste worldwide (WIEGO 2018). Protecting waste pickers is not only a humanitarian or labor-rights issue; it is also a means to improve the efficiency of urban waste flows. Overall, urban natures are as integral to the city as citizens are to the preservation of such diverse urban natures.

Yet, reports of the green economy rarely recognize the informal sector, and current green city models neither acknowledge the importance of the informal economy, nor support it—even though, ultimately, greening the informal economy would provide an opportunity to incorporate this economic sector into the global economy. The consequences of doing this are uncertain, however, particularly for those who rely on local markets to maintain their businesses. We need research that looks at the operation of local economies. In particular, we need to understand which green development models benefit informal sector workers, and which ones displace them or destroy livelihood opportunities. Green cities that are implemented at the expense of informal economies

miss an opportunity to improve the performance of existing businesses; at the same time, they potentially cause further hardship to citizens already operating in precarious conditions. We should design context-conscious green cities with full recognition of existing economies, formally sanctioned or not. Such a green city would prioritize the concerns of those living in the city and create opportunities to deliver mutual benefits for both the environment and citizens.

Conclusion

Protecting urban natures requires recognizing that cities coevolve with ecosystems. Making cities green is akin to integrating sustainability into everyday practices, and promotes fairer futures for all. This is not a call to change people's lifestyles. Rather, sustainability pushes us to recognize cities as dynamic arrangements of meanings and things where recognition of the existing landscape and the multiple forms of life it sustains comes before the implementation of rigid management systems that deliver equally rigid visions of the green city. This also constitutes a call for the reversal of familiar, but ineffective, forms of techno-economic planning because they lack engagement with the actual demands of a changing urban society and the ecological systems that sustain it.

Cities have created a global climate of optimism about the prospect of delivering on climate change objectives. This is not because cities hold some kind of silver bullet or a technological solution that can be translated into best practices to be implemented in every corner of the world. Rather, cities hold the key to hope because they offer a world of endless possibilities, and at least some positive outcomes are likely. Cities and broader urban agglomerations bring together diverse resources and groups of people that have the capacity to reimagine the urban environment in which they live. Cities are places in which environmental action is realized in concrete projects that can be presented, promoted, and appropriated in different contexts.

However, action in cities does not occur in a vacuum. Instead, it builds on specific urban histories. Thus, acting in any one city requires recognizing the specific configurations of urban spaces and how they are lived. Action in cities also requires acknowledging the material and symbolic permanence of urban spaces, as much as the ways in which they

change beyond recognition for anyone other than those who live in—and transform—those spaces. Cities enable citizens to interact with their environment and forge urban landscapes. And cities offer the opportunity to establish institutional systems of accountability that allow for visualizing systems of provision and how they are managed. Green cities can only emerge with reference to the landscapes of urban life, and their entanglement with history and cultural practices. Sustainable transformations thus depend on deeply rooted questions of justice, and how they unfold in specific contexts of action.

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