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Actor Consulting

A Means to Tackle the Fuzzy Side to Sustainability within a Commonly Agreed and Positive Planning Environment

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The late *Dr. Geoff Porter* was a researcher at Sustainable Cities Research Institute at the University of Northumbria, Newcastle upon Tyne.

Gert de Roo and Geoff Porter are co-authors of the book *Fuzzy Planning – The Role of Actors in a Fuzzy Governance Environment*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing.

Abstract: This paper argues that many of the key notions associated with spatial planning, such as ‘sustainability’, are essentially *fuzzy* in their nature. The paper introduces a method of data collection and analysis that seeks to clarify such situations, which might lead to the identification of more realistic spatial policy that reflects the thoughts, aspirations and motives of crucial *actors*, being limited in number and having a common and positive understanding regarding the issue at hand. The paper refers to two examples from the UK and the Netherlands respectively of how such a method can be used to explore realistic ways forward for a sustainable housing policy. In both cases it was considered necessary to explore aspects of policy that go beyond the conventional boundaries of spatial policy for housing in order to learn how to pursue more sustainable approaches. The actor-consulting model was effective in unpacking the fuzzy notion of sustainability in a way that assisted the planning authority to learn how policy might be more realistically framed.

Sustainability as a fuzzy notion

Notions and concepts in spatial planning such as ‘sustainability’ are often not as clearly understood as we might like to think. Perhaps the commonplace use of the notion of ‘sustainability’ in the language and politics of the twenty-first century creates a false sense of security, which might lead us to believe that better outcomes for economic development or socio-environmental progress might be readily achieved via creating and implementing ‘sustainable’ spatial policy. The introduction of various EU policy tools and documents, such as the *Strategic Environmental Assessment* (European Commission 2001), *Sustainability Appraisal* (ODPM 2004) of spatial plans and the EU Sustainable Development Strategy of 2001 (COM 2001) and its consequential series of annual monitoring reports, might serve to heighten this false sense of security. However, although such concepts – and espe-

cially that of sustainability – might appear to be well understood by all, their incorporation into spatial plans can often lead to disappointing outcomes.

We begin this paper therefore with the assumption that important notions, concepts and doctrines in planning, such as ‘sustainability’, ‘liveability’, ‘resilience’, ‘urban’ and ‘compact city’ are not understood as well as we implicitly might like to think. Instead, they might be considered to be essentially ‘fuzzy’, ‘fluid’ or ‘illusive’ by character. Arguably, we could say that in situations found between the two main streams of planning thought (Allmendinger 2009; De Roo 2003) it is not considered obvious to expect fuzziness to be of influence. However, it is precisely here where ignorance concerning fuzziness prevails and this is, consequently, a serious cause of planning disappointments. Fuzziness is less likely to occur within a technical-rational environment, which assumes certainty is everywhere due to direct causal relationships, clear entities and a stable environment. A well-understood factual environment is to be expected. At the same time, we may assume that all participating actors are very much aware of the far-reaching uncertainty in a rational communicative environment and thus aim, in particular, for a consensus which would result in an agreed environment. The fuzzy nature of planning is therefore most destructive in a situation with a limited number of actors who all assume that they have the same goal, the same attitude and the same concerns in addressing a common interest which is clear, open and motivating to all involved. It is quite likely that these assumptions are wrong, with the situation being less clear than imagined, due to the use of fuzzy notions and concepts, amongst other concerns.

‘Sustainability’ is perhaps the most obvious example. While almost everyone accepts ‘sustainability’ as one of the more important goals of planning, the outcome of the ambition to achieve ‘sustainability’ is often limited. One important reason is that its translation from policy into practice fails to recognize that a multiplicity of actors is likely to be involved. For example, actors might inadvertently act in conflicting

ways, as each of the actors will adopt a personal understanding or belief while considering actions in response to a particular policy addressing ‘sustainable development’. In this kind of situation the outcome of our planning might be in contrast to what was expected.

This paper explores mechanisms that assist in understanding the fuzzy character of these concepts in planning, and how actors might behave in a fuzzy governance environment of this nature. In particular, a decision-making approach is proposed to tackle the fuzziness associated with these concepts and to clarify their operational value. A substantial part of this fuzziness might stem from ignoring the multiplicity of different understandings and perceptions of concepts such as ‘sustainability’.

Defining sustainability beforehand narrows down the scope of analysis by prejudging its meaning (Lafferty, Meadowcroft 2000: 17). Instead, it should be seen as a concept that derives meaning by what people – actors – expect from it, allowing the concept to ‘*cut across established sectoral domains*’ (Lafferty, Meadowcroft 2000: 20). Analysing ‘sustainability’ might therefore focus on the intentions and belief systems of those who want to act or react to sustainability, whatever its meaning. It is often found that not all actors are particularly in favour of ‘sustainable development’, especially if they are required to adapt their lifestyle (Davidson 1996). In terms of implementation therefore, a creative process is needed. Sustainability precludes a universal understanding of how it can be interpreted and consequently we must regard its elaboration as a *fuzzy* planning problem that should be related to the motives, values and preferences of influential actors who have a direct interest in the planning issue at hand.

Fuzzy Planning Model

From a philosophical perspective, Kosko (1994: 19) tells us that fuzziness means *multi-valence*: ‘three or more options, perhaps an infinite spectrum of options’, instead of one specific, unified meaning to address a single entity. Fuzziness arises therefore when a notion or concept has a multiple understanding. Taking a constructivist line of reasoning, it is important to understand that reality as we see it is a construction that each of us composes for themselves in continuous interaction with the outside world (object-oriented interaction) and through interactions with constructions made by others (inter-sub-

jective interactions) (Scott 1995). Unless there is one clear definition accepted by all, there will be multiple interpretations, which will add to the uncertainty regarding results of spatial interventions. Seen from a planning perspective, this adds to the uncertainty of the planning issue, uncertainty within the planning process and uncertainty with regard to people’s behaviour and actions.

We therefore focus in particular on *actor-related fuzziness in planning* and present a model based on an analysis of actor contributions by an observer (researcher). This model is referred to as *actor consulting*. The model is not new to planning, which has a long history of multi-actor analysis, using interviews that are meant to identify significant, positive or missing links between key actors. Nevertheless, we consider actor consulting to be a means of designing and implementing spatial planning policy that more effectively reflects the aspirations of crucial actors, supporting the search for deeper meanings and building awareness of their consequences, individually and among the various actors. In particular, by making a distinction between *present* (actual) contributions and contributions which the various actors would consider *desirable*, information which is very constructive for the process of planning can be generated. Actor consulting makes sense in situations within which actors are limited in number and do have – to some extent – a common understanding of the issue and the direction of actions to be taken. In this sense, actor consulting is not to be confused with public consultation (e.g. Arnstein 1968). As we will see later, the key actors to be consulted are likely to be governmental bodies or agencies, established environmental pressure groups, major developers or third parties strongly connected with the implementation of policies.

The aim of the actor-consulting decision-making model is to address the subjective nature of fuzzy notions and concepts in planning, to fine-tune a common understanding among actors and to unravel underlying mechanisms that determine the actors’ behaviour. The model therefore provides information about the thoughts and actions of actors. This information equips decision-makers with better anticipation in a policy arena, in which it is too readily assumed that a commonly understood issue will lead automatically to commonly desired actions and results. The model helps decision-makers to formulate well-considered, realistic policy by reducing this uncertainty caused by predisposed assumptions.

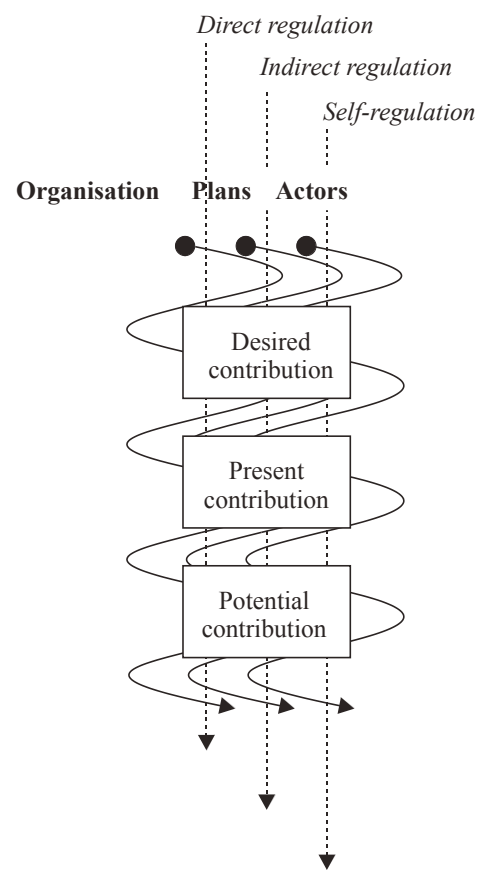
Actions taken by actors do not come about independently. They are determined, among other factors, by the resources available to each actor and the institutional setting in which they operate. These are dynamic because physical conditions change continuously, because interactions between actors influence changes of attitude and because of the continuous development of institutional arrangements. The dynamic nature of the interrelationship between actors means that actor contributions are likely to present a moving target and will need to be regularly reviewed. This is the context in which actors will act in a particular way – their *present contribution*. Meanwhile, they have certain ideas about the way they want to act – the *desired contribution*. The proposed actor-consulting model facilitates an analysis of the present and desired contribution, and the conflicts that might arise between them.

Additional literature study, expert meetings, introducing observation techniques and further analyses can generate information about the *potential contributions* of actors and the internal and external conditions under which such contributions are possible. Technical research might be of value here, such as the comparative study of a similar situation in other regions. Interviewing actors about their perception of the role of other parties can add value to the research. This facilitates an understanding of the interdependence of actors that is needed to achieve objectives. Though interviewing actors about their perception of others can sometimes lack objectivity, it might generate ideas that are worthwhile pursuing. In short, we can distinguish two steps to study *the potential contribution*. The first step consists of finding out what solutions exist, while the second step refers to exploring the advantages and disadvantages of these solutions for different actors. This is akin to the exploration of *alternatives* that forms the basis of many rational planning techniques, such as that advocated by the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive (European Commission 2001: Article 5(1)). This gives us the basic model, consisting of the present, desired and potential contributions of actors.

This approach is aimed at helping a planning authority to formulate well-considered, ‘realistic’ policy by reducing uncertainty and raising the level of awareness regarding assumptions to which the actors relate. With the notion of ‘realistic’ policy we are at an important point as regards elaborating the actor-consulting model. As our approach aims to build awareness, it must therefore reflect carefully

upon the regulatory environment of the policy sector under investigation and the relationship between the regulatory climate and the attitudes of the actors. We can describe this process of interaction between authorities and other parties in terms of *direct regulation*, *indirect regulation* and *self-regulation*. Authorities too readily consider direct regulation as a proper means to guide actions, while it is not always in their power to enforce a policy from above. Nor is a top-down approach the best route per se to reach a desired result, particularly if there is mutual dependency between the actors, which is quite often the case. Direct regulation is usually imposed by a planning authority with legal powers, and may be implemented at national, regional or local levels. A local authority by-law is a possible example. Indirect regulation aims to change behaviour by means of incentives and usually takes the form of some fiscal instrument. Regional policies for car parking charges or grants for the installation of domestic thermal insulation are possible examples here. Self-regulation generally consists of an agreement between stakeholders to behave in

Fig. 1: The actor consulting model, illustrating how present, desired and potential contributions of crucial actors in a planning issue might be analysed to produce a framework of direct, indirect and self-regulation, within a given governance environment denoted by organisation, plans and actors.



a particular way. An agreement by a federation of construction companies to adopt regional sustainable building design guidance might be such an example.

The arrows in Figure 1 indicate that regulatory options should be considered at each step in the analysis. An important actor is the planning authority itself, which will wish to identify the most effective set of regulations. Goals, targets and objectives will form the basis of their plans. These will play an important role, since they will be translated into formal policy by means of regulatory tools. Therefore it is not unlikely that the actor-consulting analysis will have a strong focus upon the vision of the decision-making body itself. The plans of all crucial actors should nevertheless be included in the analysis. Subsequently, the outcome of the analysis will serve to indicate to the authorities the potential objectives they can pursue and the types of regulation that might support these objectives. The model at Figure 1 therefore refers finally to ‘organizations’, ‘plans’ and ‘actors’ within a particular planning context. These substantive criteria should help to clarify the institutional context of the interests that are brought to the table. Note, however, that this is not a technical-rational process that seeks to deal in certainties. The actors’ interests and the incentives to subordinate these to a common goal have to be balanced, and together they will contribute to an understanding of the main forces (for example, sustainability) that are pushing the issue forward. However, the interests need to be understood through the lens of the wider institutional framework. Consequently, the institutional background of organizations, represented by actors and presented through their formal plans must be analysed to gain a clear understanding of the issue at hand.

UK Case Study

Introduction

This case involves the use of the actor-consulting model to explore the key sustainability issues in housing policy in the North East region of England. It examines the outcomes of spatial policy at regional level and at local level, in the City of Newcastle upon Tyne, by exploring the perception of a range of actors, focusing on the extent to which they perceived planning policy to be promoting sustainable development with reference to their experience of a major development proposal.

At the time of the research, the principle of consultation in UK planning was long established, but conceived largely within a highly centralized system (Tewdwr-Jones 2002). Policy guidance was now focussing on ‘sustainable development’ (DETR 1999). An emerging feature of the plan review process was the requirement to carry out formal Sustainability Appraisals. This was regarded as good practice at the time, rather than as a mandatory requirement, because the research just predated the implementation (HM Government 2004) of the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive (European Commission 2001). The research offered an opportunity to use the actor-consulting method to review regional and local approaches to spatial policy for the location and design of housing, which stood out as one of the key issues in the regional sustainability debate (North East Assembly 2002). Actor consulting would therefore provide a means to assess the performance of regional and local plans in delivering sustainable outcomes, and provide an opportunity to relate this information to the formal sustainability appraisal processes. Planners at both regional and local levels are required to address sustainability of spatial plans via a formal appraisal system based on setting objectives and targets, supported by the monitoring of a potentially complicated set of indicators. A process of *public* consultation must take place to underpin this process (ODPM 2004). This research was not however linked directly to a formal plan appraisal, but was regarded as an opportunity to explore new participatory techniques for this purpose.

Research methodology

Rather than exploring policy in the abstract sense, the research focused on the experience of actors relating to a specific development proposal. After considering a variety of options, the development proposals for Newcastle Great Park (Bryant Group, Leech Homes 2000) were selected as a case study. Newcastle Great Park was a development proposal for 2,500 new houses and a technology park in an urban fringe setting, with easy access to road and air transport links. The land had originally formed part of Newcastle’s greenbelt, so the land-use and transport aspects of the planning application in particular had been controversial, with both strong support and strong opposition to the development proposals. The idea of developing the site had been pursued for a period of over ten years, and at the time of the research

Business interests	The Developer's consortium: · House builders · Planning consultants · Landscape designers · Transport consultants House Builders' Federation Regional Economic Development Agency Northern Business Forum North East Chamber of Commerce (also representing Royal Institute of British Architects)
Environmental interests	Council for the Protection of Rural England Northumberland Wildlife Trust Countryside Agency English Nature Environment Agency Renew North (Regional renewable energy promotion)
Planning and Transport interests	Government Office North East (regional office of national government) Tynebikes (cycling organisation)
Community interests	Newcastle Healthy City Project National Housing Federation (represented by a social housing company)

Tab. 1: Actors taking part in the Newcastle Case Study.

had reached the stage where final proposals for the design were being negotiated between the developer and the planning authority. This was a development, therefore, of regional significance with respect to the debate on sustainable development.

The actors were selected to represent a broad range of social, environmental and economic interests in Newcastle Great Park. The list of actors is shown in Table 1. The *Sustainability Checklist* system (BRE 2002) was used to define the scope of the discussions with the actors. The Checklist provides a tool to evaluate the 'sustainability' of development proposals and is intended for use by both planners and developers. It breaks down sustainability into eight categories: land use, transport, energy, natural resources, buildings, ecology, community and business, and steers the user through a set of criteria within each of these categories as a means to appraise the development proposal. Despite its technical-rational origins (Faludi 1973) (including, for example, the option for the user to apply a points-scoring system to the object of the appraisal), the Checklist provided a convenient tool to explore the actors' present, desired and potential contributions to the NGP design proposals. The actor contributions would therefore be framed within this scope.

The eight categories on the Checklist (BRE 2002) were used to structure the discussions, al-

though only those that reflected the knowledge and interests of each actor were pursued. So, for example, those with specialist knowledge contributed information to only one or two of the categories, whereas others contributed to all eight. The present contribution towards sustainability was explored by examining each actor's perception of their current behaviour and the behaviour of others, and by reference to what actually happened at the development of Newcastle Great Park. The desired contribution included questions regarding how each actor might *wish* to behave, and ideas were sought to establish how other actors might contribute to achieving improved 'sustainability'. The potential contribution examined actors' perceptions of how the gap between the present and desired situations might be bridged, and sought to explore what new policies and approaches might be possible in order to improve 'sustainability'.

Actor contributions to sustainability

The actors were able to contribute a wealth of information about how the planning application for the NGP development had proceeded, and how policy at regional and local levels had supported, or failed to support, their notions of 'sustainable development'. The actors were also able to contribute a variety of speculative ideas, which linked their perception of the gap

between the present and desired states with the sustainability objectives of the North East region (North East Assembly 2002). Each interview summary was therefore scrutinized to identify discreet sustainability issues¹ and the results were set up on a database. In the categories of Community, Business, Land Use and Transport, between 20–30 sustainability issues were raised, while in the categories of Energy, Buildings, Ecology and Natural resources, between 5–10 issues were raised relating to Newcastle Great Park. Each entry in the *Potential Regulation* column in the database sought to link the gap between the *Present Contribution* and the *Desired Contribution* to one or more of the regional sustainability objectives (North East Assembly 2002). Further columns in the database indicated the nature of the regulatory ideas (statutory, self-regulation, capacity building²) and the level of government that might be involved in their implementation (National, Regional, Local).

The results relating to the category of land use indicate for example that housing *location* is a regional issue, rather than a local one. This reflects the need to co-ordinate land-use planning for housing between local authorities to avoid excessive development on greenfield land. Linked to this is the desire for a public communication programme of alternative local and regional spatial strategies. New media to promote public and political debate might include computer modelling of land use for housing, so that people can see existing land-use patterns and strategic options for the future. There is a need for more housing for single people and small families, and also a need for executive housing with easy access to city centres to curtail long-distance commuting. As in the Drenthe province case study (see below), there was a wide perception of the need to refocus on the types and sizes of homes being built, instead of the current preoccupation with targets for house building.³

The analysis revealed that the contributions of the actors featured relatively little conflict. Similarly, there was little repetition of issues and ideas. The list of sustainability issues was therefore used by the local authority as a checklist against which emerging local and regional spatial policy might eventually be evaluated⁴. This represents the output of the research. The interviews not only revealed a high level of knowledge of sustainability issues among the actors, but also an unexpected desire to achieve a common purpose. For example, the house builders indicated a strong willingness

to deliver housing developments that are perceived to be sustainable in the widest sense, and therefore more likely to be profitable. The process of learning experienced by the planners who took part in the interview process helped to develop an understanding of how the actors perceived the various sustainability issues, and consequently how policy might be structured to accommodate their aspirations. Learning was however limited largely to the planners, because the results of the data analysis were not fed back to the actors. This perhaps emphasizes that actor consulting should be regarded as an ongoing process, with review and update of the information passing both to and from the actors on a regular basis. Only by this means will it be possible for the various frames of reference (Healey 1997) to converge, as mutual learning progresses. According to Blumer (1969: 5), ‘the actor selects, checks, suspends, regroups and transforms meaning in the light of the situation in which he is placed and the direction of his action’. During a planning process, the situation, the mutual understanding of the situation and the actors themselves change. Consequently, what is needed is what Scheff (1967) calls a reciprocated understanding of collective agreements, and not just between the observer (researcher) and individual actors. It would be desirable to use actor consulting as a continuous interaction mechanism between participating actors (De Roo, Porter 2007). Indeed, a key learning point for the planning officers and researchers taking part in this exercise has been to expose the sheer complexity of this policy arena.

Discussion

The output of the research has centred on a list of issues against which emerging policy at local and regional levels can be evaluated. These issues are founded on ideas that are formulated by key actors with direct experience of the shortfalls of contemporary planning policy in delivering sustainable solutions in practice. The weakness of this approach lies perhaps in the specificity of the NGP case. Whilst an exploration of a case study that features the *implementation* of policy might indeed produce an effective way of exposing sustainability issues, it also presents a weakness in terms of its geographic representativeness (Mason 2002). In order to address this point, it might be necessary for example to explore the issues identified so far with a more geographically representative selection of stakeholders, or alternatively to carry

out further case studies across the geography of the local or regional plan.

One of the inherent difficulties of the UK Sustainability Appraisal system is the conflict created by the potential incompatibility of the four national guiding principles for sustainability⁵. The inclusion of economic growth here waters down the policy framework to what some⁶ would see as an ineffectual compromise. Five guiding principles have subsequently been introduced⁷ which might represent a shift from a 'weak' (Pearce 1993) to a slightly stronger approach to sustainability, in that the reference to the '*maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment*' (DETR 1999) has been carefully qualified by reference to social, environmental and resource criteria. The Regional Sustainable Development Frameworks (DETR 2000) are nevertheless required to set out objectives for economic growth alongside those for social progress, environmental protection and resource usage, and spatial policies will be judged against their ability to deliver on *all* these objectives. This will inevitably give rise to conflicts of interest in policy development, not least during the policy appraisal process. Scenarios of this nature require political decisions, despite the assumption of technical-rational theory that 'objective assessment' will lead straightforwardly to better decisions (Owens, Rayner, Bina 2004).

The checklist of issues that represents the output of this research may therefore help to take forward the processes of technical Sustainability Appraisal, but this will continue to be mired in the contradictions that underpin the UK national objectives for sustainable development. It can consequently be concluded that the process of continuous learning on the part of the planning officers and researchers taking part in the actor-consulting process has been a key outcome of this research, and that this might contribute in the fullness of time towards the development of better policy and practice at both local and regional levels.

Netherlands Case Study

Introduction

Housing policy in the province of Drenthe, in the northeast of the Netherlands, is influenced mainly by the relationship between the cities of Groningen and Assen with their surrounding area. The entire Groningen-Assen area accommodates more than half a million people,

of which many are employed in the two main cities, but live in the surrounding settlements. The out-migration of higher income groups to the countryside has exacerbated the depopulation of Groningen's high-density post-war neighbourhoods, adversely affected the fiscal income of the city and resulted in disproportionate growth and development of surrounding villages and towns. This process of suburbanisation has in turn caused a deterioration of environmentally sensitive areas such as nature parks and water systems. In other words, a range of social, environmental and economic problems have begun to build up due to a lack of regional policy co-ordination. The need for co-operation among the actors in this region is framed within this context.

Research methodology

The Province of Drenthe wished to clarify its role in promoting sustainability in its approach to housing policy, accepting and appreciating a shift from a government towards a governance environment. Actor consulting was employed to establish how the principles of sustainability might be pursued. The research methodology started with activities to establish the *present* and *desired* contributions of each of the crucial actors involved in regional housing policy. This in itself constituted a three-stage process. Firstly, a contextual study was carried out to establish the current regulatory framework for housing location and design, in terms of direct (top-down), indirect (incentives) and self-regulation (as a bottom-up process of shared governance), along with the historical context of current policy. Secondly, an investigation of the authority's own perception of its policy environment was carried out to establish their expectations for the roles of the different parties and their perception of the balance of power among the various key actors. Thirdly, a questionnaire was devised to explore each of the key actor's present and desired contributions to housing location and design, and interviews were carried out to explore any discrepancy between the desired and present contributions.

After analysing the present and desired contributions, research was carried out to ascertain the *potential* contributions of the actors. This was achieved in the first instance by carrying out a comparative study between Drenthe province and a similar situation in other regions. This enabled the researchers to establish what alternative solutions might exist. The comparative study was then supplemented by interviews

with actors to ascertain their views on how these potential contributions might help to achieve mutually beneficial objectives. This provided a better understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of these solutions for each individual actor. The outcome was an outline set of policy instruments, or potential contributions, which could be used as a basis for a revised regulatory regime.

The final research activity sought to obtain an insight into the way in which parties might respond to the proposed policy ideas. In an ideal world, the best outcome would be complete agreement among parties about the effectiveness of the proposed policy. In reality though, the outline policy ideas require adjustment to obtain an optimum balance. Consultation work was therefore carried out to establish how each actor might behave in response to the proposed ideas for regulation. This information was used to adjust the proposed regulatory regime, to recognize more fully the relationships between the decision-makers and the executors of the decisions: a joint voluntary agreement contributing to a commonly accepted idea of sustainability to be put into formal regulations to avoid 'free rider' behaviour.

Present and desired contributions of actors

The aim of the analysis work was to explore a better understanding of the underlying motives of actors that were likely to influence policy for housing location and design in Drenthe province. The actors that were consequently chosen to take part in the study were the national, regional and local government policymakers, housing developers, social housing corporations, planning consultants and a variety of environmental and social interest groups. In accordance with the actor-consulting model, their respective organisations and plans were studied carefully.

The national objectives for housing are aimed at concentrating the population in the larger cities, while discouraging housing development in rural areas. This is the policy framework in which all regional parties are supposed to work. As such, the policy of encouraging housing redevelopment on derelict brownfield land is intended to support the containment of urban sprawl and out-migration from the cities. The policy in the cities of Groningen and Assen for the reconstruction of post-war neighbourhoods is intended to reverse the trend of decreasing occupancy in urban areas, where the quality of housing is failing to match expecta-

tions. In the past, the Province of Drenthe pursued these objectives mainly through deploying planning instruments derived from formal legal procedures. These instruments include the zoning of land use, and controlling the number of houses that each municipality is allowed to build. These instruments enable the Province to influence the *supply* of houses in terms of '*how many to build*' and '*where to build*', whereas little attention has been paid to the actual *demand* for housing, and to questions of '*what needs to be built*'. This emphasis has left the responsibility for meeting the individual housing demand and for the quality of the developments to other actors operating at a more local level.

The research into the present and desired contributions of these actors revealed a number of municipal practices that were failing to contribute to more 'sustainable' housing in the region. Local government might in some cases act both as an advocate of public interest and a defendant of its own interests (Kaiser, Godschalk, Chapin 1995). For example, it is common practice in the Netherlands for *municipalities* to acquire greenfield land, provide the infrastructure and subsequently sell the land at a profit to developers, housing corporations or individual households. Financial interests, linked to the ownership of the land, are a driving force behind the location of new developments and these financial considerations often take priority over considerations of environmental and social sustainability. Whereas rural municipalities in Drenthe province have made considerable financial profits from converting agricultural land, the urban municipalities have found that the reconstruction of their post-war neighbourhoods and the redevelopment of brownfield land have resulted in substantial financial losses. Furthermore, private developers have not shown enthusiasm for investment in brownfield projects due to the perceived risk involved.

Provincial policy must consequently seek to influence more directly the building activities of the municipalities. The question is how to make this work, as the existing regional plan of Drenthe has been limited in its possibilities, as it does not prescribe the target groups for housing developments in terms of tenure or affordability, or qualitative aspects of new housing such as house size or access to green space. As such, a block of flats for the elderly – a group with a high demand for housing – might consume a large part of a municipality's housing allocation. Therefore, rural municipalities have little incentive to address housing demand for the elderly. Instead, it is more financially attrac-

tive to use their allocation to build traditional family dwellings for middle and higher income groups. More people can live in larger family houses than in smaller apartment blocks, of which one unit is counted under the terms of the allocation system as the equivalent to one family dwelling. The outcome of all these mechanisms is the proliferation of development in rural areas and the ongoing decay of urban areas.

The provincial planning system has not attempted to influence the reuse of brownfield land in the past, because it was thought that the costs would outweigh the potential returns. High-density housing is often necessary to make such projects financially feasible. However, high densities have in many instances failed to support the quality or the sense of identity of places, particularly in rural municipalities. The actors tended to associate high-density designs with lack of public space, poor layout design, incongruity with the existing townscape and lack of attention to ecological measures. This suggests the need for a collectively supported financial programme for sustaining the reuse of brownfield land in the region. It remains a problem that instruments for prescribing quality, such as policies for securing the release of public space, are not sufficiently developed or properly applied by municipalities. A region-wide policy framework that sets out commonly agreed quality regulations might be needed to deter developers from their current practice of shopping around for the best greenfield sites and the design specifications that yield the highest profits.

Potential contributions of actors

There are opportunities – *potential contributions* – that might support the commonly held sustainability objectives of the actors in the province of Drenthe. Money determines, to a large extent, the motivation for and power of influencing potential contributions to sustainable housing (Forrester 1989). Clearly, there is much to gain if a common policy approach can be agreed upon among the actors. For the Province of Drenthe this is likely to mean reaching a mutual understanding and a voluntary agreement on common actions, which is a shift in approach from direct regulation towards one of supporting common interests on the basis of consensus.

The allocation of housing numbers is not sufficient to promote sustainable housing policy. Instead of controlling supply, the Province

should also pay attention to *‘for whom to build’* and *‘what to build’*. This might be controlled to some extent by modification of *direct regulation*, involving a clearer prescription of the *type* of housing required, avoiding for example the current practice of accounting for the supply of a single-bedroom apartment in the same way as a family dwelling. Some benefit might also be derived from guidelines for quality, identity and ecological building, although here *indirect regulation* might also be possible via regional fiscal instruments to encourage sustainable development. In this situation regional government has to pursue an active policy that focuses on *development*, instead of providing passive support for environmental *protection*. It means that the one-way approach of regulating housing policy through a limitation of numbers should be reformulated into a mutual approach coordinated between the Province of Drenthe and its partners, along with a willingness to take into account situational details that allow an approach which is well embedded in the local context and better relates to local desires. Public-private partnerships might provide a way forward to implement an approach of this nature. This could very well be a promising mechanism to achieve this largely self-regulatory aim, as it actively seeks to engage the support of a wide variety of actors.

Reflection on the outcomes of the two cases and their use of actor consulting

It can be concluded that in the UK case, the differences between actors’ present and desired perceptions of sustainability provided an effective means for the planners to learn how existing policy was being played out in practice. This has led to a better understanding of the key sustainability issues that need to be addressed at both local and regional levels. The actor-consulting model lends itself readily to such gap analyses, because the gap between the actors’ present and desired contributions can be readily related to opportunities for regulation. However, this is not a purely technical-rational process involving the logic of cause and effect⁸. Instead, the process should be seen as a substantially communicative exercise through which the observer (researcher) provides feedback that seeks to marry the aspirations of crucial actors.

However, in contrast with a communicative rationale environment appreciating many actors with different and opposing interests, the

communicative exercise is meant for a planning arena, with crucial actors being limited in number and having a common and positive understanding of the issue and actions to be taken. While there is a common drive, in this arena there are opportunities to be considered for more realistic policy and regulation. The indicators that begin to emerge from the UK case (such as, for example, the extent of public engagement in the appraisal of alternative spatial layouts for housing) are associated with process rather than substantive issues (Miller 2006). In the UK case, it was recognized that the close reference to a particular development restricted the generalizability (Mason 2002) of the empirical data, but the data could nevertheless be seen as an indicator of effectiveness of the previous generation of housing policy. In this sense, the UK case represents a simple method of monitoring the effects of policy at the end of the planning cycle, using a communicative methodology – actor consulting and its focus on desired, actual and potential contributions – rather than a series of substantive measurements.

In the case study carried out in the Netherlands, the approach was taken several stages further than that of the UK. From the perspective of the provincial planning department, the research succeeded in formulating some outline ideas of how regional housing policy might be framed to produce a more sustainable outcome, and how such reframing of policy might affect (and be supported by) the main actors. The outcome was more comprehensive than the UK case, because the methodology was reflexive in its approach in maintaining continued contact with the actors during the development of the outline regulatory approach. This case has implications for the planning of housing not only in Drenthe province. Traditionally, throughout Western Europe, spatial planning has tended to focus on housing *supply*. Responsibility for housing *demand*, and in particular the provision of affordable housing, has usually been separated from the spatial planning department across departments in local, regional and national governments. In such situations the cross-sectoral approach upon which the notion of sustainable development is founded⁹ has lacked attention. The package of regulatory tools that represented the outcome of the Netherlands case might therefore be more generically applicable. By using actor consulting to explore a wider spectrum of issues among both the government and crucial public and private sector actors who are affected by gov-

ernment policy, governance processes can be more thoughtfully constructed that might lead to a more effective balance between housing supply and demand.

The two cases demonstrate that the actor-consulting model can be useful in learning how policy might be analysed and subsequently framed more effectively, by exploring how the *fuzzy* concept of sustainability can be unpacked. The model deconstructs the idea that sustainability is well understood and will consequently lead to predictable and obvious actions and ends. In planning practice, the contrary is too often true, resulting in disappointments. In the cases discussed, the model proved to be a means to connect meanings at multiple levels and to consider meanings in a discursive way. This emphasizes the importance of a situational understanding. The model has characteristics of both rational and communicative planning systems, but is strongly embedded within an inter-subjective line of reasoning. It has a role to play in solving issues with a limited number of actors playing a crucial role, all embracing a sort of common understanding regarding the issue, actions to be taken and a desired end. Under these conditions, substantial fine-tuning is still a necessity. Actor consulting is a means supporting this necessity to work together to implement, for example, a more realistic conception of the notion of sustainability.

Notes

- 1 Note that these were qualified by wider reference to *organization, plans and actors* (Figure 1).
- 2 Opportunities for ‘capacity building’ were considered to be of more interest than fiscal regulation, which is rather limited in a UK local and regional policy context for housing. Sustainable development capacity-building initiatives can be defined as: ‘*all measures that strengthen governmental structures to meet the demands of sustainable development, as well as measures that create these capacities in co-operation with civil society*’ (Evans et al. 2005: 26).
- 3 These issues were subsequently refined in the development of ‘*A new housing strategy for the North East*’ (NE Housing Board 2005) and played out in detail among regional actors in the development of the *North East Regional Spatial Strategy* (North East Assembly 2005), which at the time of writing had just undergone its Examination in Public.
- 4 This approach was suggested by Newcastle City Council.
- 5 Social progress which recognizes the needs of everyone; effective protection of the environ-

- ment; prudent use of natural resources; maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment (DETR 1999).
- 6 See, for example, the comments of the Royal Commission for Environmental Pollution (2002: 98).
 - 7 The five guiding principles (HM Government 2005: 16) include: living within environmental limits; ensuring a strong healthy and just society; achieving a sustainable economy; promoting good governance; and using sound science responsibly.
 - 8 Hajer (1995) argues, for example, that environmental issues should not be conceptualized in terms of defined, unambiguous concepts by individual actors.
 - 9 For example, Jacobs and Scott (1992) suggest that sustainable development should embrace all aspects of human welfare including employment, health, education, housing and crime.

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