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Over the past two decades, this view of sustainability has become widespread, employed in both national and local policies across the globe. In effect, to answer the question “What do we mean by sustainability?” we must answer these questions: What do we mean by environmental, economic and social sustainability? And how do these versions of sustainability relate to each other?

What is Social Sustainability?

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• Is social sustainability a more difficult concept to define?
• Is the concept ultimately a useless one?

Irrespective, we have little choice but to understand how the concept of social sustainability is being framed, particularly since it is now widely employed.

If we take ‘social sustainability’ in the literal sense, it means little more than keeping social things as they are; maintaining, as it were, the social status quo. Clearly, this generates something of a paradox since the sustainability “project” is generally viewed as a transformative agenda: it is essentially about changing unsustainable practices. Our concern cannot therefore lie with the question “How do we sustain our society?” Rather, we must engage with the normative and ask, “What kind of society do we want to sustain?”

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URBAN CONCERNS

ISSUE 5 SEPTEMBER 2009

RESEARCH AND TRAINING FOR BETTER URBAN LIFE

www.uws.edu.au/urban

FROM THE DIRECTOR

Our feature article investigates the idea of social sustainability. It’s a phrase that is easily said and easily written into policy documents.

But translating the idea of social sustainability into measurable outcomes confronts governments with major decisions with significant resources implications. In Sydney, for example, it is reasonable to think that measurable categories within a social sustainability section of a metropolitan plan would include time spent travelling to work, availability of public transport, education and employment participation rates, housing affordability ratios and levels of discretionary income to enable a fulfilling social and cultural life.

Yet it would be difficult to find any Sydney-sider who would claim that Sydney’s metropolitan society is moving consistently towards good metrics within these important social objectives.

Who, then, has responsibility for enacting social sustainability goals? Clearly, no tier of government – local, state or federal – is up to the task on its own. Nor, obviously, would the private sector spontaneously take the lead. And the non-government or community sector will always lack the resources to enact the changes needed over the long term.

A lesson can be learned from the broad green movement and the widespread community support for environmental sustainability. Only after long and painstaking educational work and community-based conversations can a coalition of change be assembled. Like environmental sustainability, the idea of social sustainability must be fleshed out and widely understood before we can expect real attention to it as a core political concern.

Phillip O’Neill

FEEDING SYDNEY

The URC’s Feeding Sydney project continues to develop with the appointment of a full-time project officer, Sarah James, in May this year. The Feeding Sydney project addresses the environmental, economic and social sustainability of Sydney’s food systems into the future. In the context of a highly urbanised nation faced with predictions of significant climate change, fuel shortages and continuing economic uncertainty, the systems that supply Sydney’s food become an increasingly salient research concern.

The initial stage of this project aims to address the deficit of knowledge about the spaces and processes of production, manufacturing and consumption that shape Sydney’s foodscapes. The mapping of agricultural land in the Sydney Basin by the Centre’s GIS analyst Maria Piquer-Rodriguez represents the primary stage of research in the area of food production. This mapping will provide a detailed analysis of the extent of land currently under production and land use change over time. Data collected through this process will be vital to urban planning for the protection and development of these important agricultural lands.

Fostering inter-university and industry links as well as public participation are critical to addressing the complex and multi-faceted challenges of sustaining Sydney’s food systems. As key instigator of this process, the Centre is running a series of meetings with a team of researchers from Macquarie University headed by Professor Bob Fagan. Part of an ongoing dialogue, these meetings will ensure the development of a dynamic research agenda on food issues in Sydney. Working to generate networks at a city scale, the Centre is also co-sponsoring two key food events: the ‘Feeding Sydney’ conference at the UWS Hawkesbury campus in September, and the Sydney Food Fairness Alliance ‘Food Summit’ in October. These events will bring together representatives from academia, industry and the general public to discuss critical food concerns for Sydney. This series of meetings and events provides a lead-up to the official launch of Feeding Sydney at the end of this year.

SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

Urban Concerns is the free monthly newsletter of the Urban Research Centre. Each issue features commentary from our researchers and highlights the Centre’s courses, research activities and events. Urban Concerns is relevant to urban academics, practitioners, policy makers, decision makers and community groups.

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MAKING SENSE OF SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

By Dr Mark Davidson

The push towards making our cities more sustainable gains momentum by the day. Almost every policy initiative includes a major reference to sustainability, and when this is absent many are quick to point out the omission. One need only look at the current responses to the global financial crisis to see sustainability’s omnipresence. From Obama to Rudd, to Merkel, to Brown, each has targeted government stimulus spending at an array of sustainability initiatives.

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So has the emergence of social sustainability, as part of the wider sustainability policy agenda, heralded a new set of political discussions? Most academic literature on the contemporary political condition would suggest it has not. Indeed, many commentators argue that we now live in a post-political age, an era when political concepts and goals, perhaps even ideology itself, are absent from the arena of government.

Political philosopher Slavoj Zizek has argued that in a post-political age we have witnessed “the reduction of politics proper to the rational administration of conflicting interests”. For Zizek, politics – institutional government – has become absent of politics. Politicians and policymakers no longer engage explicitly in political projects. Rather, they maintain a consensus of experts that necessarily excludes the notion of transformation. Governance therefore avoids politicisation and the state performs the administrative role of contractor.

WHITHER SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY?

So where does this leave the desire (or requirement) for socially sustainable cities? Of course, we first have to ask what this desire consists of. But it remains difficult to see how we can answer the question: “What kind of society do we want to sustain?” or what this aspiration means for the policies that should secure it. We need only look back to Alexis de Tocqueville’s groundbreaking commentary 150 years ago on an embryonic American democracy to understand how fundamental such questions are to a healthy politics. de Tocqueville argued that, “…without [such] common belief no society can prosper; say, rather no society can exist; for without ideas held in common, there is no common action, and without common action there may still be men [sic], but there is no social body.”

If we return to the most recent embrace of sustainability, in the form of the billions of dollars pumped into various pockets and projects in the form of stimulus payments, the requirement of our engagement with the question of social sustainability should then be felt. When we are making huge social investments in our cities, what kinds of outcomes do we desire? What principles are guiding our so-called ‘nation-building’ projects?

If we fail to identify these principles – what do Tocqueville called common beliefs – we must also ask what the implications of this absence are? What politics are absent of the political project?

Dr Mark Davidson is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Urban Research Centre.

MORTGAGE DISTRESS SURVEY

Are you experiencing mortgage difficulties? We want to hear your story.

The Urban Research Centre is recruiting participants for a study about mortgage distress from the perspective of the borrower. We invite you to complete our online survey at: www.uws.edu.au/mortgagesurvey

You can also email us if you are interested in participating in a face-to-face interview. Your time will be compensated with a grocery voucher valued at $50.

Email: mortgages@uws.edu.au
Phone number: 02 8833 5901
Dr Olga Camacho Duarte, Research Project Officer

SHORT COURSES

Planning Law Update (2 days) 27 - 28 August

The planning system, in both legal and administrative terms, is constantly under review. For instance, in New South Wales, major changes to the EP&A Act have been assented to, and are being commenced in stages. Amendments to delegated legislation and environmental planning instruments occur regularly and good administrative practices emerge. The Urban Research Centre offers this intensive two-day short course for practising planners on planning law and practice. Planners might consider putting this course on their annual professional development calendar.

Financing Cities (4 days) 10 - 11 and 17 - 18 September

Financing the large amounts of physical infrastructure required to keep cities running and growing at a time when many governments, who have been the traditional providers of this infrastructure, face financial constraints is a key challenge for urban managers. In order to be able to enter into the debate about financing cities it is important to develop a basic financial literacy and to understand the framework of public finance in Australia and elsewhere. This course undertakes the study of all the terms and jargon in these areas. The course addresses common misconceptions, reasons for poor practice, ways to deal with short timescales and small budgets, ethical issues and standards of good professional practice. The course is a mix of presentation and group-learning experiences.

Further information:
For a full description of short courses and registration, please visit our website: http://www.uws.edu.au/urban