Where the global meets the local? Sustainable cities and global environmental governance

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Introduction

In this paper, I argue that while cities are increasingly seen as an arena through which global environmental issues can be addressed, the ways in which local responses to global environmental change are conceived is limiting our understanding of the role of cities in global environmental governance. Rather than confining our analysis to the local scale, we need to appreciate how urban sustainability is shaped at multiple scales.

The global meets the local

Following the 1987 Brundtland Report, various initiatives by the European Commission, as well as the Rio Earth Summit and the subsequent development of Local Agenda 21, sustainable cities have become a central part of the environmental governance landscape. The importance of achieving sustainable cities is made clear in Chapter 28 of Agenda 21:

‘Because so many of the problems and solutions being addressed by Agenda 21 have their roots in local activities, the participation and co-operation of local authorities will be a determining factor in fulfilling its objectives. Local authorities construct, operate and maintain economic, social and environmental infrastructure, oversee planning processes, establish local environmental policies and regulations, and assist in implementing national and subnational environmental policies. As the level of governance closest to the people, they play a vital role in educating, mobilizing and responding to the public to promote sustainable development.’ (Chapter 28, Agenda 21 1992, cited in Lafferty and Eckerberg 1998: 263).

This call to attention has engendered responses from: national governments, promoting local action through initiatives such as the UK Sustainable Community Projects; transnational networks, such as ICLEI and the European Sustainable Cities and Towns Campaign, and has ‘precipitated extensive action at the level of the municipality’ world-wide (Selman 1998: 533).

Taken together, the pre- and post-Rio emphasis on local action as a necessary part of ‘thinking globally’ led to increasing attention being placed on the role that cities could and should play in addressing environmental problems. In focusing on the urban arena, two different ways of conceptualising sustainability and the means of achieving it have emerged:

1 I wish to acknowledge the support of the British Academy and the Department of Geography, University of Durham, for providing the funding for my attendance at this meeting.

2 The arguments presented in this paper are drawn from collaborative research undertaken with Michele Bestill, Colorado State University, the results from which are available in Bulkeley and Betsill 2003.
(a) approaches which focus on modelling and monitoring environmental flows through and within cities, with the intention of reducing resource use and waste outputs (e.g. Capello et al. 1999; Giradet 1999; Ravetz 2000).

(b) approaches which focus on redesigning urban space with a view to addressing the environmental, economic and social dimensions of sustainability simultaneously, sometimes labelled the ‘compact city’ approach and evidenced in new ideas about urban planning and design (e.g. Breheny 1996; Jenks et al. 1996; de Roo and Miller 2000).

However, as Marvin and Guy (1997: 312) have argued, such approaches face the danger of falling into the ‘new localist’ trap, where:

‘Conceptually the locale is seen as a socio-spatial container in which the sum of institutional, social and physical relations necessary to achieve a more sustainable future can be found. The local becomes a “black box”, disconnected from the global, international and national contexts within which localities are framed’.

In the rest of this paper, I want to suggest that we need to move beyond such approaches to understanding the role of cities in addressing global environmental change.

Local responses to global environmental change

There has been a growing interest in the role which cities, as places in which energy use is concentrated and managed, and their governments could have in addressing climate change. In the UK, the national climate change strategy states that:

‘Local authorities have a special status as local, directly elected bodies. They are uniquely placed to provide vision and leadership to their local communities, and their wide range of responsibilities and contacts means that they are critical to the delivery of this programme. They can take forward the action needed on the ground to cut emissions, working with local communities, and will be central to efforts to adapt to the impacts of climate change.’

Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) 2000a, Chapter 7

One means through which local authorities have been encouraged to consider the issue of climate protection is through changes to national guidance for local land-use and transport planning. Table 1 illustrates the different ways in which the planning system is being charged with addressing climate change. Although climate change does not provide the sole rationale for any of these policy principles, it is one means by which these policy shifts have been justified.
Table 1: National planning policy guidance relating to urban energy use3 (Bulkeley and Betsill 2003: 76).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ways of addressing urban energy use through the planning system</th>
<th>Examples of national planning policy guidance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reduce the need to travel</td>
<td>Promote development in inner city locations and on previously developed land</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Promote mixed land use developments</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Increase housing densities</td>
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<td>Reduce the number and length of motorised journeys</td>
<td>Locate major developments where they are accessible by public transport links</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Include public transport, cycle and walking access in development design</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Abandon minimum parking standards for new development and restrict land take for roads and parking</td>
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<tr>
<td>Design for energy conservation</td>
<td>Take advantage of passive solar energy in the design of developments</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Include energy conservation standards for buildings in design guidance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Include renewable energy</td>
<td>Promote the use of CHP in development proposals</td>
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However, there is little evidence that such rhetoric is changing the reality of urban planning and transport policy on the ground. I want to draw on two brief case-studies – of urban planning and design in Newcastle, and transport planning in Cambridgeshire – to examine why this might be the case.

**Urban planning in Newcastle**

Newcastle’s Urban Development Strategy, the Unitary Development Plan (UDP), has explicitly recognised the potential impact of planning on climate change and includes guidance on accessibility and alternative modes of transport, brownfield land, higher energy efficiency rating of new buildings above national standards, incorporate passive solar design, and include renewable energy or CHP within projects (NCC 1998). In addition, supplementary guidance notes for development control procedures which encourage energy efficiency have been developed. In terms of implementing energy efficiency in the design of new build, these criteria

3 These policy principles, amongst others, are included in one or more of the following documents: Guidance on Full Local Transport Plans (DETR 2000b); PPG3 Housing (DETR 2000c); PPG 13 Transport (DTLR 2001b); PPG22 Renewable Energy (DoE 1993); Planning for Sustainable Development: Towards Better Practice (DETR 1998); By Design. Urban Design in the planning system: towards better practice (DETR 2000d).
have primarily been implemented either where the Council owns the land which is to be developed, such as Ouseburn where sustainability considerations were made before costs, or where developers are eager to gain access to particular sites and avoid delays in the planning system, such as at Newcastle Great Park – though even here measures were considered weak.

However, these instances are few and far between – although they have been included in the terms of policy guidance, policy-makers felt that sustainability considerations did not carry sufficient weight to outweigh other concerns. While the UDP suggests that energy considerations are to be encouraged, other issues, primarily the provision of housing and development sites in such a manner so as to attract economic growth and stabilize the population, are given a higher priority, in line with the Council’s *Going for Growth* strategy which focuses on urban regeneration in economic terms.

**Cambridgeshire transport planning**

A key issue in Cambridgeshire is transport, accounting for over a third of emissions of greenhouse gases in the local authority area, and seen to be a critical factor inhibiting the further economic development of the region. Motivated by the need to reduce traffic problems in the region, current strategic planning documents for Cambridgeshire advocate increased concentration of development in urban areas, principally the Cambridge sub-region, and sequential development, taking place near this region first, in order to reduce the need to travel. Due to the Cambridge Phenomenon, the label attached to the high level of information technology and bio-technology industrial growth in the area, development pressure in the sub-region is acute, and will involve the development of brownfield land, the development of some areas of Green Belt, and a new village near Cambridge to be serviced by new public transport links.

However, whether this will be sufficient to address transport problems, and ensuing emissions of greenhouse gases, is doubtful. Despite the emphasis on compact development in and around the Cambridge sub-region, there is little question that housing development of the levels proposed in the region will generate traffic growth, with the possibility that this will be exacerbated by the allocation of large numbers of houses to market towns if this (easier) option is taken before more controversial building plans for the Cambridge sub-region. Moreover, research suggests that measures to reduce the *need* to travel are unlikely to be successful in the absence of measures to reduce the *inclination* to travel (Owens 1995). While some measures to manage demand in Cambridge have been introduced, there has been a reluctance to use these outside the historic centre of the city or to engage with the use of economic instruments (e.g. road user charging) to this end. At the same time, there is a continued emphasis on the need to increase the ability to travel:

‘Historically local investment in infrastructure has been an essential requirement to underpin economic success. This was true in the areas which previously relied on “sunset” industries … it is no less true in the high technology future in which Cambridge is expected to lead the way. The Cambridge area has already experienced huge growth in employment and, consequently, similar growth in residential development and service industries. This growth is predicted to intensify. While all developments have
contributed to new and expanded infrastructure, it has not kept pace with needs and there is now an “infrastructure deficit” which threatens to clog the arteries of success.’
Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC) 2000:14

While there has been a degree of re-thinking about effective transport solutions, the “problem” remains framed in terms of maintaining and enhancing mobility in order to promote economic competitiveness in general and the Cambridge Phenomenon in particular.

Conclusions

These case-studies suggest that addressing issues of global environmental change at the local level is far from straightforward. Further, two critical conclusions emerge.

First, moving from the global to the local scale as an arena through which to ‘govern’ global environmental problems does not remove conflicts and tensions between the economic, environmental and social dimensions of sustainability. In fact, such tensions become ever more apparent.

Second, in conceptualizing ‘local’ responses to global environmental issues we need to move away from an analysis which is explicitly concerned with the urban as a separate and discrete scale and to consider the complex ways in which processes operating at and across a variety of different scales of governance come to shape issues of local and global sustainability within the urban arena.

References


