Seminar 3 (10 February 2012)

Eco-city politics: national policy, local leadership, public accountability

Synthesis Report

The third in this series of Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded seminars was hosted by the University of Westminster in London on 10 February 2012. The focus of discussion was on the multiple challenges involved in achieving effective leadership for sustainable urban development in different national and sub-national governance and policy contexts. The event was convened by Anders Franzén (Växjö City Council), Daniel Greenwood (University of Westminster), and Li Yu (Cardiff University), who are partners in this ESRC initiative.

The previous seminar (in October 2011) had explored the question of integration with regard to eco-city innovation: how different practices and technology relate to each other at different scales; how existing knowledge is recombined in new ways; and how different types of institutions can most effectively work together to encourage eco-city innovation. The question of institutional cooperation provided a link to the most recent seminar, in which the topic of governance was more directly addressed.

Questions of governance are at the heart of the seminar series. A conceptualisation emerged from the first seminar (in May 2011) of the eco-city as an ongoing, multi-faceted and co-evolutionary innovation process. Accordingly, an attempt to develop a simple prescriptive list of ‘best practice’ in terms of the steering, coordination, institutionalisation and legitimisation of eco-cities is unlikely to succeed, since the final goal of the process remains undefined. Nevertheless, the value of such a process can only be enhanced through reflection about which factors appear to encourage and hamper innovation. In this spirit, the researchers and practitioners attending the most recent seminar discussed the issue of governance with regard to the following specific questions:

1. Which particular factors at different scales of governance appear to be most likely to lead to positive outcomes in the practice of eco-city innovation?

2. Which roles can national governments in particular most usefully play, given the apparent success of cities themselves in driving eco-city innovation?

1 Synthesis reports from the first two seminars in the series (May 2011 - Eco-City Governance: defining the research and policy agenda; October 2011 - Eco-city innovation: integrated systems management & policy coordination) are available to download from the University of Westminster International Eco-Cities Initiative web pages: http://www.westminster.ac.uk/research/a-z/eco-cities/esrc-research-seminar
What other elements of governance at a local level appear to drive successful eco-city innovation?

In the seminar series as a whole, a conscious effort is made to understand eco-city innovation as a global process. However, the discussion of governance in this most recent seminar benefited from a sharper geographical focus, with the case studies all taken from Northern Europe (France, the UK, Germany, and Sweden).

Summary of Key Discussion Points

Since many of the papers included a significant historical perspective, one common thread which emerged was the significance of timeframes in eco-city governance; this had only been touched on cursorily in previous seminars in the series. Assessing the success or failure of particular projects, or particular aspects thereof, is potentially controversial if only short-term measurable results are taken into consideration. Thus, Elanor Warwick (UK Technology Strategy Board) suggested that criticism of the progress of the UK government-driven eco-town programme may miss the point that the long and iterative process of their development has only just begun. Joanna Williams (University College London) similarly observed that the UK eco-towns were first discussed just 5 years ago; Freiburg’s practical innovations, by way of contrast, extend over three decades at least, while many of Sweden’s current initiatives can be traced directly back to the 1970s.

Even apparent failures can still be viewed in a positive light as learning experiences if we adopt a wider conceptualisation of urban sustainability initiatives as an ongoing and multiple experimental process. Key opportunities for learning from the UK eco-town initiative, Elanor Warwick suggested, may be relatively concrete – for example, through the identification of which aspects of the relevant Eco-town Planning Policy Statement (PPS) are and are not deliverable in practice. The experience might, equally, contribute to broader debates; while, for example, Richard Rogers dismissed the planned UK eco-towns as contributing to sprawl, they might be more charitably viewed as an experimental alternatives to standard ‘Middle England’ suburban developments. The question of ‘How do we get our suburbs to work?’ is often posed; further empirical evidence can only be helpful in its resolution. Wulf Daseking (Freiburg City Council), indeed, suggested that it was precisely the suburban parts of most cities which need most work and imagination; too much attention is typically paid to ‘showpiece’ city centre sustainability initiatives.

The long timeframes involved in this process themselves pose a challenge to governance, requiring a balance between flexibility on the one hand – the ability to adapt to changes in material and social conditions – and consistency on the other; in particular, the longevity of strategic policy. Both Katarina Eckerberg (University of Umea) and Anders Franzén (Växjö City Council) made the point that Sweden is fortunate in this respect, with broad consensus among major national political parties on environmental issues. Sweden’s move to the centre-right in the 2010 national elections, in other words, did not significantly disrupt the environmental agenda.

If the case of Sweden, then, demonstrates the importance of consistency in a national government’s steering role, the practical implications of a corresponding lack of consistency in the UK may still have served a diagnostic purpose. Alina Congreve (University of Hertfordshire) plotted the history of sustainable development in Britain over time, with the Labour government’s broader notion of ‘sustainable communities’ – conceived of largely in social rather than environmental terms, with a large design element – now overwritten through an effective repositioning of design as a burden for the developer rather than as a force for social good (and thus marking an apparent return to the 1980s). Indeed, the previous Labour government’s ‘eco-town’ Planning Policy Statement has now been withdrawn; the effects of this withdrawal on the progress and eventual form of the planned eco-towns are yet to be seen. Dan Greenwood (University of Westminster) reviewed the UK government’s record in terms of introducing ‘low carbon homes’ more specifically, concluding that
the scheme would have benefited from stronger steering from central government. This may have included the provision of more resources, the development of better evidence bases (including more input from research), and more transparent methods – with measurement tools not owned by private companies. The UK experience in this respect also demonstrates the importance of governmental ‘steering’ rather than compunction. The centrality of market forces to development in practice means that that non-mandatory regulations can be just as important as legal obligations – with awards and incentive schemes potentially playing a significant role.

Nevertheless, an assertion of the importance of central government – as a catalyst if not a prerequisite for innovatory development – may sit uncomfortably with Peter Newman’s (University of Westminster) argument that a hierarchical construction of cities as subservient to national governments is limited, in its ignorance of the often greater significance of linkages between cities. Indeed, the most important factor in the governance of cities may well be their position within transnational inter-city networks of trade, knowledge-sharing, and other forms of influence. The limits to the usefulness of studying individual cases of eco-city innovation comparatively from the perspective of national differences therefore need acknowledging.

Heike Schroeder (University of East Anglia) outlined the ways in which cities themselves have significant agency, echoing Peter Newman in her observation that traditional studies have focused overly on national contexts. Nevertheless, her discussion of the role of cities themselves was grounded in a recognition of the factors constraining them – in particular, the negative implications of their scalar dependence for resources and formal political autonomy (US municipal authorities, for example, were judged to be ‘political subdivisions of the state’ by the Supreme Court in 1903). Yet, regardless of such constraints, cities have in many cases exceeded national requirements – very often in partnership with other cities internationally. Anders Franzén gave the example of cities in the US and Canada whose actions have not depended in any substantial way on support from central government.

Heike Schroeder suggested that the reasons why cities themselves have so often taken the lead include the negative motivation of vulnerability – with 80% of cities being on rivers or coasts, for example – and, in economically problematic regions, the enticing possibilities of ‘win-win’ solutions where the economic benefits of developing green technologies accompany environmental improvements. She pointed out that local environmental programmes are often packaged to address simultaneously broader issues of climate change and practical local problems: reducing car use, for example, both demonstrates global responsibility and eases local congestion and problems of air quality. Additionally, the pressure on cities to brand themselves distinctively and competitively plays a part; there are ‘leadership opportunities’ in being seen to be in the vanguard of change. The success of transnational networks of cooperation between urban authorities can be measured in the extent to which they have increasingly embraced cities from the global South since the 1990s.

Cities were also seen as having an interpretive role in the introduction of sustainability innovation. Wulf Daseking argued strongly against the idea that any model of sustainability can be imposed upon a given place. Freiburg’s pride in its own achievements thus includes a recognition of their place-specificity; they are not necessarily replicable elsewhere in the same form. But this does not preclude the educational role that these achievements may play; visitors from other cities, rather, are actively invited to come and take inspiration in developing their own approach.

Equally, Joanna Williams suggested, arguing for the importance of certain types of national and international frameworks or interventionism need not equate to advocacy of the imposition of ‘large scale technical solutions’ through ‘consultancy company colonialism’. Again, actors at city level have a responsibility to reflect on the implications of local contextual factors as design constraints.
way of a practical example, Anders Franzén described the way that Växjö’s sustainability initiatives had been shaped by the local availability of wood as a resource. But place-specificity also clearly affects the relevance of different structures of governance – and there would certainly seem to be little evidence that a top-down or bottom-up approach is more effective in any absolute sense. Joanna Williams made this point with reference to the case studies discussed on this occasion, each of which demonstrates different successes yet varies considerably in its governance style: a systems infrastructure model in Sweden, a highly collaborative model in Freiburg, and a market-shaped approach in France.

The French ÉcoCité programme, reviewed in Kathryn Anderson’s paper, constitutes a very clear case of sustainability being locally interpreted yet simultaneously clearly steered by national government. Guidelines for applications for funding here encouraged municipal authorities to submit proposals which were framed by the ‘triple pillars’ of sustainable development, but were otherwise rather less prescriptive than, for example, the UK eco-towns standards. The locations of the first 13 such projects display a wide variety of different climates and economic conditions. Although in essence a state-driven investment programme, Kathryn Anderson argued, it should nevertheless contain many potential learnings for a wide variety of future eco-city developments.

The role of regional institutions was not discussed in great detail. Anders Franzén described the role of regional authorities in setting regional targets intended to complement national ones. Wulf Daseking argued that sustainability planning needs to take place at five scales: the region, the city, the quartier, the block and the individual house – but that this process should begin at the regional level. The German system of Länder, in its turn, facilitates a prioritisation of regional planning. This was contrasted with the current lack of regional government in the UK, which was generally interpreted as problematic for the possibility of eco-city innovation. Alina Congreve suggested that its reduction to a ‘duty to cooperate’ among Local Authorities has yielded only limited successes to date.

Meanwhile, a focus on institutional structures of governance at different scales may risk downplaying the agency of individuals and grass-roots organisations – the cultural and ‘bottom-up’ aspects of sustainable development. Public engagement and accountability were seen to be closely related in this process. Katarina Eckerberg suggested that the successes of Agenda 21 in Sweden derived not only from top-down political support but also in part from the way its specific implementation often combined recreation and nature protection, thus increasing local buy-in. The heavy involvement of NGOs both alleviated funding problems and functioned as a significant channel of local engagement, while that of the business community in a variety of public-private partnerships was also key to success. Heike Schroeder commented that small and medium-sized enterprises were featuring increasingly heavily on the urban sustainability agenda; their importance lies in the fact that they are simultaneously responsible for 65% of industrial emissions, yet also – unlike larger companies – more obviously embedded in their immediate socio-cultural contexts.

Outlook

Any conclusion that eco-city governance needs to take place at different scales may appear facile – even if only because climate change has, in Heike Schroeder’s words, an inherent ‘convening power’ to bring together different initiatives and objectives. But its assertion is still necessary as a way of countering the otherwise apparently default assumption that the key responsibility for the development of sustainability should lie with national governments. This assumption fails to acknowledge the primary role that cities themselves have evidently long played, ignores the importance of both competition and cooperative knowledge transfer between cities and across national boundaries, downplays the importance of regional governance (either as a basis for
strategic policy or as a framework for interpreting national policy), and may even poorly articulate the precise ‘steering’ role which national governments are best placed to play.

But if we expand our understanding of this governance process to include networks of civil society and the business community, questions remain about how these can coexist with more representative democratic governmental processes. Accordingly, the next ESRC seminar, in May 2012, will focus specifically on community stakeholder involvement and local activism in eco-city planning / implementation.

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March 2012

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