

14. Building consensus for sustainable development

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SUMMARY

To achieve sustainable development on the city and metropolitan scale, consensus-building efforts of various kinds are essential. The different perspectives and interests of contending groups need to be reconciled. Many urban sustainability initiatives fail because they are run as top-down management efforts, with weak support from key stakeholders outside of government. In order to generate sustainable investment and development decisions supported by a wide range of constituencies, ad hoc representatives of all stakeholder groups need to be involved in open conversations, usually facilitated by professional 'neutrals'. Champions inside and outside of government need to advocate for such collaborative efforts aimed at achieving informed agreements. Furthermore, sustainable development is not likely to be successful if policy choices are not closely monitored, so that adjustments can be made. Obstacles to generating such agreements include the reluctance of elected officials to share decision-making authority, difficulties associated with organizing and maintaining public-private partnerships, lack of awareness that sustainable development needs to be a continuous (and not a once-only plan-making) process, and the lack of reliable and believable information regarding the progress of sustainability efforts that can inform adaptive management. These obstacles can be overcome, but only if sustainable development is embedded in a broader regional commitment to participatory decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, many cities have begun to re-focus their planning efforts to encourage more sustainable development. In coastal areas,

this means taking seriously the risks associated with climate change – sea level rise, flooding, increased storm intensity, salt water intrusion, disease vectors and more. In non-coastal areas, this can mean promoting low-impact development (LID) and reducing greenhouse gas emissions to head-off climate-change-induced drought, heat island effects and dangerous weather events. Pursuing such environmental policies, while taking into account a wide range of economic and social interests, is at the heart of the notion of sustainable development. In many cities, quite apart from efforts to respond to climate change in an economically and socially responsible manner, sustainable development focuses on minimizing sprawl, conserving water, making it easier to grow food locally, protecting fragile habitats, minimizing air pollution, and encouraging energy efficiency as well as ‘greener’ forms of building construction.¹ Such efforts are typically aimed at maintaining or increasing economic and social activities – but doing so in a more environmentally friendly manner. Some cities hope to accomplish these objectives by emphasizing technical tasks, including formulating new zoning maps, re-writing building codes and adopting new land-use regulations. Other metropolitan areas are doing this by refocusing infrastructure investments, particularly in transportation and energy production.² Still other communities are trying to encourage voluntary citizen action through social marketing.³ Unfortunately, most of these efforts have not yet had as much impact on overall levels of urban sustainability as planners had hoped.

Indeed, in our view, it is highly unlikely that these efforts to promote sustainability will really ‘catch on’ until they are the product of much more extensive stakeholder (or public) engagement. Elected officials around the world have a clear incentive to follow what the public wants, to increase their chances for re-election. And, reported public support for the concept of sustainability does not automatically translate into more sustainable behavior.⁴ Thus, most efforts to promote sustainable development have been imposed from the ‘top down’ because there is not much of a grassroots constituency for the idea of a new approach to urban planning that seeks to balance economic development, environmental protection and social equity. A few well-meaning bureaucrats have taken up the cause – but they have generally done so without much political backing, and thus they have not been willing to really challenge the status quo.⁵ Not much of the push for increased sustainability is the product of what we would call a ‘bottom up’ effort. In our view, further attempts to promote sustainability will require (1) a much stronger grassroots push for specific changes in public policy, (2) more concerted pressure from corporations and private individuals who believe in sustainable development, and (3) a shift toward greater shared responsibility for managing the risks associated

with unsustainable development. All three will probably have to be the product of citizen-led rather than government-mandated efforts. Each will generate controversy. Unless the competing views of all of the relevant stakeholders can be reconciled, the status quo is likely to prevail.

This chapter describes a consensus-building strategy that might be used to support implementation of more sustainable patterns of development on the city and metropolitan scale. In addition, we identify the barriers to such an approach and point out how they might be overcome.

Triggers for Attention to Sustainable Development

Public decisions at the municipal and metropolitan level are usually left to elected and appointed officials; that is, until a substantial amount of money is about to be spent,⁶ or a major facility is proposed that might adversely affect a substantial number of people.⁷ At that point, people have a direct incentive to pay attention. They make their views known (arguing, most of the time, to maintain the status quo) and lobby their elected officials. At the early stages of policy-making, most people do not pay attention. They are content to let political elites and the relevant officials do what they want. When it becomes clear, though, that government policies (such as decisions to limit the density of development, mandate that homeowners reduce water consumption or use less energy, or requirements aimed at restricting the use of private automobiles in an effort to encourage public transportation) are about to have an effect on people's lives, then large numbers of citizens will react. Once an issue is perceived as dramatic and exciting, it is much more likely to draw significant attention from a broader range of citizens.⁸

This dynamic was partially evident in the Netherlands following the announcement of a proposal to store carbon dioxide underground near the town of Barendrecht, immediately outside of Rotterdam. In 2007, after years of preparation, Royal Dutch Shell in conjunction with the Dutch government, proposed storage of carbon dioxide in two depleted gas fields underneath the town. This was intended to be a pilot project that would probably lead to similar efforts at a larger scale. This project emerged in response to calls by the European Union and by the Dutch Ministry of (then) Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (known as VROM, the Dutch acronym, now known as Infrastructure and Environment) to look at large-scale sub-surface carbon dioxide storage to limit emissions in light of concerns over climate change. After announcing the project, Shell was almost immediately confronted with significant local resistance. Public officials at the national level were, and still remain, supportive of carbon dioxide storage. Despite this, local elected officials,

with support from the citizenry, were successful in blocking the project completely in November of 2010.⁹ Royal Dutch Shell was forced to seek alternative locations to study carbon dioxide storage.

It could be argued that this is the essence of democracy: guaranteeing voters and taxpayers a chance to have a say.¹⁰ But, democratic ideals are less explicit about what ought to be done when groups put forward competing claims or arguments – for example, about the safety of carbon dioxide transportation and sub-surface storage. On the one hand, democratic theory suggests that the majority should rule.¹¹ On the other, most democracies provide protection for the rights of minorities, regardless of what the majority wants.¹² In general, people are guaranteed the right to elect their government, but once elected, officials can make almost any policy decisions they want. They are constrained only by the laws of the state and the fact that they will have to stand for re-election. This leaves lots of room for officials to improvise with regard to particular policies or projects.¹³

Officials often say they want citizen 'input' on particular decisions – but that is no guarantee that a particular group with strong concerns will get what it wants. Different types and levels of public participation in decision-making exist,¹⁴ but constraints on resources mean that most of the time, when policy or development decisions are made, some groups do not get everything they want. In many parts of the world, angry constituents can litigate. However, they have to show malfeasance or some kind of legal violation to win in court. They cannot just say that they are unhappy with specific development policies or decisions. In other instances, they can take to the streets. But this is almost unheard of with regard to local or regional development decisions. So, asking the public to advise on development decisions, at the policy level, or in terms of site-specific public investments or regulatory actions, does not mean that everyone can or will get what they want.

When trade-offs have to be made – and most of the time that is exactly what has to happen, even when there is broad agreement on the importance of the notion of sustainability – there are three ways that officials can justify their choices. First, they can argue that they are doing what their technical or scientific advisors recommend. In other words, they can try to justify their decisions with reference to 'what the experts think is best'. This is the so-called discourse of administrative rationalism.¹⁵ It is problematic, though, because different groups or factions can almost always find sympathetic experts to support their point of view, finding technical flaws with what the government has decided. Second, they can appeal to principle, drawing on a range of discourses and arguing that they are doing what is 'most economically efficient', or 'most socially just', or 'most environmentally sustainable'.¹⁶ Whether or not that is really why they

made the choices they did, it is a possible justification. No matter what principle they favor, however, other groups will argue that different principles are even more appropriate. So, this justification is rarely convincing. Third, they can make decisions on political grounds, arguing that they are doing what the majority wants, or what the majority of people who elected them prefer. Moving in this direction is dangerous, though, because it can lead to continuous fluctuations in policy, as one group after another takes office and reverses the decisions of those in power before them.

Since sustainable development decisions, by definition, need to remain in effect for a long time – although they can be adjusted periodically – it would be best if trade-offs had widespread support. Then, politicians and their staff would not be able to rely on any of the three justifications mentioned above. If they did, their decisions would not remain in effect for very long. And, they would probably not remain in office. To determine which approaches to development have widespread support, public officials need to invest in consensus building (CB). This will help them determine which decisions will be viewed as fair, efficient, and wise by almost all the relevant stakeholders, and it will add durability to whatever choices have been made.¹⁷

HOW DOES CONSENSUS BUILDING WORK?

Involving the Right Representatives

Consensus building needs to involve representatives of all relevant stakeholder groups, chosen by those groups. There is a procedure for identifying relevant stakeholder groups and working with them to select their own spokespeople. This is called *stakeholder assessment*. Consensus building is also the means of involving stakeholders in the design of a joint inquiry that will produce evidence to support collaborative decision-making.¹⁸ Once the right participants are assembled, it is often possible to generate negotiated agreements regarding changes in land-use priorities – for example, including protection of fragile areas and more careful use of natural resources, infrastructure investments or modifications of building and zoning codes. Agreed changes in development regulations usually hinge on the negotiation of a ‘package’ agreement that creates additional value and does not merely allocate costs to ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. Consensus can emerge when all the parties, using information generated jointly, produce proposals that almost all of the relevant stakeholder groups believe meet their interests better than what is likely to happen if they fail to reach agreement.¹⁹

Shared Understanding of Unsustainable Practices

CB involves developing a shared understanding of the causes and effects of unsustainable practices. Any 'diagnosis' indicating that a proposed course of action might produce unsustainable results needs to be credible in the public eye. Shared understandings of this sort only emerge if all factions or parties are invited to engage in joint inquiry assisted by technical experts that all stakeholders have helped to select.

CB Facilitation by Professionals

This kind of CB only works when it is facilitated by professional mediators with appropriate technical backgrounds and well-honed 'process management' skills. Such individuals must be viewed as non-partisan by all of the interest groups involved. The relatively recent emergence of environmental mediation centers in most of the world means that professional 'neutrals' are available in almost any city or metropolitan area. While most sustainable development efforts to date have not been managed in this way, it is not because the skilled help required is unavailable.

Striving for Unanimity

CB seeks near-unanimity through the application of informal brainstorming and problem-solving techniques. While final decision-making authority must always remain with those who have the statutory obligation to act on the public's behalf, CB is a means of holding such individuals accountable. A CB process that produces informed agreement is hard for elected officials to ignore. If generated properly, it is not possible to brush consensus agreements aside as unrepresentative, or to argue that there are still other (more important) views that must be taken into account. One of the ways that political accountability in such situations can be achieved is by specifying very clearly how the success of particular sustainable development efforts will be benchmarked and to include this in the agreement. When near-unanimous proposals are produced in a transparent way by appropriately selected representatives of all stakeholder groups, with the technical assistance they require, it is extremely difficult for elected or appointed officials to ignore them.

An On-going Process

CB needs to be on-going, and cannot be solely aimed at producing a fixed plan or set of guidelines. This means that agreement on sustainable

development strategies and decisions cannot be accomplished on a one-time basis. The socio-ecological systems involved are enormously complex. Regardless of anyone's claims about their modeling capabilities or computing power, forecasts in the face of such complexity need to be adjusted in light of changing conditions and new information. So, the only way for public officials to generate agreement on the trade-offs that must be made to ensure sustainable development, is to bring representatives of all relevant interests together to engage in a mediated process of joint fact-finding that includes follow-up reconsideration of whatever decisions are made in light of what actually happens. We call this process *collaborative adaptive management*.²⁰ Any other way of working is likely to lead to a political rollercoaster – as policy shifts each time the political majority changes.

WHAT ARE THE PREREQUISITES FOR SUCCESSFUL CONSENSUS BUILDING?

In theory, CB ought to allow contending interest groups or factions to reach agreement on trade-offs that make the most sense given competing political, scientific and economic agendas. Often, though, it is not in the immediate interest of public officials to spend resources to reach such informed agreement. The typical election cycle for officials at the urban or metropolitan level is four to five years. This means that getting re-elected is likely to be a more pressing concern than any long-term considerations such as promoting sustainable development. Elected officials invariably have the final word on whether and how sustainability is pursued, but it can be politically expedient for them to respond (secretly) to their political supporters or financial backers regarding development decisions, even if the long-term results are likely to be unsustainable. Only if such actions are viewed as unacceptable by the public-at-large, regardless of political affiliations, will officials think seriously about launching a CB effort. The decision-making process that led to the second coastal expansion of the Port of Rotterdam, through the construction of the 'Tweede Maasvlakte', illustrates this point. Originally suggested in the mid-1990s, the proposed expansion went through a first Environmental Impact Review in 1997. However, the adequacy of this review was quickly challenged, and the compensatory mitigation plans were deemed insufficient. The proposal was formally withdrawn in 2000, and a new, more participatory consensus-oriented process was started. This process included extensive discussions regarding the likely health effects of additional activities in the Port of Rotterdam, and resulted in an agreement that included stipulations

regarding the methods that would be used to transport cargo overland to and from the port. Additional mitigation measures were also proposed. Following this agreement, a successful legal challenge to the outcome was mounted, but eventually a resolution was reached with those plaintiffs as well, resulting in additional compensatory measures. This shows that elected officials not only need to champion CB at an early stage, but also that the outcome of CB efforts will face emerging challenges, as the process is on-going.²¹

Thus, we can identify a series of prerequisites for successful consensus building: (1) champions both inside and outside of government are required; (2) the involvement of agency personnel with cross-sectoral and area-wide management authority is necessary; (3) technically sophisticated and timely information needs to be generated in a way that all stakeholders find credible; (4) officials must make a commitment to adaptive management (with appropriate monitoring that itself is the product of stakeholder engagement); (5) sustainability concerns need to be integrated into everyday decision-making; and (6) close monitoring of efforts to promote sustainable development must be put in place.

Champions

Building a coalition to press for sustainability is an important consideration in all infrastructure planning, economic development and regulatory and budgetary decisions. This requires champions both inside and outside of government. In the United States, in the past few years, more and more cities have appointed full-time sustainability directors.²² These individuals bring some combination of economic development capability, administrative experience, political savvy, and a background in finance and environmental planning to their jobs. They usually have the confidence of the mayor or the city manager – at least immediately following their appointment – and their responsibilities usually straddle a number of departments or bureaus. It is their responsibility to make sure that sustainability considerations are given attention both within and across departments on a day-to-day basis.

When a city has an urban sustainability director or coordinator, that individual is likely to have a hard time being effective if he or she is not supported by at least one high-profile corporate leader as well as the leaders of one or more environmental NGOs. The combination of inside and outside champions pulling in the same direction is critical to the success of sustainable development. While it is valuable to have a chief elected official who makes sustainability part of his or her political platform, a commitment to sustainability needs to go beyond the chief elected official.

Involvement of Appropriate Agency Personnel

Even if a city has an influential and well-respected sustainability coordinator, to be effective across multiple sectors, the city has to create a team of agency or department directors with a mandate to bring their sectoral efforts into conformity with an overall city or metropolitan sustainable development strategy. Transportation, energy, open space preservation, housing policies, community economic development and job creation are all instrumental to achieving sustainable development.

While it is not necessary for a city to have a separate sustainable development department, it is important that sustainability moves to the top of the list of concerns of almost every city and metropolitan agency. The cities that have been most effective in this regard have published detailed sustainability objectives and measures of success, especially at the neighborhood level.²³ Usually, it takes a public-private partnership of some sort to make sure that such indicators are taken seriously.

A Commitment to Joint Fact Finding

Specific development decisions, such as how and whether to promote commercial development at new public transit stops, strategies for increasing energy efficiency in commercial real estate and in public buildings, approaches to increasing city recycling levels, decisions to promote rooftop gardens and other low-impact development in new or old buildings, and commitments to urban gardening and other approaches to replanting paved areas are all practical examples of ways to improve urban sustainability. All of these decisions require careful consideration based on their expected impacts on the social fabric, environment quality and economic activity of a city. The appropriateness and cost of these practices vary. Certain ways of pursuing these objectives can restrict the rights of private property owners more than they need to. There is no single 'correct' way of pursuing sustainable development ideas. But, whatever ways are chosen will not be credible if they do not draw on the scientific and technical information available and take account of the costs and benefits associated with each possible approach.

Decisions in each city or region regarding the 'best' way of pursuing these and related goals ought to be sensitive to the environmental, social and economic context in which they are to be implemented. This means these decisions should be based on a collaborative study of the benefits and costs of each option in light of the particular history and capabilities of each community. Decisions about how to appraise each option will undoubtedly depend on 'non-objective judgments' of various kinds.

For instance, in assessing the likely environmental impacts of alternative infrastructure designs, setting the geographic boundary of the study area too narrowly, or scoping the study in ways that do not extend far enough into the future will produce skewed results. There is no single correct geographic boundary or time horizon for such studies. Forecasts and assessments will carry the most weight when they are the product of joint fact-finding; that is, collaborative efforts that frame questions, hire expert advisors, review preliminary findings and set boundaries for analysis in a collaborative way. All of the non-objective judgments that experts usually make behind-the-scenes should be made in a transparent way, by the parties, when CB is done properly.

The techniques of joint fact-finding are well established, although not always followed. Not all technical experts are willing and able to work under such close scrutiny of stakeholders. And, many do not want to be bothered to engage non-experts or to take local or 'indigenous' knowledge seriously. But only if experts are willing to do these things will CB lead to politically credible and technically sophisticated agreements.

A Commitment to Collaborative Adaptive Management (CAM)

Even after the most careful studies, decisions about how to proceed must reflect the uncertainty that surrounds most efforts to shape the dynamics of complex cities and metropolitan regions. The precise effects of climate change, for example, remain largely unclear at the city and neighborhood scale. While the fact that the climate is changing in a variety of complex ways is now well documented, what specific changes will mean for a particular location, especially in the near term, is almost impossible to predict. The way to proceed in the face of substantial, but hard to quantify risks, is to make small moves, monitor whatever the results are, stay attuned to larger changes that others may be documenting, and adjust as required. There are also ways of identifying 'no regrets' moves that will work to promote sustainability regardless of which 'alternative future' materializes. The best way to hedge against uncertainty is through adaptive management. And, the only way to formulate such strategies is with the direct involvement of all of the relevant stakeholders – both in making short-term decisions, but also in monitoring and interpreting how these turn out and learning more about what else might be tried.

Integration into Everyday Decision-making

Sustainable development is not something that can be achieved apart from everyday decisions made by multiple actors about which developments

to encourage, how to locate, design and operate key pieces of the city or the region's infrastructure, what environmental and design regulations to enforce, and which incentives to provide private investors and developers. A separate sustainability plan that is not integrated into a city or metropolitan master plan or long-term capital improvement plans is unlikely to produce sustainable outcomes in the long term, since no city in a democratic context can rely on a single decision-maker to implement all aspects of such a plan.

Performance Monitoring

As noted above, without precise, agreed-upon indicators that can be used to monitor performance at the neighborhood, city and metropolitan levels, it is almost impossible to determine whether sustainable development efforts are succeeding or not. Performance reviews should be undertaken on a regular basis by representatives of all stakeholder groups who helped to set benchmarks, prescribed the data-gathering necessary to monitor performance and who meet periodically to assess how things are going and what adjustments might be needed.

WHAT ARE THE OBSTACLES TO REACHING NEGOTIATED AGREEMENTS ON HOW SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT SHOULD PROCEED?

It is not easy to reach agreement on how sustainability ought to be achieved in a particular city or region. Some cities have no tradition of civic engagement beyond noisy public hearings at which decisions that have already been made are presented for public reaction. Other cities are used to relying on 'blue ribbon' committees that involve the same short list of influential business leaders and neighborhood political operatives all the time. Often, university experts are included. These committees are no substitute, however, for the involvement of properly selected stakeholder representatives. Their findings and the recommendations of 'blue ribbon' committees rarely have credibility in the political world of local decision-making. Consensus building of the sort we are advocating is much more far-reaching and much more likely to achieve legitimacy in the public arena. Consensus building aims to produce informed agreements that all stakeholders can support, although it still generates proposals (not decisions) on which elected officials must act.

If everything we have said is well established, and there is evidence in

practice to confirm the logic of our analysis, why is it so difficult to achieve more sustainable patterns of urban development? The first two obstacles to proceeding in a consensus building fashion reflect the ways that individuals, particularly public officials, tend to operate. The next three are a by-product of the institutions and organizations we have built for ourselves in most developed democracies.

Reluctance of Elected Officials

The use of CB remains relatively rare at the urban or regional scale, which means that elected officials can be expected to have limited familiarity with this particular type of process aimed at involving the full spectrum of stakeholders in joint fact-finding and collaborative problem-solving. If we were to ask public officials whether they would like to know what they could propose regarding how to restrict development that would achieve practically unanimous support, we expect most would indicate, perhaps even excitedly, that they would indeed like to hear what that might be. But, then, if we tell them that a well-designed consensus-building process is the best way to produce such clarity, we usually encounter some wariness. A first concern is that they might be delegating away their authority. A second is that most would doubt that a truly representative group of stakeholders can, in fact, reach agreement on a politically difficult question. Let us consider each of these worries.

Elected officials cannot, by law, delegate away their statutory responsibility. So, when they invite the public to 'get involved', they are formally only asking for advice. And, they can expect to hear a lot of conflicting ideas. They can reserve the right to ignore whatever the public has to say. The same is true, in a way, of any invitation they might extend to citizens to participate in a consensus-building process. When engaging in a CB process, elected officials are not granting an ad hoc group final decision-making authority. However, it is a lot more difficult, once a CB process has been set in motion, for an official to give preference to the concerns of 'special interests' who would rather work behind the scenes to get what they want. Officials beholden to a small faction, or a few individuals, are in a difficult position if they invite all stakeholders to participate in a CB process. They will have to give some public explanation for why they are not endorsing what has been recommended.

We believe that most elected officials in most parts of the world have been led to assume that politics is a zero-sum game. That is, that when one side or party wins, others must lose. The notion that there might be 'all gain' solutions to difficult public policy questions, like sustainable development trade-offs, seems implausible.²⁴ That is because the way that

politics is done in most places does not put a premium on 'value creation' or the formulation of 'packages' that guarantee all 'sides' something more than what they will probably get if there is no agreement. Value creation often requires bundling of seemingly unrelated issues. Often certain linkages are implied by the very notion of sustainability as being made up of social, economic and environmental concerns. Sometimes, it hinges on the willingness of parties to make 'contingent agreements', promising to compensate others or hold them harmless if the worst possible outcome occurs. These kinds of agreements are only possible if we reframe political decision-making as problem-solving (that is, how to meet the most important interests of all sides). Consensus building is a form of collective problem-solving in which the participants take responsibility, not just for meeting their own interests, but for finding ways to meet the interests of all the other parties as well. Until we can convince public officials to allow CB to proceed, the win-lose dynamic will prevail – and sustainable development will remain yet one more issue at the bottom of the political agenda.

The Inability of Public Agencies to Work in Partnership with Civil Society and Business Interests

Many public officials talk about the desirability of public-private partnerships, but they are not really comfortable with this idea. Consensus building brings appointed officials, corporate leaders, community activists and environmentalists to the table to work out trade-offs. This is a true form of government-private sector-civil society partnership. While the product must still be acted upon by the relevant elected officials, both those who would call themselves progressives and those who would define themselves as conservatives are troubled by the idea of public decision-making being made in such an open and collaborative way. A commitment to CB is a commitment to work together in a fully accountable and transparent way. Until officials see that this can work, and that they can still get re-elected even after supporting such partnerships, they are unlikely to take CB seriously.

This means that the first use of CB in each sustainable development decision-making context is crucial. Until there is clear evidence that CB can work and that public officials who support it do not put themselves at a political disadvantage, many public officials (as well as a great many corporate and civil society leaders) will remain skeptical. In places where non-governmental organizations and corporations have made, or claim to have made, significant progress towards sustainable practices, CB provides a venue for the exchange of lessons – and also

a venue in which public agencies can be pressured to be more proactive and responsive.

The Failure of Public Agencies to Work Effectively on Problems that Cut Across Typical Departmental Boundaries

Sustainable development decisions are by definition multi-dimensional. This means that no single bureau or agency of government is in a position to make such decisions on its own. Individual departments cannot be expected to have sufficient technical capability or the political mandate required to take account of the economic, ecological and equity considerations involved. Multiple agencies (often on different jurisdictional levels) will probably need to get involved in making the trade-offs required, and to implement more sustainable patterns of development. There are few things more difficult in our current age than coordinating and synthesizing the efforts of separate agencies or departments.

Sustainable development coordinators, mentioned earlier, can help. But they, too, are often hamstrung by limitations on their capacity and authority. This is why we think the responsibility for achieving sustainable development falls primarily on the public-at-large rather than on elected leaders. Unless there is a clear mandate and a continuous push from the 'outside', public agencies have an incentive to behave as they always have, jealously guarding their bureaucratic prerogatives.

The Failure to See Sustainable Development as an On-going Challenge, rather than a One-time Task

We are enormously skeptical of the idea of producing separate sustainability plans – new documents that provide a development overlay that sits on top of existing city master plans or specialized agency plans (like a mass transit plan). Unless sustainability principles are integrated into guidance documents and policies, it is unlikely that they will ever be realized. This means that those responsible for achieving sustainability need to push for these concerns in every decision-making forum. While it is important to have quantitative sustainability performance standards spelled out and adopted by local and metropolitan agencies, implementation of these measures will depend on on-going vigilance and intervention by those who participate in CB processes. Getting agreement (which is no small accomplishment) is the beginning, not the end, of each stakeholder group's responsibility. Unless sustainability is always on the agenda – in the same way the justice or fairness is always a concern in urban policy-making – there is almost no chance it will be achieved.

The Failure to Benchmark Performance and to Collect and Share Appropriate and Timely Information that Enable Appropriate Policy and Program Adjustments

All agencies engaged in attempts to make cities more sustainable must continually learn how cities and metropolitan areas can develop in ever-more sustainable ways. Such learning hinges on the availability of clear benchmarks against which performance can be measured, and on the ready supply of reliable (real time) information to make such judgments. This means that every effort to develop in more sustainable ways must be pegged to explicit performance measures that will enable evaluation and thus, learning and improvement. For example, what are the fiscal, environmental and social equity indicators of neighborhood improvement that will be used to gauge joint development efforts in conjunction with the construction of new mass transit stations? Unless the right information is collected in a reliable and timely way, it will not be possible to measure performance or make on-going adjustments in budgets, programs and policies. Thus, CB efforts are not complete unless they spell out evaluation criteria and make provision for appropriate data collection and sharing. In the absence of such performance standards and monitoring arrangements, it will be hard to determine whether agencies are getting better at sustainable development.

Notice that one item that is not on the list of obstacles is the need for definitive scientific or technical insight into the workings of socio-ecological systems before we can plan in sustainable ways. We should presume that our understanding of the dynamics of such systems is only fragmentary and will remain so for some time. The complexity of these systems, even at the neighborhood scale, will outdistance our scientific understanding for many years to come. Nevertheless, decisions regarding sustainable development can and must still be made. All we can do is work with the knowledge that we have, invest resources in maximizing what we learn from our decisions and develop methods to enhance opportunities for pooling our experience with others over time, expecting that greater insight will emerge.

NOTE ON THE POWER OF COALITIONS

One diagnosis of why sustainable development efforts in a great many cities have not gotten off the ground or have not produced significant results, is that those in power are not prepared to open up their decisions to public scrutiny, or (even worse) they are actually opposed to taking

a long-term and multi-faceted perspective on how development should proceed. They are content with the results at present and take no responsibility for the long-term implications of current programs and policies.

We would argue that those in power have no reason to oppose new ways of doing things as long as these new approaches to development coincide with their interests. The reason they have not been enthusiastic about sustainability thus far, in our view, is that proponents have not made a compelling case that promoting sustainable development will help them get re-elected. Unless the coalition that favors sustainable development grows large enough and mobilizes politically, this situation is unlikely to change.

Energy efficiency, for example, is a worthwhile objective because it saves consumers (including commercial real estate owners) a great deal of money on a continuing basis. As it turns out, sustainable approaches to development, while sometimes requiring upfront costs, and thus a shift in the immediate allocation of gains and losses, often stand to create dramatically more long-term benefits for the vast majority of residents than current ways of doing things. However, unless stakeholders know about and have a role in determining this for themselves, the majority are more likely to be manipulated by those 'at the top' who have a lot to gain by maintaining the status quo.

There is no doubt that sustainable development can create long-term gains for a far greater number of urban residents than unsustainable development – especially if gains are tallied in terms of public health benefits, intergenerational benefits for our progeny and higher levels of personal satisfaction, and not just in terms of short-term economic costs. In the short-term, though, emphasizing the multiple dimensionality of sustainability means challenging the status quo. That, in turn, represents political or economic losses in the short term for a small number of powerful individuals, companies and groups. When managed correctly, however, both short-term and long-term benefits accruing to the 'gainers' associated with sustainable development can be turned into a plus for those in positions of power. While we have not presented them here, there are a great many well-documented case studies that substantiate this claim.²⁵ Such benefits can only be achieved, however, if there is political pressure from a strong-enough coalition of those who stand to gain in the long run from a shift to more sustainable patterns of development.

The key point is that advocates of sustainable development will have to build a much broader and bolder coalition among those who will actually stand to gain in the long run, and not just clamor for 'greener development', if they expect to be successful. One of the ways to empower such a coalition is to advocate for a commitment to the right kind of consensus building at the municipal and metropolitan levels.

NOTES

1. For information on city and community level efforts both specifically related to climate change and efforts that are more generally about sustainability, see ICLEI, 2011.
2. For a brief overview of some early examples in the United States, see Weiss, 2002.
3. See for additional information Kassirer, 2011; here, the following social marketing case studies can be found Walking the Talk, Seattle Neighborhoods in Motion, Ozone Action Program, Bike Smarts, Vancouver's Employee Trip Reduction Program, and Go Boulder.
4. Leiserowitz et al., 2005.
5. Krueger and Gibbs, 2007.
6. Rubin, 2009.
7. O'Hare et al., 1983.
8. Downs, 1972.
9. Rijksoverheid, 2010.
10. Fung and Wright, 2003.
11. Dahl, 1989.
12. Kymlicka, 1995.
13. Manin, 1997.
14. For examples, see IAP2, 2007.
15. Dryzek, 1997, Chapter 4.
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17. Susskind and Cruikshank, 1985.
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21. Evers and Susskind, 2009.
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