

# Sustaining communities: setting the agenda

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## Sustaining communities: setting the agenda

The concept of ‘sustaining communities’ has been mobilised in myriad ways across academic, political and policy domains, despite the tendency of the term to defy easy definition (Boyle et al. 2008; Brownhill and Carpenter 2009; Davies 2002; Raco 2005; Schofield 2002). The idea of sustaining communities is generally thought to be a good one, though the precise means through which it may be achieved often remain opaque. The rationale underlying this special issue is to explore this concept from a multi-disciplinary or cross-disciplinary perspective in order to shed light on its versatility, fluidity and contingency across divergent geographical and institutional contexts. We recognise the growing resonance of concepts such as sustaining communities in the context of post-Fordist spatial and economic restructuring, and particularly in relation to the ‘neoliberal’ political project that has been reshaping not only the political landscape but also the ideological underpinnings of societies in various ways. A growing body of

work within Geography and Sociology is beginning to emphasise the unique ways in which supposedly ‘global’ processes are experienced within different geographical, institutional and cultural contexts (Amin and Thrift 2002; England and Ward 2007; Massey 2004; Ong 2007). There has also been resurgence in geographies of comparative urbanism (Ward 2008). Robinson’s (2006) insistence on the importance of the geographies of ‘ordinary cities’ has stimulated a discussion about the ways in which we compare places and contexts, and how we should conceptualise difference and similarity in contemporary society (Dear 2005; Kantor and Savitch 2005; McCann 2008; Nijman 2007; Pierre 2005). In recognition of such debates, we were interested in editing a volume that would explore the concept of sustaining communities in national or cross-national contexts. We asked prospective authors to look at how community was conceptualised, how it was manifested in practice and how it was framed within wider policy discourses. Through this editorial approach, we hoped to initiate and promote a comparative debate on the theoretical underpinnings and policy formation of, and responses to, the issue of sustaining communities within an international context.

The contributions we received offer us a series of insights that highlight the challenges of sustaining communities, while also pointing towards the problematic of defining *what* exactly is to be sustained, and the historical and socio-cultural conditions under which such discourses and grounded realities have

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emerged. In short, they offer a snapshot of how we conceptualise community, how sustainability and community are linked, how the notion of sustaining communities has become politicised cross-nationally, what the current key debates are and where we are headed. While it would be disingenuous to suggest that this collection offers a truly ‘global’ perspective on the issue,<sup>1</sup> it is nevertheless an ‘international’ one. Depending on the geographical context, along with other factors, community was defined in different ways by different authors. Depending on their definition, the authors take us on different journeys, pursuing diverse avenues of exploration and interrogation. The special issue draws together papers on the experiences of communities in the United Kingdom, the United States, Mexico, and Ireland, thus emphasising the geographical specificity inherent in sustaining communities debates.

The global–local nexus of the sustaining communities question is addressed through a number of themes: The regeneration of working class neighbourhoods (McIntyre and McKee; Bertotti et al.; Mata); the impacts of entrepreneurial urban redevelopment projects on community (Crossa; Raco); the inequalities associated with the rise of gated communities (Low, Vesselinov and Le Goix); the uneasy interfaces between urban and rural communities (Mahon, Fahy & O’Cinneide; Liliberte), and broader theoretical and philosophical reviews of the sustaining communities concept (Powell; Raco).

There has been a lot of debate within the literature on how to define community. The papers in this collection similarly grapple with this issue. Mahon et al. raise the question as to whether ‘dwelling’ in a place equates to belonging to that ‘community’. Similarly, various authors included here (Crossa; Liliberte; Mahon et al.; Tuason Mata) draw attention to tensions between visions of community as endogenous and exogenous and homogenous and heterogeneous. These types of questions are fundamental to our conceptualisations of community and are especially resonant in contemporary societies characterised by commuting to work, cross-border mobility, and connections through information technology. The

papers presented here demonstrate the tensions implicit in conceptualising and mobilising community when notions of inside and outside and local and global are marked by fluidity and liminality.

Within this context we need to be conscious of community and society as discursive constructs expressed in geographical and sociological ways. Such constructs create ‘spaces of community’ that are ideological as well as physical, and which affect individuals and groups through, for example, policies for social housing, planning paradigms and developer priorities, rural aesthetics and economies, and environmental concerns.

### **Mobilising community in a neoliberal age**

In the opening paper of this collection, Powell argues that sustainable communities provide a metaphor for deepening democratic politics that challenge previous hegemonic ideologies of state or market dominance. Neoliberalism, he suggests, has created a distinct set of ‘political fictions’ which have translated the welfare state into a market-oriented, individualistic and competitive society. Drawing upon the Ancient Greek concept of the ‘*agora*’, he argues that community development priorities offer us the potential to regain this civic space and thus to write new political fictions with which to change society for the better. The negative outcome associated with neoliberal ‘political fictions’ is suggested by Raco in his paper on spatial policy in the UK. Using Bourdieu’s (2004) notion of ‘pseudo concepts’ Raco traces the emergence of a set of dominant assumptions during the 1990s and 2000s that effectively closed off possible alternatives. In the unraveling of those assumptions wrought by the global credit crisis, new opportunities for creative policy thinking and practice have now emerged. More specifically, Raco explores the key assumptions underlying spatial policy in England: globalization as a foundational reality; the potential of the knowledge economy/creative industries and the capacity of the market and private sector to delivery broader policy objectives. The weaknesses and limitations of this model which have been exposed by the current crisis, creates a space for refashioning spatial policy. Rather than passively seeking to provide for anticipated growth, planning, Raco argues, could play a more explicit

<sup>1</sup> Despite our efforts we did not succeed in securing contributions on the sustaining communities debate from the Eastern Europe, Mid East, Asia, or Africa. No doubt such contributions would offer an added dimension to the special issue.

role in setting trends and shaping the form and character of future growth and development. Like Powell, Raco sees the current moment offering new opportunities for developing alternative agendas and ways of thinking about policy and practice.

Following on from these theoretical and policy discussions, Crossa's ethnographic case study offers an account of the impact that neoliberal urban redevelopment has had on street vendors in Mexico City. Crossa focuses on a space of community—the Latin American plaza—as a way of exploring how the transformation of spatial practices has also transformed (and restricted) the dynamics the community of traders that inhabit the space. Rather than presenting a defeatist portrait of a community under threat, however, Crossa's interviewees demonstrate how resistance has always been an important facet of the vendors' world and how the community adapted their practices to the limitations imposed by city government on the space. This is indicative of Simone's (2004) view of 'people as infrastructure'.

### Reshaping housing, rebuilding communities

The opening trio of papers all highlight the extent to which urban regeneration and property investment have played into reshaping the experience of communities. One of the most significant elements of this spatial economic paradigm has been the transformations in housing policy and housing markets. The papers in this collection all touch on this issues to a certain extent, but it is addressed most explicitly by Low, Vesselinov & Le Goix, Bertotti et al. and McIntyre and McKee.

Drawing upon a dynamic multi-disciplinary approach, combining psychological, political, and anthropological theories, Low explores middle-class housing preferences in the US through the concept of 'gating'. Gated communities have become a prevalent feature of many urban and suburban areas, which Low argues offer higher earners a way to achieve racial and economic segregation, while ostensibly still sharing the same 'neighbourhood'. Through a set of qualitative interviews with residents in gated and co-op complexes, she explores the reasoning and rationale behind their housing choices. Through this multi-disciplinary framework, she argues that we can come to a better understanding about the dynamics of these

residential spaces both in terms of individual and collective behaviour. Adapting a more quantitative approach, Vesselinov and Le Goix argue that gated communities are producing new clusters of privilege and affluence, and also of racial and ethnic homogeneity in the metropolitan region. Focusing on three North American cities—Phoenix, Las Vegas and Seattle—they identify a new layer of suburbanization in the form of gated communities creating islands of racial, ethnic and economic homogeneity in nominally diverse suburban regions. The polarizing effect thus created has profound implications for urban equality and community sustainability. While Low and Vesselinov and Le Goix focus on evolving residential trends in middle-class communities, the contributions from Bertotti et al. and McIntyre and McKee focus on the reciprocal impacts of government policy on working-class and disadvantaged communities. Drawing on data from twenty London neighbourhoods classified as disadvantaged, Bertotti et al. have used an innovative qualitative method - 'World Café' - to evaluate the nature and extent of community involvement in urban regeneration initiatives. Their results demonstrate practical gaps in the UK Government's sustaining communities agenda; for example, they discover a lack of awareness of the centrality of young people to the future development of neighbourhoods, and they identify a need to build the capacity of informal networks as a means for both internal community cohesion and external engagement with the policy process. In conclusion, they argue that while the state's emphasis on community is positive, there is a need to emphasise the 'voices' of the community more centrally in policy formation, and to enhance the various ways in which residents can play a more pivotal role in the decision-making process. Focussing their work on disadvantaged communities in Glasgow, Scotland McIntyre and McKee question the impact of a range of schemes designed to promote owner-occupation in low-income areas. The need to combat "tenure segregation" through the widespread promotion of home ownership has emerged as central to regeneration initiatives (Cole and Goodchild 2001). A key underlying principle of this policy is that home ownership is the "natural" tenure of choice, and that home owners are preferable to social housing tenants. However, research has shown that gains from home ownership are highly variable and not necessarily assured.

Indeed, as Raco (this volume) notes the credit crunch and its aftermath challenges some of the fundamental assumptions underpinning mixed-community building. McIntyre and McKee's exploration of the relationship between ethopolitics, mixed communities, and the normalization of home ownership concludes that the assumption that areas of owner occupation are more sustainable than areas of social rental housing, because they require (at least initially) less state intervention, needs to be rethought.

When we talk about renewal in the context of community, it is not merely a question of the physical and social. We must also speak to the issue of environmental degradation and environmental justice movements. Mata's paper on attempts to rebuild communities in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina through policies emphasising environmental justice, offers a salutary commentary on the nature of government and civil society relations. Focussing on the experience of a Vietnamese community, Mata draws on ethnographic action research, to demonstrate how attempts at collaborative work within the community were undermined by broader city-wide political agendas. At the core of Mata's analysis are broader questions about sustainable communities that are not limited to environmental improvements. Echoing the work of Bertotti et al. she identifies what elements of working relationships need to be in place in order to strengthen collaboration so that communities can move toward the goal of sustainability. Tuason Mata presents environmental justice as a *conduit* to community sustainability, crucially aided by effective collaborative relationships held together by a common desire to abide by the ethical standards of reciprocity and mutuality.

### **Rurality, community and sustainability**

While most of the papers in this collection give the sense that 'community' as a discourse and as a practice has emerged in a new form over the last number of decades due to the a neoliberal political model favouring (at least ostensibly) market freedom, these is also a sense that this version of community is also defined in a relational and oppositional way to what it 'used to be'. This is evident in the papers by Mahon, Fahy and O'Connide and Laliberte dealing with rural societies in transition. While the contexts

are different (Mahon et al. focussing on Galway in the West of Ireland, Laliberte focussing on the experience of Great Barrington, MA in New England, United States), both papers detail rural communities in a state of change. Coping with a decline in agriculture and manufacturing, these places have been experiencing an influx of new residents, mainly from urban areas. In both papers, the aesthetics of the countryside and issues of 'quality of life' are highlighted as important aspects of place for both new and existing residents. Mahon et al. use a survey methodology to evaluate the extent to which 'quality of life' factors into people's residential location decisions, and the extent to which they provide a common set of interests around which community may be built. They argue that, contrary to assertions of communities in demise, in their study areas "...community in the sense of individuals who share common interests and concerns, particularly those that relate to place, is still strongly applicable". Laliberte's paper chronicles the evolution of Great Barrington, MA from a rural manufacturing base to a 'rural idyll', detailing the subsequent shifts in the discourses of the rural and community that accompany such metamorphoses. To combat economic decline, certain interests in Great Barrington have re-branded the town "...as an idyllic escape from the hectic, overcrowded and polluted life of the city". With these new residents also came new landscape aesthetics, burgeoning property prices, and shifting perceptions about what constitutes the 'community'. Rather than viewing this process in terms of a community under invasion, Laliberte argues for a nuanced, relational conceptualisation of the term. She suggests that in a spatially or socially endogenous model, "...the creation of a 'sustainable community' can be to the detriment of those deemed 'outsiders' and thereby create and perpetuate systems of social injustice." Instead she argues that communities can only be fully understood when placed within the context of their interpersonal networks and multi-scalar relationships. Only then will the requirements for sustaining that particular 'community' become apparent.

### **Sustaining communities in the twenty-first century**

Taken together, these papers offer a series of complementary and insightful commentaries on the

sustainable communities agenda. They address the issue through a range of geographical and social conditions, and unearth the multi-faceted and fragmented ways in which the term is conceptualised and mobilised. Powell argues that the term retains the power to inspire, motivate and ultimately bring about transformation in civic space and the political realm. While acknowledging the ways in which neoliberalism has advanced an individualist agenda at the expense of the collective or communal good, both Powell and Raco remain hopeful that politics can be refashioned to take cognisance of the need for a form of development which is both sustainable and community oriented. Crossa, Mata and Bertotti et al. offer practical, empirically based insights into the capacity of communities to adapt to changes imposed from without, and to nurture communal ties in a civic space that has the potential at least to resist complete incorporation by state-driven spatial and social agendas.

Moving from the civic sphere to the housing sphere, it is clear that a major cleavage has developed across the Anglo-American world in terms not just of home ownership, but how that home ownership is expressed in space. Several decades ago, Peter Saunders (1986) argued that the most significant divide emerging in Britain centred on home ownership. The residualisation of social housing has rendered social housing tenants even more marginal within policy discourses (McIntyre and McKee) while the rise of the gated community has allowed for the proliferation of a new and perhaps more noxious form of class reproduction through spatial segregation (Low, Vesselinov & Le Goix). A variant of this class reproduction through housing choices is visible at the urban–rural interface explored by Mahon et al. and Laliberte. Echoing the classic work of Pahl (1968) and Newby (1979) both papers demonstrate the appeal of the countryside to urbanites, and the importance of sense of place in sustaining community.

As we suggested at the outset, our aim was not to define the issue of sustaining communities but rather to open up a dialogue. Our objective in gathering the papers that constitute this volume was to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas cross nationally and across disciplines. The papers demonstrate continuity with classical thinking on sustainability and community but also offer a range of perspectives on how our understanding of both concepts is changing in light of

recent social, economic and political transitions. We have indicated some of the commonalities and also some of the complications of addressing the sustaining communities question within an international context. We hope that this collection of papers will help to encourage wider discussion, exploration and reflection across disciplines on the challenges and opportunities faced by a sustainable communities agenda in the twenty-first century.

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