

Urban Development and Civil Society: The Role of Communities in Sustainable Cities. Edited by Michael Carley, Paul Jenkins and Harry Smith. London: Earthscan. 2001. 266 pages. £22.95 (Paperback).

This book successfully brings together two themes - urban development and civil societies - examining the role of and relationship between communities, society, local and central government and the private sector in attaining sustainable urban development. The book is logically structured, opening with two chapters which provide a clear introduction to the theoretical framework adopted, then presents a series of case studies from across the globe examining the institutional and organisational movements that promote sustainable developments, closing with two chapters that draw upon key points of the case studies.

The case studies are the core component of the book. They range in location (Mozambique, Pakistan, China, Costa Rica, the Philippines, South Africa, and the UK), context (from rapidly urbanizing and transitional to developed countries) and issue explored (i.e. land use, environmental quality, decision-making processes, housing). Their breadth is both their strength and their weakness. The broad collection provides a useful comparison enabling the interchange of experiences and theories that focus upon urban development through three distinct perspectives: policy, infrastructure and engagement. Through demonstrating the complex, fluid relationships between the state, the market and society each study highlights the difficulty in delivering change within the urban environment without action or support in these areas. Nevertheless, at times, it can be a jumpy read from one location and context to the next, each with varying levels of critical analysis and discussion. There is certainly scope to develop the discussions further, thinking about the wider implications and contributions of the research undertaken. For example, the book raises questions over how sustainable urban developments are constructed, although the construction of the 'communities' within these developments is also an important consideration which is not really touched upon within the case studies. The term 'community' is used indiscriminately within urban studies literature and policies, being hardly ever defined. 'Community' could refer to local residents, a community of practice, a professional community, a community of interest or even just one member of a group (a community representative) - there are clear differences between these groups. Despite the huge variation in meaning of who is being referred to it is rare to see a definition within the literature - the case studies documented within this book present an opportunity to compare constructions of communities in different contexts. Similarly, a 'sustainable community' is frequently offered within policy and literature as a common goal to strive towards; underlying this is an assumption of homogeneity and shared opinion of all the parties involved in the understanding of, planning, construction and use of an area (e.g. central and local government, service providers, architects, local communities, developers, businesses, the private and voluntary sectors). Such work highlights the multitude of perspectives, interpretations and

agendas within this field, thus the book making a significant contribution to literature in this field.

The case studies are skillfully drawn together in closing chapters which outline the constraints and the complexity of community development, the infrastructure needed and the influence of policy to take sustainable measures forward. The key messages are highlighted and summarised: the work emphasises that radical, new forms of engagement, multi-level partnerships and structures (mental modes) are required for the delivery of sustainability within the built environment. The closing chapters argue the pivotal role of new urban social movements and action networks, both locally and nationally, for sustainable urban environments, although they do not explore in detail how these mechanisms are/can be created. At times the institutional perspective adopted simplifies to the fluid, dynamic and flexible nature of these movements and connections. It is important to point out that a network may not exist in a pre-given state, for instance, in the majority of cases of physical regeneration, networks are constructed around a specific issue, project or campaign, then diluted once the issue has been dealt with. Over space and time people may belong to various movements and networks, with varying degrees of attachment. This is particularly evident through the virtual communities (i.e. MySpace, Facebook) where information and communication technology has led to space-less trajectories and multiple action networks.

The closing chapters reinforce the recurrent theme throughout the book – democratic participation and engagement is necessary to achieve ‘sustainable communities, drawing upon lessons learnt through the UK experience. There is no doubt that engagement and participation are complex issues, covering a range of approaches, with massive variations in interpretations. Devolving decision making requires a shift in conventional power relations; citizens are no longer passive observers and consumers but active participants in the delivery of key public services; this in itself raises a number of questions and debates which are touched upon throughout the book. Incentives, levels of motivation and satisfaction are rarely explored within the urban literature and, unfortunately, are not within the scope of the book. Further research is required to explore and document the practical manifestations of differing agendas and motivations – investigating what democratic participation actually consists of in practice. Dissatisfaction with the experience of generating such participation is depressingly widespread both on the part of the ‘community’ and the traditional ‘decision-makers’. Many members of the public feel that their views and local knowledge are not taken into account by policy and decision makers.

Overall, the book provides a useful, insightful contribution to both urban development and civil society studies, examining the complex multi-level relationships between the state, the market and society. The diverse case studies are a collection of contrasting models of these relationships. Although the book may be dated (first published in 2001), it succinctly captures the challenge and difficulties faced in attaining sustainable

urban development. The crucial question one is left with is how will societies face the global challenges ahead?

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