
VIEWPOINT

Mainstreaming Sustainable Development

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Introduction

In just a few months time, 'sustainable development' will be celebrating its 20th anniversary.

The term was first introduced in the 1987 Brundtland Report, which defined it as: 'Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (Our Common Future, 1987). Since then, in the UK alone, we have had two sustainable development strategies as well as a plethora of initiatives on sustainability at regional and local levels.

Today, the expression trips from the lips of our political leaders on a regular basis. David Cameron, the leader of the Conservative Party, promises 'To improve the quality of life for everyone through a dynamic economy...strong society...a sustainable environment, where we enhance the beauty of our surroundings and protect the future of our planet.' And Tony Blair tells us 'Each of us needs to make the right choices to secure a future that is fairer, where we can all live within our environmental limits. That means sustainable development.'

The words appear to have made their way to the heart of political discourse in the UK. But beyond the rhetoric what policy and practice has actually changed?

In many ways, the UK has been a leader in sustainable development. It published a national sustainable development strategy in 2000, with a set of 'headline indicators' to measure progress. It gave the Welsh Assembly, along with new powers, a duty to promote sustainable development. It set

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up a Sustainable Development Commission five years ago, chaired by leading environmentalist Jonathon Porritt, to encourage and monitor progress. And in 2005, it published a second UK Sustainable Development Strategy called 'Securing the Future.'

So, in terms of papers, procedures and policies, the output has been impressive. The changes on the ground, however, have been slower to happen. We produce more waste every year. CO₂ emissions are actually increasing in the UK. Most of our major indicators are moving in the wrong direction. And our big new house-building programme still gives scant regard to the environment.

Why is this? And what is the future of sustainable development in the UK? To help in answering these questions, it is useful to consider what has happened – and is happening – at the local and regional levels.

The Regional Agenda

When the infrastructure for regional governance was set up, the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) were primarily focused on economic development. It has been something of an uphill battle ever since for these bodies to make sustainable development mainstream.

This has not been helped by the plethora of organisations operating at the regional level. It is often difficult to tell which of these – the Government Offices, the Regional Assemblies and the RDAs – was supposed to be taking the lead on sustainable development.

Where RDAs did take heed, they applied something of a 'checklist' approach, and it was difficult to see how this actually led to policy or project changes. The Regional Assemblies have the powers to scrutinise the RDAs on their performance, but again it is not clear to what extent they have taken them to task on their performance on sustainability.

That said, there has been some improvement. This is particularly apparent if one compares the initial Regional Economic Strategies (RESs) to those they are producing now. There are also isolated examples of on-the-ground spending which is strong on sustainability criteria.

So far, so uninspiring. But there is a different picture in London and Wales. Both have enjoyed a greater degree of devolved powers, and are also able to operate at a level to which their populace relates.

London, under Ken Livingstone's leadership, has demonstrated this through the congestion charge. The new London Climate Change Agency looks like a serious attempt to raise the game. And the latest iteration of the London Plan addresses sustainability issues, and in particular, climate change, in a comprehensive way.

Bolstered by its constitutional duty to promote sustainable development, Wales has proved particularly fertile territory for practical sustainable development initiatives. Forum for the Future, for example, helped the Welsh Assembly to develop an 'integration framework' – a tool that enables the Assembly to join-up policies, and helps in assessing the impact of a

new policy, activity or strategy against their big sustainable development objectives. Ministers have made use of the tool compulsory within the Assembly, so they can demonstrate how their high-level policies are contributing to their vision for a more sustainable Wales.

The Local Government Agenda

At the local government level, the picture is mixed, too.

Following the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, UK Local Authorities really seemed to be taking a leading role in addressing sustainable agenda. The Local Agenda 21 (LA21) process felt to some involved as though it had real vigour. Later, powers granted to local authorities for the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of their areas, granted in the 2000 Local Government Act, looked like – and should have been – a vital step forward. The debate and rhetoric around the introduction of the powers made it clear that they were designed to be used to address sustainability and quality of life. It is worth pausing to reflect on how historic a change this was – local authorities were given the power to act in any way, unless the action is specifically prohibited by law, which is fundamentally different from only being able to act in ways mandated by the centre, for fear of being adjudged *ultra vires*.

Today, however the picture looks less rosy than expected. There are few local authorities where sustainable development has major purchase among the political leadership or leading officers. LA21 officers tended, in practice, to be of marginal influence within authorities, with little input into overall strategy. And LA21 was largely sidelined, or subsumed by other issues with stronger statutory and financial drivers. Too often, the agenda was just about recycling.

The powers of wellbeing are still little-used, although this is beginning to change, which is one positive sign, as is the fact that LA21 officers – or their equivalents – are often in the Chief Executive's Office or Policy Unit, and so are nearer corporate policy making than in the past. These are, however, just green shoots compared to where we should be. Why is this?

There are plenty of plausible reasons why sustainable development has not been central to local authorities. Behind most of the reasons suggested (competing policy priorities, 'initiative-itis' from the centre and reorganisation) is the UK's over-centralized state, which, by 2003, had reduced local government to being essentially a delivery arm for central government. There is a consensus now among all those interested in public service modernisation that centralism has stopped serving us well; we surely have to recognize that neither has it served sustainable development well.

Local authorities have had decades of being given responsibilities, not powers. So perhaps we should not be surprised that the wellbeing powers did not lead to a revolutionary change in approach in our town halls.

Despite all these difficulties, some examples of best practice do shine out. Woking Borough Council and Middlesbrough Council have become

known for their progress on, respectively, energy and hydrogen. Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council have used a sustainability integration tool really effectively to improve key strategies and decisions. With excellent member commitment, West Sussex County Council has set corporate sustainability targets and indicators, and applied an integration tool to all projects over £2 million. Many authorities have also made some advances through the 'liveability' and local quality of life agendas.

The Future Challenges

So where next for sustainable development in the UK? Regional Governance is facing a tough time at the moment. The overwhelming vote against having a democratically elected regional assembly in the North East dealt a serious blow to the legitimacy of Regional Government. The Conservatives, who are looking increasingly electable, are promising to dismantle the whole regional edifice.

We are unlikely to lose the regional governance that we have in England, though. Many services need a sub-national dimension that local authorities are too small to provide. This is good for sustainable development, and it is often the most appropriate spatial level for working towards sustainability, through strategic functions such as planning, economic development, waste and water.

Regional organisations are still relatively new. With any new structures, particularly at a new level of governance, it takes time to establish and then effectively deliver what is set out. Completely new arrangements, however well-meaning, could mean starting from scratch with another long learning period and then potential reorganisation again. Regional organisations do need more time to continue their development.

They also need to find ways to take sustainable development more seriously. One option for improvement would be to have a Minister with direct responsibility for each region to whom the regional institutions would report. (This has been the case in London with a Minister for London, despite London also having a Mayor.) This would make the Minister accountable for decisions taken in the regions.

Accountability to citizens also needs strengthening, bearing in mind that one reason the elected assembly agenda failed was the perception in the North East that the proposed body had too few powers. The current city region agenda, which implies a strengthening of strategic powers for city governments, may help in this respect, although we are bound to see some 'variable geometry', where accountability arrangements differ from place to place.

There is also a need for the simplification of existing arrangements. There is still considerable confusion among many people regarding the roles and responsibilities between the different institutions – particularly

between the Government Office (GO), RDA and Regional Assembly (RA). We could broaden the remit of the RDAs turning them into RSDAs – Regional Sustainable Development Agencies – thus broadening the remit to economic, social and environmental development, with a sustainability duty as their overall aim. This body would soak up most of the GO's functions – with the remaining GO functions supporting the RA in its scrutiny, accountability and planning role.

Local Government also faces a fresh round of change. All the major political parties are currently talking about the importance of the local, and how to devolve more power and choice. Importantly for sustainable development, as well as the consensus that the centre of gravity needs to shift towards local authorities and beyond, to neighbourhoods, with more power and responsibility, there is an emerging understanding that local authorities currently do not use the powers they have to anything like the full extent. This is leading to a focus not only on devolving responsibilities and management, but on working out how to develop local authorities as more confident, assertive bodies.

The Inquiry led by Sir Michael Lyons is likely to report in early 2007; Lyons places a great deal of emphasis on the concept of the 'placeshaping' local authority. Being a 'placeshaper' sounds appealing, though we should not kid ourselves about the number of local politicians who see delivering services as the key role of a council, not shaping their place for the future. A 'placeshaping' authority is a useful concept for sustainable development, if it becomes embedded in local political culture.

There was much speculation that a recent Local Government White Paper would see the government pursue a 'double devolution' agenda, with significant powers moving to the sub-local level. It looks as if the Government will indeed make it easier for neighbourhood bodies to establish themselves, but it is not at all clear what this will mean for sustainable development, not least since it raises the spectre of NIMBY-ism (for example, small communities trying to block the creation of wind-farms in their 'back yards').

The Forum's experience is that sustainable development is only embedded in an authority when the leaders (both members and officers) see it as a key corporate issue that affects the corporate performance of the whole organization and to the area as a whole. It is clear that legislation will not create this understanding and commitment in every authority.

Conclusion

The work of Forum for the Future with public sector bodies shows that, by embedding sustainable development, they achieve four benefits. They gain efficiencies and save money; enhance reputation and trust; connect with concerns of residents; and reduce future risks.

However, an over-centralized UK has failed to deliver anywhere near enough good practice. Our aim must be that we turn this around in a refreshed UK that is more devolved and localized. On the eve of Sustainable Development's 20th birthday, this is becoming more and more urgent.

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