



# NATURE, SOCIAL COHESION AND THE CITY

## Conference report

Cities and nature are intricately connected. A rich variety of flora and fauna inhabit urban areas. Cities produce vast quantities of pollution. Natural resources are used to construct an endless number of commodities that make up urban areas from office blocks to the clothes you wear. However, existing relations between cities and nature are far from settled and are open to substantial criticism. Pollution, often in the name of local economic development, is degrading the environment. Cities are seen by many as being 'unsustainable'. Access to environmental 'goods' is somewhat limited to those who more-often-than-not possess power, money and White skin. Minority groups and deprived urban communities are seldom included in environmental policymaking and seem to suffer disproportionately from 'environmental bads'. The often problematic and often unappreciated nexus between social cohesion, the environment and cities, therefore, is an important issue for academics, policymakers, NGOs and the public alike to consider.

On Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> February 2009, a one-day conference took place at the University of Manchester entitled *Nature, Social Cohesion and the City*. Its aim was to reflect upon this very nexus of cities, social cohesion and nature. Twelve presenters from three spheres – policy, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and academia – took part in front of an audience of over 50 people from a variety of backgrounds. The conference was organised by Josh Steiner from the Manchester-based environmental NGO, Action for Sustainable Living (AfSL, [www.afsl.org](http://www.afsl.org)), together with Ian R. Cook and Erik Swyngedouw of the University of Manchester's School of Environment and Development. The conference was organised as part of Erik and Ian's European Union Seventh Framework-funded research project, *Social Polis*, which examines social cohesion

in European cities (see [www.socialpolis.eu](http://www.socialpolis.eu) for more details). This report will overview the important themes discussed in the conference and the insights gained.

## **1. Urban sustainabilities**

In recent years, rhetoric of urban sustainability and its cousins, sustainable development, sustainable communities, sustainable economies and sustainable growth have become increasingly prominent. In fact, they are very hard to miss. This rhetoric has accompanied the belief – as laid out in the infamous 1987 report *‘Our Common Future’* by the Brundtland Commission – that economic growth, social equity and environmental protection are all necessary aspects of contemporary living and can be realigned to support, rather than destroy, each other. Nonetheless, there remains widespread confusion as to what urban sustainability actually means, and how it has and should be practiced.

The first session brought together Mike Reardon from the Greater Manchester Environment Commission, Chris Wright from AfSL and Mike Raco from King’s College London to discuss the politics and practice of urban sustainability. **Chris Wright** began by arguing that we need to face up to the issues of environmental degradation and our overwhelming reliance on burning fossil fuels. He reasoned that in many quarters there is either a denial of the extent and ramifications of these issues or a reluctance to actually undertake alternative, sustainable pathways. He argued that sustainability must come out of communities – governments cannot do it alone – and that charities such as AfSL can play an enormous role in this. For Chris, “engaging people is the holy grail of sustainability”.

**Mike Reardon** followed by detailing the governance of urban sustainability in the Manchester city-region. He reasoned that sustainability is a culture, a way of doing things, but one that is extremely complex, involving a mixture of factors from architecture to transport, Co2 reduction to economic viability. Unlike Chris Wright, he favoured the idea that governments should take the lead on issues of sustainability but pondered which spatial scale of government the issue of sustainability should be addressed at. He also noted the local governance bodies face significant pressures ‘from above’ when creating and delivering urban sustainability strategies. He argued that

climate change should be seen as opportunity rather than a threat – an opportunity, even, to enhance the competitiveness of the Manchester city-region. Echoing many policymakers, Mike also called for pragmatism in policymaking: to be “practical and inspiring; not heroic and sacrificial”. He outlined the governance structures within the Manchester city-region that are responsible for urban sustainability and, in so doing, showed the complex maze of actors and institutions who are involved and the recent restructuring of this. Reflecting a wider pluralisation of the state and the wider involvement of the private sector in local governance circles, he noted how a new business-led coalition, the 100 Month Club, is being formed to promote low carbon emissions within the business community.

**Mike Raco** examined the issue of sustainable communities and the politics of aspiration in the UK. Drawing on a case study of the redevelopment of Salford Quays, he argued that urban development under the guise of ‘sustainable communities’ is tinged with a new urban politics of aspiration. We are moving away from a politics of expectation where we can expect certain universal rights and goods from the state. A politics of aspiration, in contrast, is about altering the ‘aspiration deficiencies’ of working class individuals, making them want to become better, more successful types of people. He argued that sustainable development, with its reliance on ‘mixed-use development’ and gentrification, is acceptable to policymakers as the new flats, toys and bars act as a ‘carrot’ to encourage the working classes to push themselves harder. And if they do so, then one day they might have access to these. In frustration over the ‘fuzziness’ of sustainability, Mike also issued a challenge: go a month without using the word sustainability and, in so doing, try to think of new words that better reflect the relationship between economy/environment/society.

## **2. Democratic urban environments?**

It is a commonly-held belief that the ways in which decisions are made regarding environmental policy have changed. Previously in the UK state officials dominated decisions as to how environmental (industrial) pollution should be regulated. Nowadays, environmental policymaking is more pluralised, not only in terms of what environmental ‘goods’ and ‘bads’ are under the remit of environmental policy but also in terms of who

is involved in policymaking. In this latter sense, some might say that environmental policymaking has become more democratic. On the surface, the public, voluntary groups and businesses appear to have a 'say' in the design and delivery of environmental policy. Nonetheless, there remains little consensus about how to 'engage' the public and other non-state actors. Nor is it clear whether minority groups – such as ethnic minorities and the inner city poor – are actually given access to enter this decision-making centres or opportunities to shape the decisions made within them.

The second session brought together Lucy Powell, a Labour party parliamentary candidate for the Manchester ward of Withington, Tim McMahon from the environmental charity MERCi, and Erik Swyngedouw from the University of Manchester to discuss the issues of urban politics, democracy and the environment. **Lucy Powell** was heavily involved in the 'Yes Vote' campaign for Manchester's Transport Innovation Fund (TIF). In order to access £1.5 billion of central government funding for much needed transport improvements, the Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Authority and the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities were required to hold a referendum across the 10 local authorities in Greater Manchester about a combined public transport improvement programme and 'two ring, peak-time only' congestion charge. This took place in December 2008 and soon afterwards it was announced that of the 1,031,675 people who voted only 21.2% voted in favour of the TIF and not a single local authority had more than 28% or more in favour (see Table 1). Manchester did not receive the central government funds. Reflecting on the TIF experience, Lucy admitted the results had being a disappointment to her. However, she maintained that a congestion charge was the right policy tool as increasing carbon emissions, congestion and the effects on the economy from congestion will not disappear without political intervention. She argued that a congestion charge was an effective way for a locality to bring about wider environmental change. Lucy also reasoned that a referendum was the right way to canvass public opinion and get people involved, comments which echoed Tim McMahon's earlier praise of the large turnout at the TIF vote (53% of eligible voters, which is considerably higher than turnouts at local, national and European elections). Nonetheless, Lucy argued that a decision to go to a referendum should have been taken much earlier in the decision-making process. It was also revealed that the future of public transportation in Manchester is somewhat uncertain following the

funding gap and the hostility towards congestion charging. However, Lucy maintained that any future plans must involve the public in new and innovative ways, and not simply be a technocratic exercise.

Local authority	Votes for TIF proposal	Votes against TIF proposal
Bolton	20,529 (21.1%)	76,910 (78.9%)
Bury	16,563 (20.6%)	64,001 (79.4%)
Manchester	43,593 (27.8%)	113,064 (72.2%)
Oldham	17,571 (20.3%)	68,884 (79.7%)
Rochdale	17,333 (21.9%)	61,686 (78.1%)
Salford	14,603 (15.5%)	79,326 (84.5%)
Stockport	24,090 (18.9%)	103,706 (81.1%)
Tameside	16,323 (19.6%)	83,105 (80.4%)
Trafford	20,445 (19.7%)	83,568 (80.3%)
Wigan	27,810 (26.1%)	78,565 (74.9%)
Total	218,860 (21.2%)	812,815 (78.8%)



Table 1: TIF referendum results in Greater Manchester

Source: *Manchester Evening News* (12 December 2008)

Figure 1: 'Vote Yes' advertisement in East Manchester

Photo taken by Ian R. Cook

**Tim McMahon** spoke about his personal experiences of working in environmental policymaking networks within Manchester. He detailed the creation and role of the Sustainable Neighbourhoods Pool and the Sustainable Neighbourhoods Partnership both of whom he is a member of. Tim explained that although much more needs to be done, these partnerships do begin to allow the public and voluntary groups into the decision-making process – for instance, through allowing both sets of people to scrutinise the Council's policy documents. He reasoned that partnership working is necessary but tensions and conflicts do arise such as the ongoing debates as to whether the Council's commitment to the growth of its airport *and* a low carbon future can be

harmoniously achieved. For the future, he argued, the third sector must play a pivotal role. “It must surely now fall upon the shoulders of the Sustainable Neighbourhoods Pool and the other like-minded third sector organisations in the city to work to this end and for the council to wield its power in enabling us to do so, to give the green light to communities in order to create more sustainable neighbourhoods in Manchester, to develop social cohesion through community projects and to join up the local knowledge to solve the local problems.”

Frustrated with contemporary urban environmental politics, **Erik Swyngedouw** argued that we now live in a post-political, post-democratic society. Central to this is the formation of hegemonic consensus around the need for sustainability and the dressing up of carbon emissions as the pantomime villain. For Erik, not only does this framing let neoliberal capitalism ‘off-the-hook’ but it also forecloses real, active, public debate and dissensus about how socio-natural relations are actually produced, what the real problems are, and who the winners and losers are. Furthermore, it limits people’s abilities to suggest and follow up radical alternatives. He concluded that we need to reclaim “proper democracy and proper democratic public spaces (as spaces for the enunciation of agonistic dispute) as a foundation and condition of possibility for sustainability”.



*Figure 2: Erik Swyngedouw presenting*

### **3. Social justice and the urban environment**

One part of the ‘trinity’ of sustainable development is the issue of social justice. Instead of being an equal partner in the trio, it seems to be ignored, overlooked and, at times, abused. Economic development has taken the overwhelming priority in cities during these neoliberal times when elites are striving to enhance investment, jobs, business confidence and at the moment, of course, stem the ravages of recession. For some, the environment is a resource, commodity or ‘play-thing’ for the rich. Meanwhile,

the poor and minority groups appear to have limited access to environmental ‘goods’ whilst at the same time suffering disproportionately from environmental ‘bads’.

This session sought to understand these urban inequalities and the ways in which they are being challenged. It brought together Gordon Walker from Lancaster University, Judy Ling Wong from the Black Environment Network, and Jim Segers from Citymine(d). **Gordon Walker** considered the nexus of social difference and environmental injustice. To do this he outlined the recent emergence of environmental justice as an academic-activist concept and as a social movement. He argued that environmental justice is not only about fair access to environmental decision-making and information but also about the recognition of the needs and desires of minority groups and a more equal distribution of environmental ‘goods’ and ‘bads’. Gordon reasoned that in order to understand environmental (in)justice we need to grasp four things: (i) the processes and causes of injustice; (ii) concepts of justice; (iii) evidence of inequality; and (iv) the actions and policies to challenge these. In addition we need to understand the relations between them (see Figure 3).

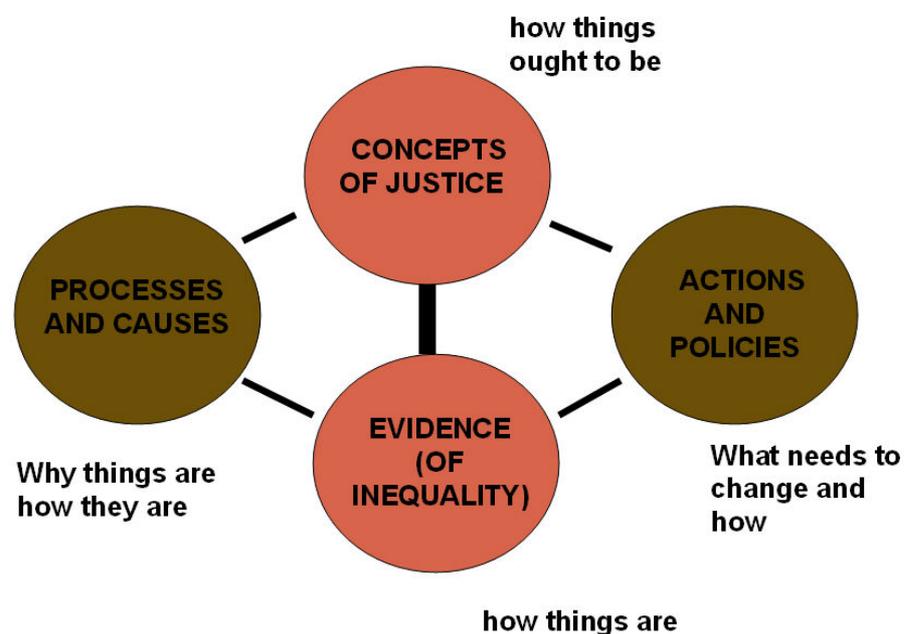


Figure 3: Conceptualising environmental (in)justice

Source: Gordon Walker presentation

Drawing on his recent research, Gordon highlighted the presence and persistence of socio-environmental vulnerability, injustice and inequality in European cities. He showed that the urban poor, the uninsured, the elderly and single-parent families were hardest hit during and after the flooding in Hull during August 2007. This was epitomised by the fact that many of those hit by the flood had no accommodation fit to live in afterwards and, as a result, many had to live in caravans for an extended period of time (see Figure 4). He also showed how it is predominately the poor who live by Integrated Pollution and Prevention Control (IPPC) sites in Scotland and that the death rate of the elderly was disproportionately high during the European heat-wave of August 2003.



Figure 4: Post-flood accommodation in Hull

Source: Gordon Walker presentation

Like Gordon, **Judy Ling Wong** demonstrated how inequality and injustice run through society's relationship with nature. Highlighting the work of the Black Environment Network (BEN), she argued that more equitable and just ways of engaging with nature are possible by exploring in everyday ways urban-rural interactions, thereby breaking down the racialised images and imaginaries of a 'white' rurality and a multicultural urbanity.

**Jim Segers** focused on microneconomics, arguing that the standard set of parameters mobilised around economic issues such as *consumer prices change, growth, unemployment, productivity, house sales*, needs to be replaced by a new set, articulated around *wealth (material prosperity), health and/or happiness*. The building stones for this are micro-initiatives in urban settings that fundamentally redraw and re-imagine what the city is or should be all about. These micro-activities focus on *skills, activities, ideas, desires, occupations, innovations*, the leading metaphors for a new, sustainable, cohesive and inclusive urbanity.

#### 4. The future of urban environmental politics

Academics and NGO officials frequently argue that urban environments and the relationships between society and nature are in need of change. In some senses, this is not surprising. What is surprising, however, is that academics and, often, NGO officials struggle to think up and communicate new and coherent relations. They seem to resemble many of those in the Environment Justice movement who concentrate on criticising existing or proposed policies and injustices and remain somewhat silent or vague when it comes to suggesting what to do instead. Policymakers, some might say, also frequently struggle to think ‘out-of-the-box’ with fresh and imaginative policies. This session, therefore, sought to think through some future possibilities and alternative socio-environmental relations. It brought together Simon Robinson from Manchester Knowledge Capital, Korinna Thielen from ARUP Urban Design and Mark Whitehead from Aberystwyth University to discuss these issues.

**Simon Robinson** reasoned that sustainability through ‘intermediaries’ is the way forward. Despite its problems, sustainability can offer a ‘win-win-win’ opportunity. In order to achieve sustainability, intermediaries need to be enabled and empowered. According to Simon, these bodies can be either project-based or more long-term and systemic. They should be tasked with galvanising different actors and institutions at different places and scales as well as mediating relations and orchestrating the sharing of information and resources between them. Manchester Knowledge Capital’s Manchester Is My Planet (MIMP) carbon reduction programme was used as an example of how sustainability through intermediaries could be achieved.

**Korinna Thielen** examined how urban areas should be designed and redesigned in the ‘ecological age’. She reasoned that urban design principles should be based around resource efficiency, land use diversity, energy efficiency, informational accountability, recycling, a balance with the biosphere, and local resource



*Figure 6: Korinna Thielen presenting*

use. Korinna used the examples of ARUP's work on the Dongtan Eco-City in Shanghai and the Eco-Town in Leicestershire to demonstrate how these principles can be applied in practice.

**Mark Whitehead** closed the conference by considering how contemporary urbanism can be made more socially and environmentally just. He examined a number of alternatives and possibilities from the slowing down of urban life to a 'politics of responsibility' for towns and cities elsewhere (one which self-consciously asks how our actions are directly and indirectly affecting people in places elsewhere). Using the example of the Transition Town's movement – which promotes the idea that goods should be locally produced and consumed in order to circumvent oil dependency and climate change – it was demonstrated that a politics of responsibility have begun to emerge (albeit not unproblematically).

In conclusion, the seminar proved extremely useful in bringing together and exchanging ideas between academics, policy-makers, NGOs and the public. There was a great sense of urgency around the need for urban environmental sustainability and social cohesion to be taken more seriously. The seminar also indicated a number of key lacunae in both our understanding of, and policy directions for, enhancing socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable urban communities. The key points and recommendations raised within the *Nature, Social Cohesion and the City* conference will be incorporated in our Social Polis survey papers and discussed further with key stakeholders at the Social Polis meeting in Vienna.

Ian R. Cook and Erik Swyngedouw, University of Manchester