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# **Sustainable urban development seen by social sciences**

**International Symposium**  
29 and 30 May 2008

## **Call for papers**

Sustainable development is generally defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future*, 1988). This notion – which attempts to link three main pillars (the economy, the environment and social issues) and to renew the way in which public policies are produced – first appeared on the international scene as the new remedy which guaranteed the continuity of our current model of development. Its success can largely be explained by the hazy nature of its definition. In the same way as other terms like “nature” or “environment” (Williams, 1983; Harvey, 1996), the significance of sustainable development varies according to the temporal and spatial contexts, to such an extent that for some it is a true catch-all word, whose success is due above all to its ability to produce an artificial consensus.

During the 1990s, local authorities – and more particularly cities – were identified as relevant levels in the implementation of the principles of sustainable development. Today, the presence of sustainable urban development (SUD) on the political agendas of cities is very strong. SUD has become the main approach in term of urban environmental policies and it has also been integrated in some other areas of public policy such as transport, housing and regeneration. SUD seems omnipresent to such a point that it appears as a "pre-requisite" for local authorities and especially local elected officials.

This diffusion of the theme of sustainability in urban policies has been accompanied by many calls for research from state funded bodies for social sciences in several countries such as France (CNRS, PUCA-Ministry of the Equipment, etc), the United Kingdom (ESRC), Quebec and so on. These calls for research have made it possible to link environmental issues with urban studies (Kaika and Swyngedouw, 2000). They have also contributed to imposing SUD as an analytical category in understanding the changes in urban public policies. Thus, for these funding bodies – and also for some researchers – sustainability has become a pertinent

analyser of such changes, which include the transformation of political agendas to integrate the interests of "future generations", the transformation of the work of local government administrations towards better inter-sector coordination, the transformation of the forms of public debates by increasing the forms of participation and deliberation, etc. Finally one can wonder whether the introduction of the analytical category of "sustainable development" or "sustainability" does not lead researchers to anticipate a change which is just starting to happen in certain fields of public policy and which is non-existent in others.

What we would like to do here is to reverse our focus and to question the public policies, the rhetoric, the strategies and the political mobilisations which assert the principle of sustainability by using categories which have long been established by the social sciences. In other words, rather than starting from the principle that SUD impels change because of its simple rhetorical force, we are seeking to test the efficacy of this change in various spheres of political activity.

From this point of view, we propose to call for contributions relating to the following aspects:

### **1- Sustainable urban development and urban policy making**

Over the last twenty years or so, urban public action has undergone a thorough transformation (Le Galès, 2003). New actors have appeared. New ways of doing things and new temporalities have also emerged. This transformation is generally tied to the shift from local government to urban governance (Andrew and Goldsmith, 1998) and can be explained by the change in the overall environment of cities. Indeed, since the industrial crisis and the erosion of the Keynesiano-Fordist compromise, cities have been confronted with a complex, and above all, uncertain environment. The globalisation of the economy, the structuring of a standard-setting European political space, the restructuring of states, the fragmentation of urban societies, the growing complexity of urban problems, etc., have imposed a climate of uncertainty on urban policy making. However, sustainability is often presented as a process which integrates uncertainties into policy making (Lascoumes, 2005; Pinson, 2006b). Faced with these uncertainties, the stakeholders are invited to build collective action frameworks, to work out a provisional consensus of action. Put differently, they have been invited to create less vertical systems of action, leaving more space for exchange, controversy and experimentation.

What has been the outcome? Has there been a radical transformation of the processes of choice in the sense of widening access to decision-making? Has there been an evolution of public policy instruments marked by the generalization of incremental and deliberative instruments such as contracts, projects, charters, local agendas 21, citizen forums, etc.? Are we concurrently seeing the development of inter-sectoral coordination practices and the adoption of more flexible framework for action within urban administrations?

### **2- Sustainable urban development and political scales**

Many works in various fields of research have identified the question of political rescaling as a relevant notion with which to understand the restructuring of states. This literature often echoes neo-Marxist works on the post-Fordist transition (Harvey, 1989; Amin, 1994) and considers that political rescaling is a strategy used by states to adapt themselves to the

changes in the capital accumulation (Brenner, 2004). Thus, according to these works, the privileging of certain scales (e.g. cities) rather than others should be understood as a means for states to adjust to the increased mobility of capital by instituting a new "spatial fix". Contrary to work in France, a whole Anglophone stream of research has attempted to establish links between these questions of regulation, of rescaling, of post-Fordist transition and the question of SUD (Gibbs, 2002; While and al., 2004; Whitehead, 2003). This conference could provide the opportunity to make up for this lost time by questioning the relationship between cities and states through the prism of SUD. Thus, one could examine what the relationship is between the national and urban SUD policies and the growing preoccupation with the competitiveness of different areas. Do SUD strategies established on a national level favour certain scales (metropolitan scale, neighbourhood scale, etc.) rather than others? Are these same strategies, while trying to improve the quality of life and amenities by developing themes generally associated with the countryside – like nature, the village, the community – being used to promote a new "urban idyll" (Hoskins and Tallon, 2004; Colomb, 2006), with the aim of organizing and encouraging the return of the middle classes to cities (Lees, 2003)? Another series of questions could relate to the nature of the relationship between cities and states. Are the national SD policies taking part in a shift to public policies more focused on procedural aspects (Lascoumes, 1996) by trying to lay down not just the contents but also ways of doing things (Epstein, 2005)? Does this evolution lead to forms of multilevel governance involving a multiplicity of actors from different levels of government?

### **3- Sustainable urban development and democracy**

The model of state-centred democracy seems increasingly called into question. Indeed, the last twenty years have seen the emergence of new procedures for involving citizens in public decision-making (Blondiaux and Sintomer, 2002). Whether it be the introduction of public debates, the installation of participative and deliberative processes, attempts at empowerment of certain segments of the population, etc., the state/society relationship seems to have undergone a thorough transformation (Swyngedouw, 2005). In this process, the local levels and more particularly the cities, play an increasingly important part (Jouve, 2005). They appear to the eyes of the experts as the relevant scale for the implementation of these new democratic structures. Once again, SUD philosophy covers these concerns. By trying to renew democratic practices, to institutionalise citizen participation and to make citizens more responsible, SUD is taking part in this overall movement.

We would like to ask whether SUD is a driving force or whether it just follows the change. Does it allow a revalorisation of the role of controversies likely to enrich the public debate? Has its diffusion been accompanied by the development of a deliberative style of making collective choices around forums which give scope to civil society and dispose of majority decision-making systems? Can one say that SUD has introduced new articulations between representative democracy and participative or deliberative democracy? On the contrary does SUD lead to a de-politicisation of urban public policies?

In a different connection, one can also ask whether the emergence of SUD has brought about an evolution in state/society relations. In the same way as is happening around social policies in Anglo-Saxon countries, does SUD contribute to an individualization of urban policies, aiming at building individuals as "the cause" and thus consequently "the solution" to environmental problems? Can one link the diffusion of SUD with the propagation of the idea of "active citizenship"?

#### **4- Sustainable urban development and the sociology of public policy professions**

The professions of public action have evolved, for some at least, to adapt to the new frameworks of action which have appeared in the last twenty years. Today, officers with a legal profile seem to have been replaced by those with a "political" profile, blurring more and more the clear-cut separation of tasks between design and execution inherited from the Fordist regulation mode. More important still, the occupation of local councillor has been profoundly changed. The role of elected officials seems to have moved from decision-making to coordination (Borraz and John, 2004). The resources at their disposal have also evolved, in particular those concerning legitimisation, which appear to be more and more linked to outputs, that is to say to the implementation of public policies (Borraz and Negrier, 2006; Pinson, 2007). This evolution has also caused upheavals in political temporalities (*Pole Sud*, 2006), which today no longer appear as being determined only by the short-term electoral temporalities.

It is thus important to consider the link between SUD and these changes. Do the themes of sustainability offer new opportunities in terms of political legitimisation? What place does the political discourse of urban leaders give to the mention of SUD? In a more concrete way, does sustainability modify the idea that elected officials have of their role? Does it lead them to conceive the place of participative and deliberative democracy in a more serene way? Is the role of the urban elected officials reconfigured whilst going from the figure of the decision-maker to that of the facilitator of the process of collective action? Lastly, does taking the long-term into account through SUD modify political temporalities?

We also need to understand whether the topic of sustainability has allowed the development of new professional responsibilities in urban administration (municipal, inter-municipal, local authorities, etc.)? If so, what place do these new professions occupy along with the traditional professions of local government? Apart from urban administration, it would be interesting to know if figures of experts are emerging in militant networks and managing to influence the making of urban policies. Is a market of consultancy and/or expertise in SUD growing up around urban administration?

#### **5- Sustainable urban development and organisations of collective action**

The evolution which we have already referred to has also had consequences on collective action and the way in which it is organized. The restructuring of states has had many effects on the role of pressure groups, social movements and also on that of political parties. It seems interesting here to consider the weight of the emergence of SUD on two levels.

The first concerns the appropriation of SUD themes by political parties. How do political parties take over the essential issue of SUD? Do they make it a strong element of their election programmes? How is the theme vested outside election times? The electoral campaigns of 2007 and 2008 in France could be used as a basis for the study of the place which the parties give to these themes. At the same time, we can ask whether SUD has the capacity to transcend existing cleavages and to provide a new type of cleavage which gives structure not only to the partisan offer but, beyond it, to public opinion. Conversely the question of the loss of ideology of the partisan offer around SUD could also be posed.

The second level relates to the attitude of social movements with regard to SUD. The emergence of the ecologist movements in the 1970s, in particular through urban struggles, had had a strong impact on the nature of the social movements. It seemed then that new social movements (Touraine, 1978) marked by an inter-class composition and by post-materialist claims were about to be born. What has happened with the emergence of SUD? Is a specific

sector of social movements in the process of constituting itself around sustainable development and more particularly around SUD, or does the topic remain the prerogative of the environmentalist movements? Has the vogue for SUD within urban government institutions opened up access to decision-making to certain social movements, and conversely has it stopped this access for the traditional environmentalist movements? Is the topic of sustainability inducing a transformation of the scope of collective action in favour of a growing recourse to the supply of expertise to institutions, to the detriment of more radical and less institutionalized instruments of action? Lastly, can we consider the link between the idea of sustainability and the adoption of a self-limited stance (Arato and Cohen, 1992) which seems to affect certain social movements?

## **6- Sustainable urban development and urban policies**

The nature of urban policies has changed dramatically. It would seem that we have gone from sectional policies modelled on the organization of the state, department by department, to much more horizontal and integrated policies aiming at resolving problems in a more holistic way. At the same time, the manner of elaborating and implementing these policies at the urban scale has changed. The era of planning seems well behind us, and today the project seems to be the preferred method of elected officials and officers (Pinson, 2006a). This evolution can apply to SUD. In public speeches, this notion is coupled with many sectional policies. The actors of urban policies multiply the references to sustainable mobility, sustainable planning, sustainable housing, sustainable neighbourhoods or even sustainable cities (Haugton and Hunter, 1994). At the same time, while placing itself against the current of functionalist urbanism (Emelianoff, 2002) and by promoting the method of the project as the central objective (Da Cunha, 2004), SUD explicitly aims at a deeply change in the contents and the action frameworks of urban policies.

What has happened in practice? How does sustainability succeed in modifying the various urban policies? For example, has the increasingly strong rapprochement between urban renewal/urban regeneration and the objectives of SUD helped to modify some practices or to integrate new objectives? Has there been an increase in the importance of environmental issues in urban policies, or rather their dilution in the blur of the concept of SUD? What are the concrete consequences of these new practices? We can ask, for example, up to what point certain central objectives of SUD, trying to preserve the urban environment, (the struggle against urban sprawl, construction in conformity with environmental standards such as the HQE standard), can foster certain processes like the social polarization of cities, the spatial relegation of certain social groups or the gentrification of city centres.

## **7- Sustainable urban development and values**

Recent studies in local economic development insist more and more on the importance of human capital. Some of this work has found a very strong echo among urban decision-makers, as is shown by the success of Richard Florida's essay (2003) and his concept, much debated in the scientific world (Peck, 2005), of a creative class. Few empirical works have taken an interest in these new "social groups", while at the same time they seem to be the subject of close attention on the part of urban decision-makers, to the detriment of other groups like the working class or ethnic minorities. Among the values conveyed by these groups, SD is prominent, so much so that one could think that SD is for these groups what ecology was for the new middle class which emerged in the 1970s (Inglehart, 1977).

It will thus be interesting to examine the reconfigurations of the systems of values and socio-political alliances around SUD. In cities, can we note a transformation of the systems of values (for example, combining acceptance of the established economic order and concern for protection of the environment but also sensitivity to democratization of the political processes) which could synthesize the idea of SUD? Is the diffusion of the themes of sustainability in cities the product of the rise to power of new social classes ("creative class", "Bohemian middle-class", "chic radical") carrying new systems of values and a new political culture?

In the same way, we can wonder, starting from these new systems of values, whether processes of realignment/misalignment of certain social groups are taking place? This question, which is close to the research agenda of Urban Political Ecology (Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003), could make us think about the fact of knowing who benefits from SUD, understood here as one of the possible ways (but not the only way) to define and deal with the "urban environment issue"?

### **Symposium programme :**

Duration : 2 days

Venue : Saint-Etienne (France)

We expect contributions from various field of research (urban planning, geography, political science, sociology, etc.) based on fieldwork but also including a theoretical dimension respecting the above-defined research questions.

Contributions may be written and presented in French or English.

Please send an abstract (less than 500 words) of your proposed paper to Vincent Béal by January 31, 2008.

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