Special Issue: Rescaling Sustainability

Rescaling sustainability? Local opportunities and scalar contradictions

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We need a better world: That's the goal, in fact. At a time when sociopolitical environmental problems seem overwhelming in magnitude and ever increasing in severity, this objective can hardly be overstated. As the urban and local scale have often been postulated as most appropriate site of intervention to respond to sustainability problems, this journal aims to bring into conversation the ways that local practices can contribute to wider sustainability transitions in ways that higher levels of authority cannot, and further, to provide a platform for research that understands the necessity of justice and equality among ourselves as a prerequisite for sustainability (Agyeman and Evans 2012). The papers presented in this Special Issue show that there is still some way to go in achieving these goals, highlighting the scalar opportunities and limitations to current emerging sustainability endeavors.

Along with an upcoming Special Issue of *Regional Studies* edited by Gibbs and Lintz (currently in review), this issue is the result of a series of scholarly venues. The first was a series of workshops organized by the *Regional Studies Association (RSA) Research Network on Ecological Regional Development*[1]*,* where researchers met to explore regional environmental constraints and opportunities, and to identify key research fields and points of orientation for research (Affolderbach, Carr, and Lintz 2013). Second was the series of sessions on urban sustainability at the *Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers (AAG),* in New York (Carr et al. 2012). Together, these venues brought together a strong cohort of scholars and expertise that addressed and analyzed the role of actor constellations, associated patterns of governance, and respective spatial dimensions in sustainability transitions. While a rich diversity of initiatives were brought to light at these conferences – and some of that variety will be exposed here as well – what also came out of these meetings was the recognition that local initiatives must be viewed in association to the wider multi-scalar contexts that enable them. What we present here are a series of papers that, together, offer conceptually anchored critical case studies that expose the limited reach of networks, the spatial unevenness, and social externalities that unfold and diverge at wider scales of analysis.

This collection of papers thus underscores the need to think beyond (Born and Purcell's (2006) "local trap," which refers to the faulty assumption that the local-scale is inherently better and more just than a national-scale or global-scale, and that, for this reason, the local is always more desirable and preferable to larger scales. By getting beyond this trap, the object is not to refute any good intentions, but to refocus the lens away from proclaimed local triumphs and the plethora of good ideas that are surfacing in local

contexts towards the multi-scalar relations that embed, support, and define them. Cross-cutting all of these papers is the notion of place as the site of intervention and locus of change: Ideas emerge and are transformed in spatial arrangements bound to local places. However, getting beyond the "local trap" also means recognizing that the capacity to produce local places is dependent on the interconnections and wider networks that embed it. Local processes are "contextual: they depend on the actors and agendas that are empowered by the particular social relations" (Born and Purcell 2006, 196). Here, the reader will find a variety of initiatives – be they port redevelopment schemes, solar powered neighborhoods, wind farms, alternative food networks, or entrepreneurs in wood processing or green building – that together add to the catalogue of ideas towards sustainable transitions to be found in local places. However, they also show that problems are encountered precisely at the tensions that bind local places to their multi-scalar relations. The papers in this Special Issue show that it is precisely at this juncture that new sets of struggle surface. In this way, it is unequivocally revealed that leveling the three-legged stool is not simply a local task, just as it was not a sole task for higher domains of rule.

The papers are thus poignant reminders of the challenging balancing act of pessimistic critique through multi-scalar analysis on the one hand and optimistic innovation and progress on the other. Pertinent struggles that can be identified here relate to different and often conflicting meanings, implications and effects of sustainability initiatives at different scales. First are the externalities exposed in the shift of focus from one scale or place to another: That is, what is sustainable at one scale is not sustainable at another. This is plainly seen in the contribution from Freytag, Gössling and Mössner as well as that of Hall and Stern. The City of Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany, is widely hailed as one of the world's greenest cities, and Freytag et al. effortlessly demonstrate how this metanarrative is not only repeatedly endorsed, but also instrumentalized. By looking inside one particular neighborhood, the Solar Settlement (*Solarsiedlung*), they expose a number of contradictions that would suggest an oppositional narrative to the one that incessantly prevails. They show, for example, that the eco-quarters privilege a certain social class of residents: Nuclear families, adults with advanced qualifications, and homeowners are the target groups and the primary beneficiaries. Further, the daily habits of this privileged segment fail to reveal any behavioral changes that would signify any sustainability transition on an individual level. These limitations were additionally underscored, finally, by the spatial arrangement of the neighborhood that is architectonically disconnected and socially secluded from the surrounding neighborhoods. Thus, what is advertised as sustainable at one scale, quickly reveals contradictions at another.

Vancouver has also generated international attention as a city at the forefront of sustainable urban development. On this case example, we gladly present Hall and Stern's paper that unpacks this metanarrative. They examined two urban redevelopment programs which were endorsed by associated real estate developers and port authorities as regionally sustainable. By looking at what they refer to as the physical, administrative, and cognitive spaces of each case, they expose how these supposed local sustainability transitions are interlinked to, and dependent on, wider and less sustainable transformations – namely, the construction of carbon-heavy road transportation networks. Within a narrow frame, initiatives are marketed as sustainable, but less sustainable developments are merely shifted to the periphery and out of view.

These tensions around different spatial expressions of sustainability initiatives are also evident in political struggles over the value of sustainability projects. Providing still another angle, Otto and Leibenath reveal some of the surprising political constellations that transpired recently in the small town of Wolfhagen, Germany, over the construction of a windmill. In Germany, the Green Party has historically been the political party that endorses investments in renewable energy sources. Yet, Otto and Leibenath observed

polar opposite political coalitions at the municipal scale in Wolfhagen: The windmill project was supported, namely, by a coalition of the social democratic party (SPD), the Christian Democratic Union party (CDU), the liberal party (FDP) and the municipal energy concern, while the Greens, environmental groups and pensioners opposed the project. Their study is thus telling, with respect to the interface of politics, implementation, and technological innovation: A technological solution is never a ready-made solution that fits all. Rather, innovative projects ignite orbits of political discourse and constellations of power that compete against each other for hegemony. Not least of the victims of such inevitable struggles are the environmental problems themselves where measures have to choose between different and possible conflicting objectives (e.g. protection of local species versus reduction of carbon emissions for global climate).

Another scalar struggle is seen in the tension between local initiatives and the mainstream. Making a better planet ultimately means invoking change on a broad scale. It means changing current and hegemonic ecologically destructive and socially polarizing processes. Yet this must start somewhere. Ideas have to originate with one or a few bodies, and there must be a process of translating the emerged new practice to anchor it at wider-reaching scales. In this way, the general course can be changed. Yet, this translation from locally rooted sustainable practices to the broader scale and similarly to the implementation of national or international policies and sustainability measures is not unproblematic. Rather, it is a path that treads the fine line – and the struggles and contradictions therein – between alternative niches and mainstream, between counter and accepted practice, between the visionary 'lone (eco)hero' and conventional operations, between real change in the mainstream and expropriation of the alternative by the mainstream. In this Special Issue, ONeill and Gibbs pay particularly close attention to this tension in their studies on the role of green entrepreneurs in the green building sector of the UK. Their research exposes a great diversity of, and inconsistency among, green entrepreneurs. However, they also realized that framework conditions play an integral role in either boosting or diminishing their successes in wider arenas. Consideration of the spatial and political dimensions of these multi-scalar support networks and mediators (such as, for example, policy frameworks or economic structures) permitted a better understanding of the barriers and drivers behind transition processes, and of green entrepreneurs as regime builders, more specifically, as they break into the mainstream markets. Of course, as ONeill and Gibbs show, this is not a mere one-directional tension where the ecopreneurs necessarily desire to break into and dominate the market. On the contrary, sometimes ecopreneurs seek to protect their niches through high-end services and products catered to a selective clientele.

While ONeill and Gibbs examine the transformative power of niche innovators and their potential to set and feed into larger transitions, McIlhenney and Hayter's analysis of the value-added wood industry in Metro Vancouver, Canada, provides a complementary perspective on the ability and willingness of mainstream businesses to adopt green innovations into their existing routines and comply with accepted sustainability standards. McIlhenney and Hayter draw on work on green entrepreneurship and flexible specialization to analyze the relationships between environmental and economic goals measured through participation in certification schemes and reduction of wood waste and pollution streams. The example of the value-added wood industry shows that while small, local firms proved flexible enough and able to adjust to changing market conditions, the support structures, firm and knowledge networks were largely missing. The greening capacity of firms in the sector largely depended on financial and human capital at the firm level inhibiting the adoption of (inter)nationally promoted green technologies and certification programs at the local scale.

Another market sector that involves such tensions is the rapidly growing networks of "alternative" food producers analyzed by Dansero and Puttilli. In Piedmont, Italy, the

growing number of alternative food networks (AFNs), spanning producers involved in direct sales, farmers markets, organic produce, and Slow Food, attest to the heterogeneity of AFNs involving different forms of local and regional supply chains, institutional organization, and actor networks. Rather than operating solely as niche actors, Dansero and Puttilli identify AFNs as agents of change that transform producer-consumer, as well as private-public, actor relationships that can redirect entire territorial systems with respect to the quality of available foods. Yet, the category of 'alternative' is inadequate in understanding the diversity across this group, which include interdependencies between AFNs and conventional agribusinesses. Dansero and Puttilli offer a framework to categorize alternative production and consumption networks which allows evaluating a network's potential for progressive change on wider scales**.**

The contributions to this special issue present a range of present-day struggles in sustainability transitions. They highlight the spatial unevenness and (social) externalities of local sustainability initiatives that unfold and diverge at wider or different scales of analysis. As such, they contribute to, and bring forward, the scholarly debates in at least four important ways. First, they verify, empirically, that sustainability remains a dominant and powerful notion in urban and regional development in Europe and North America, both as an analytical and normative framework. Second, from their research, the reader learns about the multi-scalar (unsustainable and unintended) implications of sustainability endeavors across various sectors and regions, and how the concept of sustainability is easily ousted from its original meaning. This raises questions concerning who gets to define what constitutes a sustainability transition and to what end. In the papers, the reader will see that sustainability is often reduced to generally accepted local and small-scale developments, or worse, the sustainability narrative is engaged to mask processes of further market development that occlude spaces of radical sustainability transition. For this reason, local initiatives need to be set in a multi-scalar context: Viewing a given transformation within one frame can blend out co-dependent opposing processes that are unfolding elsewhere. This is not to negate or overlook the fact – and this is the third point – that agents harboring ideas and means for alternative modes of production and consumption are also abound. Expanding networks can provide support for further securing and anchoring sustainability innovations into new hegemonic forms of daily practice without necessarily the simultaneous unilateral scaling up of political and capital power to higher levels of government or wider reaching jurisdictions of command. This is well illustrated by ONeill and Gibbs, McIlhenney and Hayter and Dansero and Puttilli. Fourth, the contributors provide a number of tools with which to understand sustainability transitions, in further sustainability research. Together, the contributions provide stimulus for future research by emphasizing the need to critically assess sustainability transitions in terms of their multi-scalar opportunities and contradictions.

Notes

1. http://www.regionalstudies.org/networks/network/erd1

References

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