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The Urban Challenge: Researching the Politics of the Urban Environment in the Global South

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Introduction

Cities in the global South are growing rapidly. With this growth comes new challenges of social development for large urban populations, most of whom are living in abject poverty and all of whom are depending on a natural environment which in many cases are struggling to cope with an expanding city. In searching for policies, technologies and institutional arrangements which can deal with these intersecting pressures, policy-makers and academics have often used the concept of ‘sustainable development’ as a guiding principle (Satterthwaite 1997; UN-Habitat 2008; UN-Habitat 2009). But Mitlin and Satterthwaite (1996) are right in noting that while everybody agrees on the principle of sustainability as long as it appears in vague, slogan-like formulations, implementing integrated approaches to sustainable development through concrete urban policies creates problems of defining what sustainability really is. One of the many questions which begs an answer is: *sustainability for whom?*

This paper is an attempt to outline some concepts and discourses which can point towards a research agenda on cities in the global South. While there are many possible points of entry in this complex field, the paper focuses on the environmental transformations generated by urbanisation in developing countries. But how can we integrate an environmental perspective into a social science research agenda – theoretically and in practice? And how can we bring ‘the politics’ into our analysis of urbanisation and sustainability? Social scientists can offer valuable insights by analysing the political expressions of urban transformations. Starting out with a discussion of some recent theoretical debates in the field, the paper goes on to link arguments about political ecology and environmental justice with the sustainable development as the dominant developmental and environmental agenda in international urban policy. It is argued that while this discourse invites researchers to engage in the intersection between environmental and social dynamics in the city, the sustainability agenda must be approach critically. Urbanisation in the developing world is characterised by inequality, poverty and a crisis in employment. This presents policy-makers with an uneven playing field where large groups of people are economically deprived, environmentally vulnerable and politically marginalised. Urban sustainability, therefore, includes difficult questions of participation and representation. It is argued that an operationalisation of the concept of environmental justice can encourage policy-relevant research in the field.

Urban Political Ecology and Environmental Justice: Theoretical underpinnings with political implications

“[T]here is no such thing as an *unsustainable city in general*. Rather, there are a series of urban and environmental processes that negatively affect some social groups while benefiting others.” (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003, my emphasis)

Policies and research on environmental issues in urban areas in the global South often draw on a discourse of sustainability. But the concept of sustainability is a contested one. To be able to establish a coherent approach to researching these issues, attention should be paid to the theoretical underpinnings of assumptions about sustainability. How do we conceptualise the actors and forces to which this sustainability applies? And how do we understand the relationship between these? In this paper, it is suggested that radical approaches to the study of nature and society, and in particular *urban political ecology* (UPE) and *environmental justice* (EJ), represent a fascinating critique of the concept of sustainability. According to Keil (2003), is “a term with strong reverberations in development studies and one based on the experience of agricultural and rural struggles around distribution and social justice in the global South”. Engaging with this critique can pave the way for a more coherent and critical approach to research on struggles over environmental ‘goods’ and ‘bads’ cities in developing countries (or in advanced industrial cities, for that matter).

Nature-society relations from a political ecology perspective

One of the most fundamental concerns of any given attempt to come to grips with sustainability and the urban condition is the relationship between the human – in other words, *the city* – and the nonhuman – which we for now can refer to as *nature*. Much of the work that has been done on sustainability in the realm of national and international developmental policy-making assumes a clear distinction between nature and society. Sustainability, then, is reduced to a question of whether the environmental impact of urban production and consumption destroys the ecological systems which human life ultimately depends on. The sustainability literature does, of course, acknowledge the complex relationship between local pollution and global environmental impacts (and *vice versa*), but many still criticise the discourse for failing to problematise the relationship between the human and the nonhuman.

One of the tenets of political ecology is the assumption that there is no ontological divide between nature and society (Swyngedouw and Cook 2009). Rather, these two realms are intricately interwoven. While newspapers and TV constantly reminds us of how urban life is vulnerable to the forces of nature, what is often downplayed is how *nature is socially produced*. This is true whether it concerns modern forestry, the production of genetically modified foods or in the planning and building of city landscapes. In fact, nowhere is the social construction of nature more evident than in urban environments. Political ecology, an approach based in Marxist political economy, asserts that the production of nature cannot be understood without simultaneously understanding the dynamic of capitalism. Capitalism reinvents (e.g. through genetic modification) and commodifies (e.g. through the market pricing of water) what we think of as natural. An analogy which is often used is that of *metabolism*: biophysical matter is transformed into useable, ownable and tradable commodities for the capitalist system to sustain itself in the similar manner as living organisms grow and reproduce through chemical energy metabolism (Swyngedouw and Cook 2009). Because capitalism is a social, cultural and political – as well as economic – phenomenon, it follows that we must conceptualise of nature as a “sociophysical process infused with political power and cultural meaning” (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003).

Urban Political Ecology and sustainable cities

But what do these fairly abstract musings have to do with our conceptualisation of cities? Well, it has important implications for the relationship between cities and the environment. Rather than measuring the impact of urban life on the physical environment in a linear causal relationship, the political ecology approach requires us to see cultural, political and economic changes as interconnected with urban environmental change (Njeru 2006). Understanding cities, and the way they transform nature in relation to globally integrated economic and political systems, also has profound repercussions for how we define ‘sustainability’. In fact, UPE “relies heavily (albeit often critically) on the advances made (or not) in the LA 21 and related processes of globally framed local sustainability measures” (Keil 2003). While the 1987 UN report by the Brundtland Commission, *Our Common Future*, was groundbreaking in recognising the interlocked nature of local and global environmental problems, Bryant’s seminal work in political ecology (see, for example, Bryant 1997; Bryant and Bailey 1997) claims that the sustainability discourse lacks a structural understanding of the relationship between symptoms of the capitalist system – such as poverty – and environmental degradation. For example, poverty is often cited as the *cause* of

environmental degradation. This failure to grasp the underlying conditions of sustainability continues, according to Bryant, to plague research in the field:

”Whereas previous research operated in the mistaken belief that environmental issues could be dealt with separately from social issues, much contemporary work assumes wrongly that human-environmental interactions can be understood in terms of selected social concerns (ie poverty, population growth) alone, without the need to grasp the nettle of political and economic interests and conflicts that are typically associated with those concerns” (Bryant 1997)

Smith (2000) supports this analysis and argues that there is a gap between the human development issues and environmental concerns in the ‘sustainable cities’ agenda. Moreover, she claims that the concept of sustainability tends to be understood in an aspatial and apolitical fashion. Again, the urban context is a critical one. By examining environmental sustainability as a socio-political phenomenon, it becomes clear that the process of urbanisation – one of the most dramatic societal trends in developing countries in the last thirty years – is not only failing to be sustainable in relation to the natural resources urban metropolises depend on, but also produces gravely unequal power relations *within* cities. These power relations condition the distribution of environmental services, for example, and offer highly unequal protection from environmental hazards (Smith 2000).

The framework extends analyses of urban sustainability amidst rapid population growth and inequality beyond the measurement of human impact on nature. The UPE perspective includes processes of economic restructuring, economic development, foreign corporate investments and state reform as factors relevant to the discussion of urban sustainability. Stemming from critical geographical research, a concept that is often used in the UPE approach is that of *scale*. Focal in this regard is the urban scale, at which many of the issues of environmental sustainability are played out politically. As a commentary to the emphasis of the UN’s Agenda 21 on local plans and solutions to global problems, UPE conceives environmental dynamics as ”embedded within networked or territorial scalar configurations that extend from the local milieu to global relations” (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003). As shown above, inequalities within cities must be addressed when tackling questions of sustainability and the urban scale is an important basis for policies to address these inequalities. Which scale is attributed primacy in a particular environmental conflict can have a huge impact on marginalisation and empowerment. For example, in relation to the organisation and regulation of water systems, different actors might

experience very different outcomes depending on whether water distribution is governed at a local, river-basin, national or transnational scale (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003).

Environmental Justice: Politicising the geographies of 'environmental goods and bads'

While the UPE approach is useful to excavate the underlying processes conditioning urban sustainability, it would benefit from being combined with more actor-oriented, empirically grounded work on environmental dynamics (Swyngedouw and Cook 2009). Remaining in the critical social science tradition, the notion of *environmental justice* (EJ) can offer some useful perspectives. Environmental justice takes a holistic approach to the politics of urban sociophysical environments by looking at the distribution and control over 'environmental goods' and 'environmental bads' in relation to different social groups.

Central to EJ is, not surprisingly, the notion of *justice*. Justice is here understood in a critical sense, borne out of the debates in social sciences in the 1980s and 1990s about the relationship between class and other identities (see, for example, Young 1990; Fraser 1997). The EJ tradition is related to social struggles in North America around the distribution of 'environmental bads' such as hazardous waste facilities, and the way in which these hazards were disproportionately affecting the lives of poor people and people of colour (Swyngedouw and Cook 2009). Through sustained engagement between activists and academic scholars, the EJ tradition has developed a relatively broad understanding of the politics shaping justice and injustice around resources and waste. In relation to a focus on the concentration of 'environmental bads and goods' in relation to marginalised groups, EJ is also emphasising the importance of getting these groups political involved in the processes governing the control over hazards and the access to environmental resources. This entails a fairer and more democratic decision-making process, which only can be achieved if marginalised individuals and groups are allowed the necessary capabilities, in terms of knowledge and skills (Haughton 1999; Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003; Scott and Oelofse 2005). How these intersecting concerns can be operationalised and become more applicable for policy makers will be discussed later in this paper.

An EJ approach to cities in the South can supplement, concretise and critique the UPE framework. While UPE is seen to focus on *how sociospatial environmental inequality is produced*, EJ direct our attention towards *the patterns of sociospatial environmental inequality*. The approach offers some tools and concepts which allow for the mapping of patterns relating to environmental injustices and to explore the agency of groups, actors and forces shaping these patterns. By

simultaneously exposing the ways in which powerful actors benefit disproportionately from environmental degradation and encouraging the grassroots development of alternative planning practices, UPE and EJ invite a more participatory approach to environmental governance.

Research emanating from UPE and EJ

While the theoretical and conceptual ground outlined above can be useful for studies of urban environments across the world, some geographical areas and socioenvironmental processes have thus far attained particular research interest. In Africa, for example, urban political ecology has focused on water provision, distribution systems and the privatisation of water services (e.g. Bond 2000; Derman, Ferguson et al. 2000; McDonald and Pape 2002; Smith and Hanson 2003). The privatisation of water is perhaps the ‘hottest topic’ within this discourse, and has also triggered academic research interest on other continents as well as exciting theoretical debates (Keil 2003; Gandy 2004; Swyngedouw 2004). Studies of environmental justice movements in South Africa are also relevant in this regard, as they bring into the equation the diversity of social actors contesting environmental governance processes. Moreover, the focus on ‘environmental goods and bads’ – and the contradictory nature of resources and hazards for different social actors – are by no means restricted to the issue of water: Njeru’s (2006) study of plastic bags in Nairobi is one of many examples of the broad-ranging applicability of urban political ecology.

An important balance to the focus on processes of capital accumulation (firms and investments) and social struggles (civil society actors) are the studies of governance systems (e.g. governments, state apparatuses and local state institutions) in relation to these politics. According to Swyngedouw and Cook (2009), however, *the study of governance in urban political ecology* is somewhat under-researched. This is surprising, given the fact that the state plays a key role in the distribution of environmental resources, the location and exposure of environmental hazards and in the access of different groups to decision-making forums and processes governing ‘environmental goods and bads’. Moreover, state restructuring and public sector reforms which play out across nation-states in a globalising economy continue to have a fundamental impact on *how the urban political ecology changes*. This is particularly true for metropolitan governance systems in urbanising developing countries, always under great political stress from domestic and international actors such as national governments, international development and financial organisations, as well as other donors and think tanks. States at a range of scale – from local government to supranational bodies – are also key players in the regulation of environmental resources through the establishment and implementation of international environmental

agreements. Tracing the scalar politics of these agreements from the global down to the local (and back up again?) is an interesting research task.

By way of summary, while they do not in themselves constitute a ready-made analytical framework for urban research, UPE and EJ offer a critical and holistic entry point for exploring the social and political aspects of city environments in the global South. Interestingly, EJ has been criticised by key advocates of UPE for speaking to a liberal and distributional perspective on justice rather than the Marxist system critique of UPE (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003). This, however, might represent a benefit rather than a caveat to social science researchers operating in policy-oriented fields; here, notions of redistribution are often based on liberal-democratic and social-democratic interpretations. Given the analytical strength related to governance systems and civil society dynamics in development research, for example, the *governance aspect of urban political ecology* can perhaps represent a stimulating way forward. A key challenge is then to bridge a focus on governance systems with an analysis of economic processes and social struggles which ultimately have a great impact on nature-society relationships in urban landscapes.

Sustainability and urbanisation: Concepts with policy relevance and research potential?

As Burgess *et al.* (1997) argue, cities are where literally all of the environmental transformations come together through natural transformations and capital accumulation in constantly changing social and political spaces. The contradictions generated by urbanisation are particularly intense in developing countries, which have seen their cities rapidly expanding in terms of natural growth and rural-urban migration, but with weak governance systems and low levels of economic development. This has led to higher levels of social inequality and greater socio-environmental vulnerability for its urban dwellers. In 2008, cities in the developing world were responsible for 95 per cent of the world's urban population growth (UN-Habitat 2008). UN-Habitat argues that while poorly planned and managed cities can be a burden on natural resources, compact and well-regulated cities “offer major opportunities to reduce energy demand and to minimize pressures on surrounding land and natural resources” (UN-Habitat 2008).

To take Africa as an example – a continent which is estimated to accommodate an urban population of 1.2 billion by 2050 – rapid urbanisation has occurred amidst economic and political crises. As a social process, urbanisation in Africa has been contradictory: while cities are

important centres for economic growth, they have also become social spaces of increasing inequality and insecurity. In 2008, slum dwelling was the reality for 62.2 per cent of the urban population on the continent (UN-Habitat 2008). These disparities have serious socio-economic, environmental and political repercussions calling for the challenge of sustainable city management to be taken seriously (UN-Habitat/UNEP 2006). In short, urban governance holds a key to whether sustainable development can be achieved. In the remainder of this section, some of the key challenges facing urban development – and, consequently, urban theory – in the global South will be examined through the lens of ‘sustainability’ and ‘urbanisation’.

Sustainability as a policy concept

Since the 1980s, sustainability has been key concept and, indeed, functioned as a focal point in international policy-making and –discourse around urban development issues. But the broad vision of sustainability into actual practice requires a critical examination of the concept of sustainability.

The Brundtland Commission defines sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (UN 1987, see Chapter IV: Conclusion)¹. As mentioned above, the report of the Brundtland Commission was instrumental in highlighting the interdependencies between the natural environment and social development, and between local and global political agency. While the assumptions underpinning the UN report have been discussed and criticised since its release, the sheer importance of this report in terms of setting the scene and the plethora of UN programmes and other international initiatives that has followed from it warrant a continued focus on the sustainability concept in urban research.

The explicit link between sustainability and urban development was institutionalised as UN policy through the establishment of the *Sustainable Cities Programme* (SCP) of UN-Habitat and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), established in the early 1990s. SCP and its sister programme, the *Localizing Agenda 21* (LA21) which focuses on local authorities in secondary towns, emphasise the role of Environmental Planning and Management (EPM) approaches in meeting the challenges of environmental degradation in urban development. These two programmes operate in more than 30 countries. In the policy documents providing the basis of

¹ Can be downloaded at <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-02.htm#I>

this programme, the linkages between natural and human processes are acknowledged (UN-Habitat/UNEP 2001):

“A sustainable city is a city where achievements in social, economic, and physical development are made to last. It has a lasting supply of the environmental resources on which its development depends, using them only at a level of sustainable yield. A sustainable city maintains a lasting security from environmental hazards that have the potential to threaten development achievements, allowing only for acceptable risk.”

In addition to the EPM approach, the UN programmes have gradually started to advocate (in rhetoric, at least) participation and enablement – issues that will be discussed later in this paper – as principles of environmental governance. More specifically, “broad-based stakeholder participatory approaches” (UN-Habitat 2009) and “needs-based approaches, rather than supply-driven” (UN-Habitat/UNEP 2001) are identified as guidelines for SCP and LA21 practices. But while acknowledging urban development as a contested terrain is an important step in this direction, finding ways of accommodating conflict and negotiating uneven power relations between different groups remain a great challenge – not the least in the unequal urban landscapes of the global South. The politics behind this discourse will be discussed in light of the academic literature in the following sections.

Measuring sustainability

One question that arises early on when thinking about sustainable cities is how it is defined, operationalised and made useful as a tool to analyse cities around the world. Satterthwaite (see, for example, Satterthwaite 1997) has made some important contributions in the field challenging the concept and its applications. An important point relates to how the city is demarcated vis-à-vis its surrounding areas. Relevant in this regard is the so-called ‘ecosystem approach’ to urban development, which aims “to determine some environmentally or naturally functional borders or boundaries for the management of certain natural resources” such as land, soil, air and water (ENVIRA unknown). Satterthwaite (1997) also points to the fact that intra-city environmental dynamics must be seen in relation to areas which function as markets or suppliers for the economic processes of the city. Focusing solely on the emissions from local production and consumption fails to appreciate the emissions emanating from the production elsewhere of commodities for consumption in the particular urban area in question. Another argument concerns the difference between urban sustainability measured as emissions per capita or the historic contributions to global emissions particular cities have made.

Satterthwaite's (1997) interventions are particularly important when comparing cities in the North and in the South. Cities in developing countries will have lower energy use per capita, but are increasingly seeing an increase in emissions from heavy industries and manufacturing. This can, in part, be attributed to the relocation of production by global commodity chains from industrialised countries to the global South. The commodities produced in these cities, however, are often made for markets in the North. Measuring sustainability on a city level, therefore, will have absurd implications when taking the interconnected nature of the world economy into account. According to Satterthwaite, urban sustainability both requires an improved environmental quality within city borders and a reduction of the transfer of environmental costs to other people living and working beyond those city borders (Satterthwaite 1997).

When applying the concept of sustainability to particular cases, it is pivotal that researchers and policy-makers acknowledge the variation between metropolitan areas: cities represent distinct economic and political histories, different social and demographic compositions and natural landscapes. City regions also inhabit very dissimilar positions in national and global economic networks. These factors create socio-environmental landscapes, and the potential of local governments and social actors to engage in more sustainable activities will always be *path-dependent* on the factors mentioned above. Universal models for sustainability and one-size-fits-all prescriptions are therefore likely to be deeply problematic in an implementation phase. Finally, Satterthwaite warns us against focusing on the city as a unit for measuring the performance of urban sustainability. Rather, we should focus on consumers, enterprises and governments as proactive agents which take part in different, yet often related, urban processes. These, in turn, can be deemed more or less sustainable.

Urban sustainability: chaotic concept or political opportunity?

There are reasons to concur with Satterthwaite when he states that, despite its intuitive appeal, *urban sustainability is a chaotic concept* which, in practical and political terms, rather refers to a set of intersecting socio-environmental policy areas. He consequently suggests “the need to distinguish between different kinds of environmental problems when making comparisons between cities” (Satterthwaite 1997) – five broad categories are identified:

1. Controlling infectious diseases and health risk vulnerability;
2. Reducing chemical and physical hazards within the home, at the workplace across the urban region;

3. Securing high-quality urban environments for all inhabitants;
4. Minimising the transfer of environmental costs to other people (beyond the city borders);
5. Ensuring progress towards ‘sustainable consumption’ for households, businesses and local government.

While the first three of these easily fit into a metropolitan-level policy agenda, the last two are more problematic as governance issues: both because they transcend the city as an administrative unit and because they are less concretely defined as solvable problems.

But does this attempt at an operationalisation suggest that we should leave the wider debate of urban sustainability behind altogether? I would argue that there are many reasons why sustainability should remain on the agenda of social and environmental research. Firstly, the concept’s intuitive appeal and the way it has been embedded in multilateral policy discourse throughout the last twenty years mean that several important political processes are driven by the language of sustainability. In short, the sustainability discourse makes a real difference at a policy level in different places and at different scales of governance. This means that it is worth studying in its own right as a political phenomenon. It also indicates – on a slightly more pragmatic note – that a lot of funding is attached to this discourse, not only for local governments and businesses, but also for researchers. Secondly, the sustainability concept, for all its flaws, promotes a holistic approach towards understanding and solving social and environmental problems. In particular, this opens a window of opportunity for researchers wanting to engage with environmental research issues from a social, political and economic point of view.

By way of conclusion, while it might be difficult to pinpoint what sustainability is (let alone measure the sustainability of a city), the concept is still worthy of recognition as an important ‘discursive mover’ and ‘legitimiser’ of environmental policies. Researchers, should therefore engage critically with this discourse while, at the same time, unpack the different concepts and aspects relevant to sustainability in urban development and politics. More specifically, for researchers with a particular interest in issues of governance and local politics, the UN-initiated sustainability discourse is a promising point of entry because the different programmes and interventions under this rubric has increasingly emphasised *participation*, *enablement* and *governance reforms* as important requirements for successful sustainability measures. A critical look at these social sustainability aspects in relation to issues such as poverty, inequality, employment and vulnerability will be discussed later in this text.

Urbanisation in the global South: some key issues for research

Before the sustainability concept is dissected in any more detail, it is perhaps timely to turn our attention to another key term in urban research, namely *urbanisation*. While the wide-spread statistical use of this term, e.g. through urbanisation rates (measuring urban population growth and the ratio of urban dwellers in comparison to rural), seems to indicate a fairly straight forward quantitative interpretation of the concept, urbanisation should be understood in a wider sense. After all, cities undergo fundamental transformations which include much more than population growth. Moreover, in line with the UPE approach, population growth, economic growth and other overlapping socio-economic processes also entail a reworking of the natural landscape – and it is in the interplay between processes that we also should understand urbanisation. Therefore, urbanisation should be defined not only as urban population growth, but also refer to the transformation of urban natural landscapes, the decline and growth of economic processes within and between cities, the new forms of governance that evolve in metropolitan areas, forms of social relations and networks developing between urban dwellers, and the political and cultural life emerging in, and shaping, the city. Supporting this view, Drakakis-Smith (1995; 1996; 1997) argues that when studying urbanisation, it should be the *processes* rather than the *entities* that should constitute the focus of research. Furthermore, he states that the debate should be structured around the people living in cities, not the economic structures of the built environment per se. Building on this, the following discussion will be structured around five central processes which shape urbanisation in the South.

The first of these key dimensions is *urban inequality*, and the particular form it takes in urban areas. Using the Gini coefficient as a measure of inequality, it seems clear that urban areas are the most unequal areas (Drakakis-Smith 1996). With high density population, geographical proximity and an agglomeration of wealth and poverty, the experience of inequality in the city is also more intense (and more intensely contested) than elsewhere. Shatkin (2007) identifies three distinct, yet related, manifestations of inequality urban inequality:

- Social inequality (polarisation of social classes)
- Uneven development (social polarisation embedded in the spatial form)
- Political inequality (uneven access to the political processes)

Moreover, he argues that three socio-economic processes underlie the exacerbation of social differentiation in cities in developing countries. Each of these areas is politically contested, and warrants further empirical and theoretical treatment:

- The formation of *public-private partnerships* in urban politics and planning;

- The *spatial implications* of the privatisation of planning; the maximisation of profitability and economic competitiveness of certain spaces;
- The *flexibilisation of labour*.

The latter point is of significance, as it highlights the second issue: *urban employment*. By using the concept of flexibilisation, as Shatkin does, a characteristic dynamic of urbanisation is identified which captures changes occurring both in the industrialised countries and in the developing world. In fact, the de-industrialisation of the urban North is closely related to the re-industrialisation of the urban South and the new geographical patterns of manufacturing activity and service sector activity that follow in this path. For most urban dwellers in the global South the flexibilisation of labour has, according to Shatkin (2007), signalled the coexistence of opportunity and insecurity. It has affected both the corporate and public sector, contributing to a rapidly growing *informal sector*. Drakakis-Smith (1996) emphasises new forms of employment as one of the key dimensions of urbanisation in the developing world. Researching employment in these cities, however, is challenging. For example, there is hardly any open unemployment in a context of poverty. This renders some of the conventional operationalisations of employment and unemployment less useful (Drakakis-Smith 1996). The relationship between urban population growth and job creation is also unclear, particularly in relation to the more formal parts of the urban labour market. Flexibilisation has also caused the fragmentation of workplaces and workforces and the casualisation of employment contracts. Even more than in the deindustrialised urban areas of countries in the developed world, cities in the global South are characterised by low and inefficient presence of organised labour (although there are honourable exceptions). While having been an instrumental factor in granting access to paid work for women in developing countries, the gendered nature of urban employment also signals a new intensity in the exploitation of female, child and casual labour:

“[T]he exploitation of many workers in both large- and small-scale enterprises has worsened as a result of increased competition and deregulation, even in the more successful Asian economies” (Drakakis-Smith 1996)

Closely linked to the limited access and low quality of employment is the problem of *urban poverty*. While data on urban poverty are contrasting, some estimates suggest that it is on the rise in the global South (Drakakis-Smith 1996). As with inequality, poverty is also of a special intensity in urban areas, making poor urban dwellers extremely vulnerable. According to Drakakis-Smith (1996), there are several reasons for this. Firstly, poor people in cities are immersed in the cash

economy, and hence dependent on a position in a volatile labour market for even the most basic means of survival. Secondly, structural adjustment in the developing world has hit urban areas particularly hard through reductions in housing subsidies and formal employment opportunities and a lack of protection from price and rate hikes on goods and services. Thirdly, the fragmented nature of the urban community and the urban household decreases the chance of urban dwellers to rely on social networks in times without cash income. Fourthly, female-headed households are more frequent in the city, inducing a gendered dynamic to urban social vulnerability. Fifthly, physical assets are more limited than in rural agricultural areas. And, finally, urban dwellers are more likely to suffer from environmental problems such as exposure to air pollution, contaminated water and flooding. Rakodi (1995) argues that urban households respond to urban poverty either through *changing household composition* (e.g. migration), enforcing *consumption controls* (e.g. by reducing consumption, delaying medical treatment or limiting travels) or through *increasing their assets* (e.g. through introducing more household members into the workforce or sub-letting of rooms or backyards).

Urban migration should certainly constitute a central component of any definition of urbanisation. Firstly, patterns of rural-urban migration are primary shapers of urban development. These patterns vary considerably between different countries and city regions. Drakakis-Smith uses a World Bank categorisation to highlight some of the variation in urbanisation patterns within the developing world, and distinguishes between (i) heavily urbanised countries, (ii) more recently urbanised countries, (iii) primarily rural but rapidly urbanising countries and (iv) large, heavily populated countries with substantial pressures on land. Interestingly, in the first category where more than 75 per cent of the population lives in cities, urban population growth is related to natural increase. It is in the second category, and to a certain degree in the third, where rural-urban migration is the main cause of urban growth. In the fourth category, seasonal migration shapes the urbanisation process (Drakakis-Smith 1995). These different patterns challenge the sustainability of urban population growth in very distinct ways. The relationship between urban size, prosperity and environmental problems, however, is equivocal (Kasarda and Parnell 1993).

But while the quantitative patterns of migrational and natural population growth are important constituents of the urbanisation process, there are other aspects of migration which also should be at the forefront of urban research. The second point worth mentioning in relation to urban migration is how it is structurally related to the other themes presented in this section: poverty, inequality, employment and human rights. For example, the low-entry access to casual

employment has also shaped migration processes between urban and rural areas (Shatkin 2007). Different groups of migrants occupy particular roles in the urban labour market, and are often marginalised in the urban geography – socio-economically, spatially and environmentally; their presence in the urbanising developing world is also of interest because they introduce new cultures, social and economic networks and forms of political mobilisation which challenge governance structures. As Amisi and Ballard (2005) show through their Durban experience, urban migrant cultures raise interesting questions of citizenship, identity and political struggle. This could be a focus of similar research in other urban contexts.

A final aspect of urbanisation in developing countries which merits further research is that of democratisation, as urban areas are key sites for the advancement of *human rights* (Drakakis-Smith 1997). With the points mentioned above in mind, there might even be reasons to argue that certain rights are particularly relevant to urban processes. As Drakakis-Smith (1997) points out, there has been an evolution in the focus on rights-based issues, from the (i) civil and political rights most often associated with the traditional human rights discourse, via demands for (ii) socio-economic rights such as the right to work and education, to the contemporary focus on (iii) women and children's rights and the right to a clean environment. Each of these steps entails a new level of contestation, as they highlight conflicts of interests between different social categories – be it those of race, class or gender, but also to other complex intersections such as nature-society relations or the relationship between intra- and inter-household networks and the public sphere. Moreover, the politics that these rights trigger quite different democratic expressions in different cultural regions, national contexts – even between different urban constituencies.

What seems clear, however, is that the city has become an arena where the politics of rights have been most explicitly and contentiously fought out. Drakakis-Smith (1997) identifies three aspects of urban life which serve to intensify the politics of rights in the city:

1. *Concentration of deprivation*: slum areas bring the numbers and the aggregate effects of deprivation together in geographical proximity, making the scale of the problems more visible to those affected.
2. *Opportunity to associate* in order to protest: Geographical proximity and urban political cultures provides fertile ground for effective organisation and mobilisation around common grievances.

3. The *proximity of the perceived targets* for such protestations: While often marginalised in terms of the intra-city geography, urban dwellers are still much closer to government offices, large employers and other echelons of power.

The way in which metropolitan governance structures decide to approach these claims and mobilisations has a great impact on whether the principles of enablement and participation, which will be discussed below, will be realised. Facing rapid population growth and economic transformation, many local governments find the challenge of rights in urban development politically challenging. Choosing to disregard or suppress this expression of urbanisation, however, is seldom successful in the long run – which timely introduces the notion of ‘political sustainability’ to this conceptual discussion (see, for example, Patashnik 2003).

Neoliberal discourse and urban sustainability

The importance of the points above notwithstanding, the social process which receives the overwhelming attention of urban researchers is economic growth. Cities are thought of not only as containers of economic activity, but also as engines of growth for states and in the global economy. By attracting capital investments and facilitating capital accumulation, cities can expand their resource base and be able to engage in environmentally sustainable processes – in the industrial and service sectors as well as on a household level. According to Haughton (1999), a central tenet of the Brundtland Commission’s report was the thesis that economic growth was necessary for sustainable development. This assumption has been subject to much debate, but what is clear is that this approach was very much in line with the ideological climate of the late 1980s. The link between growth and sustainability remains largely unchallenged at a policy level, and is closely related to general neoliberal perspectives on socio-economic development which has been dominant in multilateral financial institutions and international development agencies throughout the last decades. This has had a deep-seated impact on urban environmental policies. As argued by Burgess *et al.* (1997), while the 1990s brought an understanding of the very real threats urbanisation posed to natural environments, the policy solutions were very much based on neoliberal premises. Hence the solutions to environmental problems were market-oriented; state withdrawal was promoted and inefficient public sector monopolies were located as bottlenecks for sustainable urban development. As a consequence, contracting out and privatisation were seen as proper responses and market demand and full cost recovery were made basic premises for any service delivery investment.

Many of these assumptions were challenged by evidence that efficiencies in the market did not necessarily translate to sustainability in a wider, socio-environmental sense. According to Burgess *et al.* (1997), trade-offs between universal coverage versus upgrading for paying customers, for example, had implications for how basic environmental services such as water and waste treatment were distributed to the urban population. Also, research found evidence that the result of this market-led reforms often were that poor people ended up paying more for their water while consuming less (e.g. Jaglin 2004). Critics argue that neoliberal environmental policy goals keep failing to be achieved in the global South partly due to the adjustment regimes which, ironically, is a result of a neoliberal approach to state restructuring. Another criticism often raised was the ‘managerialist’, top-down approach that neoliberal governance took in relation to urban dwellers. While a liberal democracy opens for participation in the formal political process through the election ballot, the decision-making powers over environmental policies largely remained with the political elite, while the implementation was delegated to technical experts, such as urban planners.

Against this backdrop, the dominant sustainability discourse went through a series of slight revisions throughout the 1990s and 2000s, described by Burgess *et al.* (1997) as a move from a hardware to a software approach; a more sophisticated understanding of the role of the state and the shortcomings of the unregulated market became evident in development policy, so also in environmental governance. For example, the LA21 agenda emphasises democratisation, decentralisation and increased participation from civil society and NGOs as ways of consolidating a less interventionist state with a participatory approach to planning. But while this reorientation might seem promising, critics of neoliberal development strategies have argued that the decentralisation programmes in developing countries have had contradictory outcomes. While executive powers often have been transferred to a municipal (or metropolitan) level, regulatory and fiscal powers have often remained with the central tier of government:

“Under these circumstances decentralization measures can be seen as a means of transferring responsibilities for the effects of national austerity policies onto local government without providing the resources to deal with them.” (Burgess, Carmona *et al.* 1997)

This is a familiar argument, which often has been linked to the claim that crisis tendencies of the nation-state – of trying to maintain political legitimacy while implementing harsh neoliberal policy reforms – have forced national governments to displace these crises onto local government structures, a so-called ‘local state crisis displacement’ (e.g. Jones 1998; Lier 2009). Interesting in

this regard would be to extend this thinking onto issues of climate change and environmental degradation: facing the increasing demands of emission reductions as stated in international agreements, while trying to attract foreign investments which could potentially contribute to a further degradation of the natural environment, national governments in the global South might be tempted to use the LA21 agenda to displace this political and environmental crisis to the scale of local government. Paradoxically, these mandates often lack the required funds and the appropriate regulatory authority to effectively deal with these problems.

The contested 'world city' discourse

One of the most important policy themes in neoliberal urban management is that of the entrepreneurial city; which suggests that administrative and financial resources should be spent in such a way that the metropolitan area will be able to attract domestic and international flows of investment capital. This investment will, in turn, provide the stimulus for economic growth through an expansion of private sector activities. To attract investment, city administrations are encouraged to redevelop certain areas for business and tourism purposes, while reducing its spending on operational expenditure such as social services. Using the rhetoric of the 'world city' is therefore common, and the comparison between important financial centres and tourist destinations such as London, Tokyo and New York are often made. This reorientation has been instrumental in legitimising the introduction of cost recovery in metropolitan service delivery, which has been intensely contested by urban social movements.

An interesting form of political mobilisation against the 'world city' discourse is the campaign by StreetNet under the banner 'World Class Cities for All' (StreetNet 2009). This campaign – initially a South African campaign against the prioritisation of national and local government spending in the run-up to for the FIFA World Cup in 2010 – has become an international network of workers in the informal economy to “challenge the traditional elitist approach to building “World Class Cities” in preparation” and to “create a new, more inclusive concept of “World Class Cities for All” with the participation of street vendors and other groups of the (urban) poor” (StreetNet 2009).

Another critic often directed at 'world city' campaigns is their creation of exclusionary spaces, such as business improvement districts, gated communities and other privatised public spaces. This physical cementation of socio-economic boundaries is all the more evident in cities in the global South, where inequalities are the most extreme. This debate should also be linked to the

discussion above about disproportionate exposure to ‘environmental bads’ between different social groups: while business improvement districts downtown are often impeccably clean and litter-free, slum dwellers are barred from these spaces while their own residential areas are exposed to many of the environmental hazards generated by the ‘world city’. This observation is in line with Brenner’s (2004) well-known argument that neoliberalism has created more *customised state spaces*. This is most glaringly evident in cities. Customisation does not only refer to flagship developments and exclusionary spaces in the city centre, it has also come to characterise urban managers’ approach to poverty. Often, rather than universal approaches to upgrading, certain slums are targeted for redevelopment.

In addition to being accused of *polarising the social landscape within the city borders*, another fundamental criticism of the neoliberal urban growth strategy is that it creates a *polarised context between cities*, as urban administrations engage in inter-city competition for a limited amount of foreign investment. In this context, there will be as many losers as winners, and the only actors who can be certain of benefiting from these schemes are multinational companies who are offered tax breaks, subsidies and privileged access to urban land. Robinson (2009) argues that the ‘world city’ approach has led city administrations to prioritise ‘globalising’ aspects of economic life, service sector activities, which has received resources at the expense of local redistributive policies. Shatkin (2007) agrees with this analysis and argues that researchers have tended to bolster this bias by focusing on ‘stylish sectors’ in world cities. Moreover, the global or world city model can be criticised for being ethnocentric, presupposing a trajectory for all cities similar to those of New York, Tokyo and London. In addition, it reveals a rather ahistorical understanding of urban development, upholding the global city as an ‘end-state’. He asks whether the *global city* is a useful concept at all, as it remains a normative ideal rather than an accurate analysis. Most cities are *globalising*, however, constantly changing their internal dynamics and the relationships they forge with other cities and national governments. Accounting for local agency is particularly important, argues Shatkin (2007), and lists three perspectives which can help research generate better analysis of the particular challenges facing developing country cities:

1. explicitly emphasising the diversity of cities’ experience with globalisation
2. examine the inherently negotiated impacts of global impacts on local outcomes
3. a focus on actor-centred perspectives in urban analysis

What tends to be forgotten in neoliberal discourse is that the increased powers of local government that has followed the widespread trend of decentralisation has given new weight to

the demands of the local electorate. Urban managers are at the same time both drawn to compete while they are forced to find ways of addressing diverse economies and unequal societies. These pressures can be found in all cities and they shape the politics of socio-environmental planning. As a counterpoint to the neoliberal urban management rhetoric, Robinson (2009) rather suggests that all cities – be it a global financial centre or a secondary city in a developing country – should be regarded as ‘ordinary’. By doing so, urban managers and researchers alike can start focusing on the breadth of social issues which form the basis of urban planning, and to see this in relation to each other rather than measuring them against a vague and highly problematic ideal of the ‘world city status’.

“For urban theory to remain relevant to ordinary cities [...] much more focus needs to be given addressing the complex interrelations amongst the diverse political constituencies, economic sectors, and social groups which together determine, and have claims on, the future of the city.” (Robinson 2009)

Robinson also observes a shift in the scale at which urban issues are being framed. The urban scale is immensely complex, woven in a mesh of scalar arrangements between the global, national and sublocal. It is important not to lose sight of any of these as constitutive of the political opportunities and limitations placed on city managers and urban planners. The *scale of the city* has been underplayed in urban theory, argues Robinson (2009), in favour of a focus on inter-urban competition and networks. Urban policy makers and international donors, however, have become more rather than less focused on the city scale. This offers a promising way out of a narrow focus on sublocal development projects, and invites for more inclusive, redistributive visions of urban development (Robinson 2009).

Governance, enablement and participation: Challenging the ‘stakeholder discourse’

As mentioned above, the sustainability discourse employs a rhetoric of participation and enablement which potentially can bridge the principles of environmental justice with more practically-oriented research on urban governance and participatory planning. In the sustainability literature, however, this aspect is mainly visible through the discourse of ‘stakeholders’. The following quote from a UN Sustainable Cities Programme leaflet on an Egyptian urban planning project exemplifies this approach:

“Through a participatory process, local stakeholders will prepare a strategic urban plan with priority actions to improve housing conditions, urban services and local economy.

The strategic urban plan will provide a road map for developing the city for the next two decades.” (UN-Habitat/UNEP 2007)

Central to the idea of stakeholder participation is the assumption that by establishing meeting spaces where different interest groups in the city are represented and allowed to voice their demands, urban planners and administrators will be allowed to integrate these demands into the formal urban development process.

Governance is a key word here, not only as a descriptive term which captures the neoliberal reconfiguration of state-market relations, but also as an analytical approach which better include the networked relations between the planning bodies and political authorities of the state with the range of actors and processes interfering with these (Oelofse, Robbins et al. 2007, my emphases):

“A governance perspective looks beyond the formal structure of ‘government through representative democracy in the public sector’, to the wider picture of decision-making in the common interest (Ravetz 2000:252). It is a perspective where the governing horizon is both raised and lowered: it is significantly raised or enhanced when it comes to *which actors, interests and concerns that are involved*, but considerably lowered concerning the steering ambitions and belief in directly public regulation (Nenseth 2005). The governance perspective is neither a normative or causal theory, but rather a theoretical framework emphasising the interactive character of new public policy. Through the promotion of private and local power (privatisation and decentralisation), and the new space for individuals and voluntary organisations, *new actors have entered the scene and old actors have had to redefine their stake* within urban planning.”

On the surface of it, the increased emphasis on participation which has taken place in urban planning since the 1980s seems like a welcome development. Finally, argues Burgess *et al.* (Burgess, Carmona et al. 1997), are people regarded as subjects, rather than objects, of planning. Still, the approach has been criticised by many observers. Central to the critique is the accusation that the way stakeholders are incorporated into a predominantly neoliberal urban development agenda, serve to gloss over the inherently political nature of participation (Burgess, Carmona et al. 1997; Scott and Oelofse 2005; Patel 2006; Robinson 2009). Burgess *et al.* (1997), for example, argues that “[t]he neoliberal assertion that enablement serves the interests of all participants – consumers, producers, financiers, central and local governments – can be challenged”. More specifically, the harmony-oriented understanding of stakeholders fails to grasp the power geometry between the participating social actors:

Urban development involves conflicts of interest between different activities and social, economic and political groups that are expressed in phenomena such as expulsion, gentrification, involuntary displacement, landlord/tenant conflicts, unequal provision of services and infrastructure and so on.” (Burgess, Carmona et al. 1997)

This quote rather employs a conflict-oriented conception of participation. Arguably, this shift can even be observed in the dominant rhetoric on sustainability. The UN approach has thus started to incorporate the criticism by observers and NGOs that much of urban governance has been implemented ‘from above’ in a technocratic fashion (UN-Habitat/UNEP 2001):

“Approaches which acknowledge the existence of differences of interest are more successful, whereas attempts to avoid conflict, for example through a forced consensus or a so-called neutral technical solution, are generally less successful in the long run.”

By problematising participation as promoted through the ‘stakeholder discourse’, and seeing these practices as interlocked with the processes of exploitation and marginalisation in the metropolitan political economy, the insights from the introductory discussions can be brought back into the analysis. Participatory governance, then, becomes something that cannot be practised in isolation from already existing processes of capital accumulation, labour market dynamics and state regulation. A somewhat more pragmatic commentary is provided by Scott and Oelofse (2005). They argue that formal processes must always be assessed against three main dimensions to determine its real participatory content. These are (i) *franchise* (i.e. how many are included?), (ii) *scope* (i.e. which issues are brought to the table?) and (iii) *authenticity* (i.e. what is the actual influence of participants?).

A similar critique can be directed at the rhetoric of ‘enablement’ in the stakeholder discourse. According to Burgess *et al.* (1997), community enablement in a neoliberal urban development model has often been incorporated as a supplement to market enablement and political enablement – referring to the concomitant processes of state deregulation and decentralisation, respectively. But often, community enablement here has served as a vehicle for labour flexibilisation through so-called community campaigns, self-help labour and local entrepreneurship which has supplied metropolitan government and the private sector with access to cheap labour (see also Shatkin 2007). A key question in this regard, is whether “community enablement policies reflect or transcend the conflicts of interest involved in urban growth and development” (Burgess, Carmona et al. 1997).

While LA21 and SCP offer windows of opportunity for issues of empowerment and critical analysis, it is adamant that the focus of research transcend a narrow focus on the local mobilisation of technical and financial resources (UN-Habitat/UNEP 2000). The classless and raceless language of ‘stakeholders’ and the notion of ‘bringing groups together’ can ultimately end up performing the function of legitimising programmes and policies without offering marginalised groups an effective say in decision-making. Therefore, if researchers are to engage with the stakeholder discourse as advanced by the dominant programmes on sustainability, this engagement should include a critical examination of the power structures behind tools such as stakeholder analyses.

Operationalising environmental justice

A growing literature in social sciences provide some leads on how to bridge the insights flowing from the Urban Political Ecology and Environmental Justice literature with ongoing policy discourses and case studies of their implementation in particular cities. What all these contributions have in common is that sustainable policies are only sustainable if they are anchored in local democratic processes. They also reflect another premise of UPE, namely that environmental issues are inherently social and political issues. As Oelofse *et al.* (2007), while “the prism of sustainability” holds the promise of bringing together the ecological, the economic and the social, its actual impact rests on including a fourth aspect, namely the institutional. The institutional aspect allows research and planning practice to include the politics of environmental governance. But even if political and participatory mechanisms are built into an institutional framework, there is an important distinction to be made between *formal* and *substantive participation*. The exact tools and institutions which contribute to making environmental governance, therefore, are more difficult to pinpoint and should be subject to empirical scrutiny. Nevertheless, some useful points can be taken from these readings.

There are interesting attempts in the academic literature to *operationalise environmental justice*. While some of the fundamentals of this approach were outlined above, it still begs the question: How can these ideas become practically useful in urban policy-making? Finding ways of breaking up this concept, and operationalising its components into dimensions which can be assessed and concretised would therefore be a purposeful exercise. Walker and Bulkeley (2006) suggest that environmental justice has to be measured against three main dimensions, which have already been mention in this text: inequality, sustainability and multiplicity/diversity. With regards to *inequality*, the authors warn of an uncritical application of inequality in relation to ‘environmental

bad? Are policies necessarily just if they ensure an even sharing of environmental burdens, for example? Such a stance could have quite perverse implications, particularly since sources of emissions or environmental hazards often are fixed in space. Rather than aiming to enforce equality, argues Walker and Bulkeley (2006), attention has to be paid to the processes of policy-making. Secondly, environmental justice has to be seen as an integrated part of urban *sustainability*. Although notions of equity and justice have been a part of discourse from the start, they have been criticised for playing a side role in policy-making. This includes balancing policies aimed to redress current inequalities with the ability of these programmes to promote the provision of basic needs. The fundamental question, then, is: sustainable development for whom, and at whose expense? Thirdly, an operationalised modality of environmental justice is required to accommodate the *multiplicity* and *diversity* that is bound to emerge in a political process around environmental governance. This point is a potential mine field, particularly because allowing for different concepts of environmental justice to co-exist can lead to a relativist stance, rendering any form of decision-making or course of action virtually impossible. Still, the authors warn against suppressing potential diversity. Conceptualisations of environmental justice have evolved historically, and will continue to do so. Furthermore, there will always be local contingencies and contradictions in the cultural embeddedness of these concepts – and liberal democratic institutions and formal opportunities for activism often tend to prioritise certain interpretations and forms of expression over others (Walker and Bulkeley 2006).

Scott and Oelofse (2005) offers a useful differentiation of the stakeholder concept by distinguishing between *primary* and *secondary stakeholders* in urban planning: the former group comprises people living in immediate vicinity of the resources or hazards in question, whereas the latter group are people and organisations who indirectly have a stake in the urban environment through their business or other social or economic interests. The authors draw attention to what they label ‘invisible stakeholders’, which often are primary stakeholders whose livelihoods are jeopardised by the planning process, but which tend to lack a voice in the planning and implementation process. While formal models for environmental assessment in urban planning has indeed become more democratic, i.e. through including new groups of stakeholders Scott and Oelofse (2005) maintain that *in practice*, these groups are often limited and invisible; their participation functions as a way of legitimising the planning practice rather than shaping it.

Another operationalisation which has been undertaken, with slightly different outcomes by different authors, is typologising the different forms of socio-environmental justice. This might,

at first sight, seem like a lofty intellectual exercise but might in fact offer some very useful input on a policy-making level. By reviewing different authors' attempts to arrive at a functional typology (e.g. Haughton 1999; Scott and Oelofse 2005; Swyngedouw and Cook 2009), a relatively sophisticated and politicised understanding of environmental justice can be developed through the following multi-part definition:

- *Distributional justice*: Focusing on spatial distribution of 'environmental goods' and the concentration of 'environmental bads'; e.g. are marginalised groups disproportionately harmed, and are privileged groups prioritised?
- *Procedural justice*: Emphasising the political involvement of disadvantaged groups in controlling the concentration of hazard and the access to environmental resources; entailing a fairer and more democratic decision-making process. Procedural justice requires participants to be accountable to both (i) their own constituency and (ii) to the formal process in which function as representatives.
- *Recognitional justice*: Relating to the lack of recognition by governance systems that particular groups are in fact suffering from injustices relating to the previous two (cf. 'invisible stakeholders'). For any governance process to achieve recognitional justice, individuals' constitutional rights as citizens must be recognised, and a commitment must be made to integrate local and scientific knowledge.
- *The justice of capabilities*: Focusing on the reestablishment of the capabilities necessary for healthy communities to engage politically and procedurally with the previous three forms of justice. Scott and Oelofse (2005) argue that an environmental education and information sharing process must be an integrated part of planning processes to achieve this ideal.
- *Inter-generational justice*: As opposed to the four points above, which can be interpreted in an intra-generational perspective, this point explicitly directs the focus on whether the consumption and behaviour of contemporary urban dwellers undermine the resource base of future urban dwellers.
- *Geographical justice*: In contrast to the intra-city geographical scope of distributional justice, geographical justice here refers to the globally interlinked nature of production, consumption and emissions in a particular area and the environmental impacts of these activities on people living beyond the boundaries of the city. Do environmental solutions at a local level indirectly lead to environmental hazards or environmentally degrading behaviour elsewhere?

A conscious and active use of this perspective paves the way for a planning and governance practices which integrate the complexity of environmental justice into very practical, on-the-ground processes. A strictly hierarchical and instrumental notion of the planning and policy process has for long underestimated the multitude of actors and the variety of actor positions that would be involved in any such process (Wagner 1994:133). Scott and Oelofse (2005) supports this judgment, as they describe the orthodox environmental planning practices as technocentric and prescriptive, following a utilitarian logic.

Related to this is the *role of the practitioner*, which constitute the focus of Patel's (2006) contribution to this discussion. Much more than merely implementing socio-environmental change, the actors involved in sustainable development engages in the process of debating normative values and, ultimately, guiding public policy. Patel argues that it is at this level where environmental justice is effectively translated into practice, and it is here where sustainability and justice are being brought together and their compatibility is put to the test. When practitioners are caught in an orthodox interpretation of planning, assessment and programme thinking, all social, political and environmental contexts are often rendered 'outside the brief'. Moreover, Patel (2006) states that the assumption that communities are homogeneous is widespread (recognition justice) and biophysical processes are prioritised. But, as she timely points out, environmental planning practices cannot be done in isolation from the social contestation of the urban landscapes at the focus of the planning exercise. While practitioners often perceive themselves as objective facilitators, Patel shows – in both empirical and theoretical terms – that they are always value-laden, always with limited knowledge, always with political agendas, and never neutral. In fact, the prioritisation of technocratic tools in planning in itself indicates a particular set of values (Patel 2006). Highlighting the political nature of these practices is therefore important. Building on Patel's argument, the above-mentioned operationalisations of environmental justice can be useful guides to planning and assessment practices.

In light of this discussion, we can establish that the concept of environmental justice might represent a promising commentary to the sustainability discourse. When this concept is operationalised, it can also have a practical impact on planning practice and on the institutional aspects of sustainability programmes. However, this requires a fundamental rethink of the political dimension of environmental governance, from a discursive and global level and down to the praxis and attitudes of practitioners. Researchers might play a useful role in bridging these levels of abstraction. One way of doing so, is through developing indicators of sustainability

which formalise and institutionalise an integration of political and participatory mechanisms in environmental governance and planning (Oelofse, Robbins et al. 2007):

“Indicators are used to identify if development is moving in a more or less sustainable (or environmentally just) direction. Indicators are based on scientific knowledge and they describe a current state, systematically, in time and space. However, “the facts do not speak for themselves” - they need to be interpreted and transformed into premises for decisions and policy action. Conceptually, one may distinguish between different ways in which knowledge is utilised in policy making: instrumental as data, i.e. factual statements that directly guide action or interactively as ideas or argument to throw light on an issue or a problem, and to express new ways of framing or advocating the issue (Weiss 1991; Wittrock and Wagner 1992).” (Oelofse, Robbins et al. 2007)

Developing a set of indicators will always carry risks. With regards to the focus of this paper, an obvious pitfall lies in the process of quantifying very complex political and social issues. By doing so, many of the complex relationships highlighted above can be lost out of sight. An issue for pragmatic consideration, therefore, is whether the intuitive appeal of indicators as tools with an almost seductive quantitative and graphical clarity can legitimise losing out some of the nuances that can be captured by more qualitative approaches.

Conclusion

Environmental and social aspects of urbanisation in the global South must be understood and analysed with a particular sensitivity given to the political nature of these issues. Social science researchers have an important role to play in providing these analyses, given that they acquire the appropriate methodological tools. Critical approaches such as urban political ecology (UPE) and environmental justice (EJ) can offer theoretical frameworks which explain the integration of social and natural processes in an urban environment while maintaining a concern for social justice as a principle for motivating and legitimising the research practice. In a field often dominated by natural sciences and the technocratic approach often found in urban planning, the perspectives that social scientists can bring to the discussion should be more vocal. The potential for social science-based urban research is underexploited. By being more actively involved in the sustainability agenda, social a much more sophisticated understanding of the dynamic between the human and the nonhuman world than what is epitomised by environmental assessment exercises, for example. It was argued that the sustainability discourse, and its conceptual development since the 1987 report of the Brundtland Commission, invites for a more holistic

understanding of these relationships. Still a *critical* approach is necessary. Particularly, the link between economic growth and socio-environmental sustainability needs to be problematised further: what kind of economic growth is the sustainability calling for? Some processes which are unfolding in cities in the South might be of particular importance: the commodification of basic services, the flexibilisation of labour and the reorientation of public funds by metropolitan governments to attract external investments. Each of these certainly plays an important role in shaping socio-environmental practices in the city. Moreover, they are linked to some of the key dimensions of urbanisation discussed above: inequality, employment, poverty, migration and human rights. By drawing on the UPE and EJ approaches, creative research proposals could be drafted which link these processes to issues of environmental sustainability.

The introduction also raised the question of how we could integrate an environmental perspective into our research agenda – theoretically and in practice? While the previous paragraph goes some way in suggesting how this can be done in theory, an equally challenging task is to find actual research projects which offer themselves to this agenda. As noted, governance issues are under-researched from a political ecology point of view. Even if aligning research projects to the emerging UPE discourse might not be preferable to many social science researchers (or their clients), UPE effectively highlights the *political nature of environmental research issues*. Moreover, the EJ approach is perhaps more applicable to research purposes, as it identifies main dimensions along which political struggles over environmental resources and the exposure to environmental hazards are played out. This also provides an answer to the last question posed introductorily: how we can bring ‘the politics’ into this kind of research. Whether it is through developing indicators, assessing stakeholder analyses, researching the effects of water privatisation on poor communities or studying metropolitan governance processes in light of local or global environmental discourses – it can be argued that all environmental processes are inherently political processes. By drawing on the arguments put forward in this paper, the task of establishing the links between these politics and the sustainability agenda – as defined by national and international institutions which fund research – can hopefully be made easier.

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