



Analysis

Challenges of responding to sustainability with implications for affordable housing

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability is one of the most contested ideologies of our time because everyone acknowledges that it must occur but no one can agree on what needs to change in response. This is unsurprising, because objecting to the goal of sustainability is like objecting to other inherently good goals like peace or freedom. Responses to sustainability exist on a long continuum, with some interpreting sustainability to mean conservation-at-all-costs and reduced economic growth, while others suggest that the market will ensure sustainable outcomes eventually result. Further, sustainability can be easily manipulated to justify predetermined outcomes. There are, indeed, a multitude of conceptual and pragmatic challenges to operating on sustainability, particularly when the scale shifts from a global goal to local action. Using the application of sustainability to affordable housing in Australia as a case study, this article argues that rather than limiting sustainable outcomes, the existence of the sustainability debate which focuses on the many challenges is a positive indicator that sustainability may be attainable.

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1. Introduction

Sustainable development means that the needs of the present generation are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). This definition is widely agreed upon, although understood to mean many different things. Some interpret the Brundtland definition to mean conservation-at-all-cost, whereby consumption is limited through reduced economic growth. Other scholars argue that sustainable development will occur naturally, as market prices for non-renewable resources increase, thus providing the impetus for the development of sensible alternatives (Brandon and Lombardi, 2005). At the heart of the debate, there exists a tension between adherence to core principles and an openness to reinterpretation and adaptation (Kates et al., 2005).

Sustainable development fosters discourse about intergenerational equality. Leaving the environment at least in the same position, if not a better position for future generations has been understood by some as a moral obligation (Brandon and Lombardi, 2005). Indeed, an example of this is how Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd articulated the need to address climate change as “the great moral issue of our time” (McKay, 2008, p.309).

However, when organisations, businesses and politicians attempt to make any changes on the ground in the name of sustainability, criticism often results, as actions are perceived to be doing too little or too much. Ambiguity exists in interpreting what the concept means for policy and action, particularly when the scale shifts from a global goal to local change. At the micro-economic level, sustainability is judged by considering the economic, social and environmental performance (the triple-bottom-line), related to the interplay between built, financial, social, human and natural capital.

It is in this context that the debate intensifies because proponents of ‘weak sustainability’ suggest that because different forms of capital can be substituted, sustainability exists so long as the benefits exceed the net costs (Figge and Hahn, 2004). In contrast, ‘strong sustainability’ postulates that natural and man-made capital are complementary and both must be maintained (Brand, 2009). There are critical forms of natural capital that cannot be lost by substitution, reflected in measures such as safe minimum standards. Ambiguity exists in determining when natural capital becomes critical but it may be related to the degree of ecological resilience (Brand, 2009).

For any given issue, there is not a single response that represents sustainability. To the contrary, there are a variety of potentially sustainable responses, each of which has positive and negative economic, social and environmental ramifications. In this sense, Baker (2006) argues that sustainability is more of a process than an end goal (Baker, 2006) and might involve achieving a balance between conflicting needs and aspirations (Brandon and Lombardi, 2005). This argument is challenged by sustainability theories that proceed from an ethical basis of sustainable development, notably the ‘Theory of Strong Sustainability’ developed at the University of Greifswald and the ‘Integrative Sustainability Concept’ (Schultz et al., 2008; Hauff and

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Wilderer 2008). These theories propose a normative core for sustainable development. From this perspective, sustainability is not only a process, but a moral obligation founded on ethical objectives, which are to be used to guide policy development. If these objectives are achieved then progress is made towards sustainable development.

The challenges thus have been categorised as either conceptual or pragmatic. Conceptual challenges consider why sustainability should occur, while pragmatic challenges consider how it might happen. The distinction is made along this line because the former supersedes the later; if sustainability cannot be justified conceptually, there is no reason to consider how it might practically occur.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the challenges of the compatibility of sustainability and affordable housing via literature review. The article begins with a discussion of housing affordability in Australia and considers why affordable housing might need to become more sustainable. Conceptual challenges to sustainability are then presented and related where appropriate to affordable housing. Since the conceptual challenges to sustainability do not inhibit attempts to attain it, pragmatic challenges are then considered and applied to affordable housing. The paper then discusses whether such challenges, when considered together, prevent sustainable outcomes and render the concept untenable.

2. Background

Since the Second World War, Australians have enjoyed an inclusive society with relatively high rates of home ownership and relatively low housing costs, facilitated by cheap and plentiful land for urban development, supplemented by social housing for those excluded from the housing market by poverty, low income or disability (Beer et al., 2007; Wilson 2006, 2007). However, housing affordability is currently at an all time low with more than one million low and middle income households, in a variety of housing tenures, now experiencing housing stress (Australian Government, 2008).

Limited low-income rental and home purchase opportunities will exacerbate existing socio-spatial inequalities (Gurran et al., 2008). Failure to improve housing affordability will have broad repercussions for Australia, affecting long-term economic development and competitiveness, urban development, fertility rates, family cohesion, retirement security and intergenerational equity (Disney, 2007).

Wide-ranging policy responses are being developed to improve housing affordability. These are occurring at all levels of government, which in Australia consists of Local, State and Commonwealth Governments. At a local level, for example, efforts to respond to housing affordability generally relate to the provision of infrastructure, infrastructure changes and planning conditions and approvals (Disney, 2007). Some local governments also partner in specific housing initiatives. The City of Salisbury in South Australia, for example, is currently establishing a pilot project in providing a small number of affordable homes on council land. Although they will be sold at market rates, loan repayments will be reduced as the council will retain some equity in the homes until subsequent sale (City of Salisbury, 2008).

State governments, the jurisdictions traditionally responsible for housing in Australia, are likewise developing a variety of responses. South Australia, for example, has created an 'Affordable Housing Innovations Unit' within its housing department. Actions have included developing a mechanism to link eligible households with affordable housing and creating legislative links between land use planning and housing by mandating 15% affordable housing in all new developments (Department for Families and Communities, 2008).

At a national level, although the historical role in housing has generally been limited to developing funding models with state governments, there is renewed interest in housing. For the first time since 1996, there is a federal minister for Housing. Recent initiatives include 'First Home Saver Accounts' which encourage saving for home

purchasers through superannuation-style accounts with government co-contributions and a National Rental Affordability Scheme which facilitates the channelling of private investment into affordable rental properties (Australian Government, 2008).

There are many benefits of making affordable housing sustainable. Affordable housing discourse in Australia, possibly unintentionally, reflects many of the objectives of economic and social sustainability. This is because proposed models of affordable housing seek to avoid the financial and social failures of historic models of affordable housing in Australia. Therefore, improving the sustainability of affordable housing rests on incorporating environmental sustainability.

Further, there is the particular benefit of developing affordable and environmentally sustainable housing because low-income households spend a larger portion of their income on utilities and transport (Global Green, 2007; Winston and Eastaway, 2008). Thus constructing and locating homes to, for example, minimise energy costs and private car use, has particular benefits for affordable housing residents.

Since governments and the building industry are generally committed to sustainable development, a case study of affordable housing provides a useful context to consider the implications of conceptual and pragmatic challenges to sustainability. Such an application may demonstrate if policy is able to meet both the short-term objectives of housing affordability and the long-term goals of sustainability.

3. Research methodology

In order to understand the challenges of responding to sustainability and draw implications for affordable housing, it is necessary to review previous studies. An extensive literature review was conducted to consider the conceptual and pragmatic challenges to sustainability.

4. Conceptual challenges to sustainability

4.1. Separating needs from wants

Sustainable development means that development should meet the needs of the present generation without inhibiting the ability of future generations to meet their needs (WCED, 1987). However, a basic conceptual challenge, according to Brandon and Lombardi (2005) is what actually constitutes a need to be met by development?

Littig and Griessler (2005, p.71) note that a 'need' applies to the components of life that ensure the 'material basis of people's livelihood'. Such basic human needs include food, housing, safe drinking water, health care and the like. They argue, however, that the definition of a 'need', should also consider non-material factors, such as education, social relationships and recreation. This is because only with the non-material components of life will people be able to assume responsibility for determining a decent life for themselves (Littig and Griessler, 2005).

Although this may be a desirable definition to support policies that accentuate well-being and living standards in the current generation, considering such non-material factors may just result in the justification of a variety of activities which clearly are unsustainable. For example, excessive air travel that produces large amounts of pollution and consumes finite fossil fuels could be justified as a necessary part of life, contributing to individual well-being. Further, considering a need beyond basic human requirements blurs definitional boundaries, in that it is difficult to quantify what is a non-material factor of life that is value-adding and allows people to take responsibility for determining good life outcomes.

Further, assessments of what constitutes a need to be met by development is largely subjective and reflects the world we have experienced. As Hamilton (2003) argues, most Australians want for nothing, being prosperous beyond the dreams of our parents and grandparents. This creates difficulty in separating needs from wants,

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