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Planning sustainable cities and regions: towards more equitable development

Abstract

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Planning Sustainable Cities and Regions: Towards More Equitable Development

Karen Chapple

New York, Routledge, 2015, 308pp., ISBN 978 1 138 78966 1

The recent push for sustainable development is primarily driven by agendas such as smart growth, regional competitiveness and climate change adaptation. These efforts mainly focus on the *economy* and the *environment* whereas *equity* is often an afterthought. *Planning Sustainable Cities and Regions* may help provide new planning directions by highlighting that equity should be a crucial consideration in the practice of sustainability. Karen Chapple highlights the important position of equity by founding her book on the three 'E's of planning – economy, environment and equity.

In spite of the appetite around the world for sustainable living patterns, planning for sustainable and equitable cities and regions is a serious challenge due to a number of reasons. Chapple reviews these challenges calling for the traditional planning perspectives to be revisited: the new demography (shifts in immigrants and millennials), the new economy (sectoral changes and shifts in income and wealth inequality) and the new development patterns (shifts in housing preferences and back-to-the city movement). In light of the societal changes, better jobs and housing strategies need to be developed to achieve goals of three 'E's of planning. The main point Chapple wants to get across is clear upfront – equity should be a guiding principle for the future to ensure justice and sustainability.

The book is organised into three parts, critically reviewing important policies that have guided urban planning for a long period of time, and reconceptualising existing tools for more equitable development:

- driving design, density and diversity (people and plans)
- developing economies for specific places (economy and place)
- locating the poor near social and economic opportunities (the poor and their life chances)

The four chapters in Part 1 discuss the key engines of neighbourhood change – infill development, job-housing balance, mixed-income neighbourhoods and gentrification. Chapple asks the right questions in probing these policies: Why does transport investment is still not linked to jobs and housing? Why doesn't mixing income in housing work?

Though Chapple agrees smart growth and the provision of housing in inner-city areas reduce driving, commute costs and traffic congestion, she highlights the overwhelming practical challenges associated with those policies, such as rising land costs (and less-affordable housing), crowding out of businesses (including those hiring lower-skilled workers) and lower job densities (leading to less viable rail transit systems). These benefits and costs lead to tensions between different stakeholders including residents, property rights / fair housing advocates and planners, for instance due to the desire to preserve "the natural environment and a small-town, quality of life environmentalism (p.80)". Chapple contends the alternatives to high density such as backyard cottages may be more effective due to higher potential production levels, little capital required, lower construction delay risks, affordability and the location in more affluent areas. Since 'distributed density' alone cannot provide the scale, a hybrid solution is proposed. Moving beyond the traditional comparison between benefits and costs of high density and sprawl, alternatives to smart growth including improved energy technology in buildings and transportation are weighed in.

Acknowledging the benefits of mixed-neighbourhoods and the negative impacts of racial concentration and segregation, Chapple demonstrates there are a number of challenges in developing and sustaining mixed-income neighbourhoods: the 'right mix' is hard to define due to its many determinants; different goals of mixing; and doubts about the most effective scale. Considering the mixed evidence on the effectiveness of mixed-neighbourhoods, Chapple proposes to nurture diversity at a larger scale (e.g. community) while allowing more homogeneity at a smaller

scale (e.g. site or block). This is consistent with Susan Fainstein's (2010) idea of preserving homogenous areas with porous (or penetrable) boundaries as opposed to pursuing an even distribution of the population. The discussion extends to critically review the alternatives to mixed-income development.

Citing Freeman (2006), Chapple reflects that the narrative of displacement by gentrification resonates more than the narrative of revitalization but argues gentrification is an opportunity when benefits are spread across. To address *exclusionary displacement* – i.e. inability of low-income and minority households to move in – governments should provide long-term security of tenure and build affordable housing for low-income in-movers. Different regions and characteristics of gentrification require local and context-specific responses. Successful community organising efforts during gentrification are illustrated using two examples – Oakland's Chinatown and Staples Centre in Los Angeles.

What can we expect into the future? There is a growing irrelevance of the traditional approaches as city population, number of jobs and diversities will increase leading to accelerated neighbourhood change. Therefore, traditional planning tools to drive design, density and diversity actually result in more segregation. As Chapple puts it, "attempts to shift the location of jobs and housing need to reflect changes in the structure of home and work (p.14)". The challenge for the cities is to keep check of segregation, gentrification and displacement, and to accommodate new density in an equitable way to facilitate diversity without pricing people out. Many of the tools proposed on sustainability planning create new winners and losers, and there is the need for better local tools for redistribution.

Part 2 of the book discusses the changing relationship between economy and place. Technology, globalization and immigration have transformed the economy into a more informal place. Economic restructuring and deindustrialization have resulted in shifts in job quality and rise in low-wage work. The recent low upward mobility has also hit low-income households particularly hard. As a complete contrast, there is an increasing pattern of favourable tax rates for the rich, generous executive pay, and inherited wealth and capital. These opposing factors exacerbate the bipolarisation of the labour market and reinforce uneven development patterns. As a result, traditional policies to growing the regional economy do not address inequalities and the trickle-down economics doesn't seem to work.

Whilst accepting the above realities, Chapple optimistically argues the challenges of economic restructuring create opportunities for regions. She explains three important policies to achieving sustainability goals while growing the regional economy: targeting businesses through endogenous development strategies (e.g. SME growth, technical assistance, access to capital, tax incentives for existing businesses, innovation, new infrastructure and urban development); developing local markets for innovative local businesses; and preserving low-cost industrial space in the urban core to facilitate rapid creation of high quality jobs that pay a living wage while reducing truck VMT. The international case studies showcase how developing entrepreneurial capacity of low-income people and wage subsidy programs for hiring the unemployed have enhanced the potential economic development in regions. Chapple opposes the use of 'average case' as the analytical scale in urban and regional analysis because "efforts to grow the regional economy need to acknowledge local context (p.14)". In other words, understanding the local economy, and regional exceptionalism, is vital for managing business attraction, local markets and mixed-use industrial land in sustainability planning. The implementation of economic development policies that are sustainable can assist the regional growth agenda by creating livable places which ultimately will attract and retain the talent for the agglomeration economy. However, Chapple warns certain policies that are implemented under 'livable cities' programs such as mixed-used zoning have undermined the need to preserve industry land in core urban areas.

In Part 3, the book focuses on the growing gap between the poor and their life chances. Current policies aimed at preventing excessive concentrations of poverty and wealth through distributional policies have failed. A common policy instrument used to locate the poor near social and economic opportunities is to provide affordable housing in the urban core. The assumption here is improving physical proximity to opportunity will address poverty. However, Chapple explains, a number of additional resources are required to benefit from locational advantages available to the poor such as family and institutional support systems, and strong and weak ties to 'steer through the economy'. Funding directed at bringing a diverse array of travel modes and housing types (e.g. subsidising affordable multifamily housing in '20-minute neighbourhoods' in Melbourne) is suggested as more effective.

Chapple backs an alternative planning direction, the *capabilities approach*, to address poverty and opportunity in the region – "Rather than ... even spatial distribution of opportunity across metropolitan areas ... focus on giving disadvantaged communities the security ... to realize their full potential (p.14)". This indicates, beyond trying to locate the poor adjacent to opportunity, we should think about how to empower people regardless of context. The Plan Araucanía demonstrates how social inclusion can be supported through strategies that strengthen social capital, community participation, personal and collective autonomy and the respect for human dignity. To achieve sustainability and equity goals, the pressure should be put on politicians through community organizations and resources should be accessed through multilevel governance. Significant public participation in regional planning through participatory democratic processes will help achieve more equitable development as well.

In a way, Chapple's book is a reflection upon what lessons California and the Bay Area can offer their counterparts in other countries. In addition to environmental regulation and the country's first cap-and-trade system where the Bay Area has clearly established a reputation, their preparedness for regional sustainability planning processes and the institutional structure are also highlighted. For instance, rather than redevelopment and enterprise zones, reforms in economic development policy and stimulating the green economy are widely been implemented. California model outlines how to reconcile the three 'E's and build the legislative infrastructure to endure sustainability. There are common problems and symptoms around the world, and a justification is offered as to how the Bay Area case studies are transferable to strong and weak market regions around the world.

An engaging feature of the book is the best practice examples of regional sustainability planning from several cities around the world: Melbourne, Australia; La Araucanía, Chile; Shanghai, China; Copenhagen, Denmark; South Transdanubia, Hungary; and Istanbul, Turkey. Though Chapple brings out unique sustainability, development and wellbeing features within these plans, she also exposes the puzzling reality that social equity considerations are rarely addressed. Similarly, she comments that many housing and urban development programs in the US supported social equity not directly but 'through the back door'. These reiterate the inherent contradictions and broadness of the concept of sustainability that have resulted in limited support for sustainability planning. *Just sustainability* is not yet part of policy and practice and the community engagement is uneven. Though central for societal wellbeing, incorporating equity is a challenge also due to legislation and governance complexities.

Regardless of the difficulties associated with planning 'internally heterogeneous metropolises', most current regional plans are based on metro regions. Policies on sustainability are deliberated at national or international level although the sustainability movement has largely emerged at the city level. An important contribution of the book is that it emphasises, due to the scale of the associated issues such as transportation, water quality, housing, economic development and labour, a coordinated policy response at the regional level is required to address sustainability.

A rare point of weakness in my opinion is, though the book is written largely for an international audience, the author spontaneously mentions random cities and projects in the US with very little introduction (e.g. *Levittown* on p.81, *I-680 corridor* on p.97). This makes it difficult for a non-US audience to fully relate to certain arguments. This is, however, a minor oversight for what is a truly insightful work.

Overall, the book covers a wide range of contemporary debates around sustainability planning comprehensively and provides a framework for equitable development and as such a must-read for planning practitioners, academics, graduate students and the like. Chapple is an outstanding storyteller, and most chapters start with an appropriate real-life situation where she has directly engaged with the planning process. The book also makes use of illustrative visual images, maps and charts. Abundantly referenced by examples from the US, inclusion of planning cases from elsewhere helps to widen the appeal of the book. In the end, *Planning Sustainable Cities and Regions* makes a significant contribution to planning scholarship.

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