

By making 'local' and 'more inclusive' the focal point of our policies, we can achieve lasting social sustainability in our communities

The way we look at urban regeneration has undergone a transformation in the last 30 years; from a focus on the physical and economic renewal of places, to the building of vital and sustainable communities, in both the social and environmental sense. [Andrea Colantonio](#) and [Tim Dixon](#) argue that we need to build on the achievements of previous policy on how to build socially sustainable communities, and promote regeneration that focuses on the needs of local communities, and does not displace those on low incomes in neighbourhoods that become victims of their own success through regeneration.



Social sustainability stems from actions in key thematic areas, encompassing the social realm of individuals and societies, which ranges from capacity building and skills development to environmental and spatial inequalities. It blends traditional social policy areas and principles, such as equity and poverty, with emerging issues concerning participation, social mixing, social capital, the economy, the environment, and more recently, with the notions of happiness, well-being and quality of life.



In recent years, the sustainable urban development agenda has been broadened and been incorporated into planning practices and governments' policies for urban regeneration projects. In the 1980s, regeneration projects focused mainly on the physical and economic renewal of degraded areas. However, since the 1990s, especially in Britain, regeneration programmes have combined the stimulation of economic activities and environmental improvements with social and cultural vitality. In this new sustainability-oriented approach to urban regeneration, the concepts of 'community' and 'neighbourhood' have become the central focus of the analysis.

The New Labour government developed an urban regeneration policy framework which has emphasised the need for strong communities, active citizenship and enhanced political participation. These goals were to be achieved by building and strengthening networks and norms of reciprocity and trust, that is, social capital, but also promoting the notion of governance. This approach to sustainability emphasises practices of consultation and participation, especially through so-called community partnerships and the involvement of the voluntary or third sector, and seeks to transform the state into an enabling partner.

The neo-liberal attack against the centralised and interventionist welfare State policies of the 1960s and 1970s, which called for progressive market liberalisation and privatisation, has meant the re-emergence of local community as focal point of political decision making and development processes. According to the new governance paradigm, different types of communities have the task of releasing a wide array of political, societal and economic resources whilst the local government has the crucial mission of advocating the common good, transparency and political accountability.

Recent Sustainability Assessment Legislation in the UK

Over the last few decades, sustainability assessment has gained increased recognition in sustainable development legislation and policy agendas at both the national and international level. Since the release of the report '[A better quality of life, a strategy for sustainable development in the UK](#)' in 1999 and the '[Securing the Future: the UK sustainable development strategy](#)' in 2005, the UK government has published two additional documents providing guidance on sustainability appraisal and evaluation methodologies:

The former describes how the economic, financial, social and environmental assessments of policies, programmes, plans or projects should be combined together. The latter provides practical guidance for regional planning bodies and local planning authorities concerning how sustainability principles should be incorporated in development proposals. If read in conjunction, both documents provide the backbone of the sustainability assessment framework endorsed by the UK government.

Promoting social sustainability.

Promoting social sustainability is fraught with difficulties not only in terms of how communities engage with the regeneration process and how social sustainability is actually measured, but also in terms of the starting point for regeneration. For some critics, regeneration is often seen as a euphemism for 'gentrification', and this is true when displacement or exclusion occurs, and so the concept of 'exclusionary displacement' is also important here: if people are excluded from a place they might have lived or worked in or otherwise occupied had the place not been 'regenerated', then accusations of 'gentrification' are hardened, prompting the view that neo-liberal policy dogma has overridden a socially sustainable vision. In a sense, regenerated areas may become victims of their own success: if deprived or distressed areas are the subject of regeneration then the new jobs and improved infrastructure may in fact create an upward spiral, which causes increased house prices and therefore displacement.

At present, urban social sustainability policies are:

- experimental because the pursuit of emerging policy agendas such as social mixing have not been grounded on empirical evidence and it proves difficult to assess the results of early programmes;
- local as communities and neighbourhoods have re-emerged as key arenas for the achievement of sustainable development; and,
- fragmented and contested because of the multiple stakeholders who have become involved in regeneration and the pursuit of sustainability.

In addition, social sustainability policies are influenced by the existence of **several urban cycles** in the functioning and management of cities. These include political cycles, coinciding with the **lifecycles of municipal governments**, lasting normally four years each; **macroeconomic cycles**, which can last between 10 and 20 years; and **social and environmental cycles** which can take up to a generation to complete. The existence of these cycles should be taken into account in the evaluation of project impacts and policy outcomes.

From a social point of view, the outcomes of a project or plan may outlive the life span of a political administration or take a generation before beginning to manifest themselves. As a result, the correct evaluation of the social output or outcome of urban regeneration should not solely adopt a short term perspective (e.g. a yearly evaluation), but should take into account medium to long-term inter-generational changes.

There is also an issue over the spatial scale at which a regeneration project is drawn: are we talking about the focus for a project at a neighbourhood level, a group of neighbourhoods or a city scale? If we are, for example, reviewing and assessing change in an integrated way then surely this implies we must link and embed our measurements of the programmes of regeneration within a holistic, city level analysis?

Although it is sometimes difficult to make direct comparisons internationally, several important characteristics are important success factors:

- **Strong brand and identity:** the most successful urban regeneration programmes promoted a strong brand and identity.
- **Local community participation:** local community participation and empowerment are essential if programmes of regeneration are to be successful.
- **Partnership models:** finding the right blend or mix of public and private partnership is vital to consider. In some cases there was a strong and equal basis for a PPP, but in other instances the majority of activity was underwritten by the public sector.
- **Planning policies and governance models:** strong national, regional and city level planning policies which are integrated and robust are also fundamental to success.

It is important to reiterate how **vision, leadership and a sound managerial approach to regeneration are essential** components to deliver socially sustainable urban regeneration. Regeneration plans for a local neighbourhood become even more effective if they are linked to city-wide development plans and vision. They can also help attract further funding and generate self-sustaining projects.

In addition, image and branding are crucial for the social regeneration of city areas. Indeed, neighbourhoods undergoing urban regeneration have often acted as recipient areas for low-income newcomers to the city because of their affordable rents and lower cost of living. Regeneration projects are therefore trying to improve the image of these places in order to attract new inward-investment in social, economic and green infrastructure, as well as middle-high income people to these neighbourhoods.

It is difficult to measure universally the 'softer' aspects of social sustainability, such as well-being, happiness and neighbourhood satisfaction arising from urban regeneration. At present, however, the only effective way to measure these dimensions of social sustainability is through the use of surveys and other qualitative research techniques such as interviews and focus groups, which can prove expensive in the long term. As a result, there is a need for more investment in new and cost-effective data gathering procedures and methodologies.