

Exploring social sustainability in urban studies

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Sustainable development was the first holistic concept to be put forward as a means to transform society and impulse trajectories of development that are more equitable and respectful of natural cycles. Almost thirty years after the Bruntland report, a question arises whether it actually has delivered its promises. Although numerous interpretations and approaches have been proposed, the field is still fraught with controversies and contradictions, difficult to reconcile, since they often rely on distinct epistemological grounding.

Analytical frameworks tend to focus on economical issues or environmental protection, sometimes in an integrated fashion. On the other hand, the social pillar is mostly relegated to the background, under a vague equity consideration. Now, equity is a concept difficult to apprehend and not amenable to normalisation, because it is mostly subjective and highly value-laden.

A simple framework with three categories has been elaborated and used at the municipal level, both for the elaboration and the assessment of social sustainability of urban projects, with a special interest in regeneration of deprived neighbourhoods. Exploring the three categories, equity of access to services (especially for vulnerable populations), social capital and environmental justice, in different settings, I shall analyse their heuristic value, both at the political level and among the communities concerned by a project.

Equity of access to services cannot be captured without analysing the perceptions of the various communities and the considerable handicaps that deprived communities have to overcome in order to benefit from the project options, if we want to align the political intentions with the diversity of expectations among the population. Social capital relies on the connections that each group has, giving access to material and symbolic resources through networks and is fostered by autonomous action in favour of the common good. Finally, environmental justice, which has to be understood as an equitable access to environmental quality, was introduced to counter the effects of the market, which affects prices and relegates the poorer populations in areas of lesser quality, either through increased exposure to hazards or reduced access to amenities.

Rather than relying solely on energy or waste issues, all the above considerations have to be taken into account if we want to achieve sustainable neighbourhoods and cities, including through civic engagement and community empowerment, for a better connection with one's environment and encouragement of individual and collective responsibility in its favour.