UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

**Building
Sustainable
Societies**
Conference

Exploring Social
Sustainability

Building Sustainable Societies:

A Practitioner Perspective

Summary of the discussions from July 1st 2014

Conference partners

Building Sustainable Societies

Building Sustainable Societies is a new, dynamic, interdisciplinary research project within Leeds Social Sciences Institute. The project aims to develop new knowledge, analysis and policy to address the major social and economic challenges facing contemporary societies across the globe.

Leading social scientists at the University of Leeds, including experts from across the Faculty of Education, Social Sciences and Law (ESSL), the Faculty of Medicine and Health, and the Leeds University Business School (LUBS), make up the research teams behind Building Sustainable Societies.

This new hybrid research group came together in 2011, and aims to focus and consolidate their research efforts in order to generate knowledge that makes difference to our 21st century lives in the fields of work, care and security.

For more information, visit http://www.bss.leeds.ac.uk/

The Bauman Institute

The Bauman Institute is an international research and teaching centre dedicated to analysing major social change around the world. Inspired by the sociological imagination of Leeds' Emeritus Professor, Zygmunt Bauman, our primary research interests are: money and consumerism, ethics and social responsibility, new technologies and data, as well as resistance and power in 'liquid modernity'. We are based within the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Leeds. For more information, visit http://baumaninstitute.leeds.ac.uk/

Care Connect: The Social Care Innovation Hub

Care Connect has been established to act as a bridge between the University of Leeds and those working in and supported by the social care sector. Our aim is to ensure that all our research expertise has a positive impact on those working in practice and policy development. Alongside this we aim to ensure that knowledge and good practice from within the sector supports our experts to develop new and innovative ideas for research. Our role is to coordinate

the exchange of knowledge and expertise between researchers and the social care sector. We provide a range of multi-disciplinary approaches that are available throughout the University of Leeds.

We work in collaboration with:

- Policy makers
- Commissioners
- Public sector providers
- Independent providers
- Third sector organisations
- Service user and carer groups

For more information visit http://care-connect.leeds.ac.uk or email care-connect@leeds.ac.uk

Thesis Eleven Centre for Cultural Sociology

The Thesis Eleven Centre for Cultural Sociology, based at La Trobe University, Melbourne, encourages the development and application of social and political theory throughout the world. Our peer-reviewed social theory journal, *Thesis Eleven*, has been in publication since 1980. For more information about the Thesis Eleven Centre, please visit http://thesiseleven.com/

Leeds Social Sciences Institute

The LSSI is a large, vibrant research Institute that works to support and enhance the Social Sciences at Leeds. It fosters interdisciplinary and international research collaborations, promotes relations with external partners in the public, private and third sectors and builds capacity through the provision of training and skills development for the next generation of research leaders.

The LSSI supports and enhances the work of social scientists across six faculties, actively encouraging cross-disciplinary research. We continue to build bridges between our research community and external organisations to address relevant societal challenges. The Institute also offers training and career development for the next generation of research leaders.

For more information visit http://www.lssi.leeds.ac.uk/

Introduction

Through the Building Sustainable Societies project, the University of Leeds is pioneering a new research agenda into social sustainability. Social sustainability is the least developed of the 'three dimensions of sustainability' (environmental, economic and social) and the relative lack of understanding of the social dimension provides a tremendous opportunity for academics, practitioners, students, business, and policy-makers to contribute to better understanding this emerging idea.

The aim of our three day event was to explore social sustainability from different perspectives. The 'Practitioner Perspective' day brought together academics from the UK and beyond with policy makers and practitioners from local and national organisations to discuss and explore the topic of social sustainability. Other days were themed around the topics of Education and Cities. Organised by the Building Sustainable Societies Transformation Fund, the conference was held in partnership with Thesis Eleven, Care-Connect and The Bauman Institute.

The event began with presentations from Shaun Webster (Change, Leeds); Johanne Orchard-Webb (University of Brighton); Sara Bordoley (NHS England) and Alex Fox (Shared Lives), all of whom discussed the concept of social sustainability and how it linked into their work and/or roles. Following these presentations, delegates participated in two workshop sessions exploring the concept of social sustainability, identifying possible definitions, barriers, 'ingredients', and areas where further knowledge / understanding was needed. In our final session, Angela Catley (Community Catalysts), Caroline Mackay (Multiple Choice, Leeds) and Oliver Chrimes (West Yorkshire Community Chaplaincy Project) discussed the work of their organisations, and raised some key issues in relation to social sustainability.

Here we present some of the key findings of the workshop discussions, which we hope will form the basis of an ongoing dialogue between the university and practitioners and policy makers.

Further information

Presentations given at the event can be found at www.bss.leeds.ac.uk where you will also find links to a slideshow of the amazing drawings created by Tom Bailey (Arts & Minds) during our event.

What social sustainability means

Some people related social sustainability to **relationships** and **community,** and for many people, community was central to their understanding of social sustainability and a basic unit for its development. Others felt it was about **activism** and **empowerment** and spoke about the need for **resistance** and **revolution**. It was felt that social sustainability needed to be **co-created** rather than imposed 'top down', but also that it required **leadership**.

Social sustainability was generally agreed to be "*a process as well as an end"*, and to be not simply "*a destination"* but also an "*ongoing, dynamic, evolving journey".* Some people noted that "*what is sustainable changes all the time, and is defined differently by different groups"* and emphasised that "c*ontext is key".* Others pointed out that "*what sustainability is will change and adapt over time to different external and internal pressures".*

The question was raised of whether sustainability meant "*sustaining things from the past"* or "*progression and building new structures and practices".* This was summed up by one group by the question of "*what we are sustaining, how and why?".* Others asked how we might "*avoid toxic values"* entering the social sustainability debate, and many agreed that there was an important **moral dimension** to questions of social sustainability.

Not everyone felt that social sustainability was a useful concept, and some expressed reservations about its meaning and usage. One group said that social sustainability was a "*fashionable"* term, which had started to appear in policy, tenders and other documents. They suggested that it might be used as "*a way of making fiscal savings appear more appealing and palatable".*

Key ingredients

We asked groups to consider what might be the 'key ingredients' of social sustainability, and again the importance of **relationships** and **interactions** was emphasised, alongside the need to act collectively, through **sharing skills and knowledge**, and nurturing a **sense of social responsibility** and **common purpose.** The importance of **equity** was emphasised by many groups, alongside the need to **respect diverse needs** and to enable people to **speak and act on behalf of themselves.** The need for **innovation** and **activism** was felt to be key, as was providing **inspiration** and **sources of pride**.

Others felt that **well-being** and **social inclusion** were important dimensions of social sustainability, that people needed "*access to decent and appropriate services"* to meet their needs and that the **creation of opportunities** was required. As one group put it, this included the idea that services and professionals shouldn't "*do things for people"* but should "*let people do things for themselves".* This means that people should have a **voice** and should be **empowered** to do things for themselves, although it was also pointed out that "*participation should not be an obligation"*

because "*an obligation to participate is not freedom*".   Delegates felt that the "*freedom to choose*" and the building of **capacity to make choices** were crucial. More generally, capacity building was felt to be important to develop **skills, knowledge and confidence** for people to engage.

One group pointed out that "*there is not a 'cookbook' recipe – communities are very different so what works in one place might not work in another*".   Again, this emphasises the importance of context in strategies to develop social sustainability, balanced alongside the idea that there is a need to link together **local, regional and national** levels.   Others raised the idea that social dimensions of sustainability "*cannot exist without other forms of sustainability*".

Barriers

A number of barriers to achieving social sustainability were identified by delegates. Many of these were **systemic issues** including "*inappropriate funding structures*" and "*tensions within the system*".   People also felt that **corruption** undermined the best efforts to build sustainable societies and that there was **resistance to change** amongst many organisations, bodies and institutions.   One group referred more bluntly to the "*idiots in positions of power*" as a key barrier to sustainability.   Some people felt that the process of service delivery had been "*monetised*".

Much reference was made to issues of **inequality**, including "*unequal justice*" as well as "*unequal opportunities and knowledge*".   One group mentioned the **North-South divide** as a key dimension of inequality, and one which needed to be tackled.   It was felt that the **blame culture** which involved distinguishing between **deserving and undeserving** citizens was counterproductive, and many problems were associated with the **individualistic** nature of contemporary society.

The increasing **reliance on volunteers** – referred to by one group as the "*expectation of providing unpaid labour*" - was also identified as a key barrier. Further, it was felt that certain groups lacked advocates and were consequently disadvantaged.   A **lack of time**, **excessive bureaucracy** and **wastage of resources** were also identified as barriers.

How these barriers might be overcome

There was agreed to be a need to achieve **structural change** and address issues of **inequality** and **power**.   A number of people emphasised the need for **better distribution of resources** and **fairer pay**, including one suggestion for a "*basic income across Europe*".

Some ways in which barriers might be overcome focused on ways of building and drawing on **grassroots assets and resources**. This included suggestions to "*make the most of all people's skills*", and to "*develop skills and resources for people to think about opportunities in their communities*". One group suggested that there is a need to "*catalyse rather than control*" community action and engagement, whilst others felt that people needed more understanding of "*how to be sustainable*". Several people suggested that greater **devolution of power to local levels** was

required, as part of a move to decentralise and get away from the "*one size fits all approach*".

Again, the reliance on volunteers was referred to, with one group suggesting a need for **greater access to finance** for voluntary and community organisations and that "*the Big Society concept that 'everything is free' is not practical*". One group simply suggested that communities required **"***more resources*". It was also felt that there needed to be **more investment in infrastructure** and a **more dynamic economy.** Some people felt that "*getting rid of red tape*" and challenging the control of local authorities over communities' bids for funding would be useful. One group suggested that "*people should be supported to develop business plans*" as a way of benefit their communities.

Another group suggested that there was a need to include sustainability issues in education, and to teach children that "*they can make decisions for themselves*". They suggested that there is a need to **give more control to children**. Again, the idea that people need to be "*worked with rather than done to*" as part of a broader programme of empowerment, was mentioned. Several groups emphasised the need for "*people to be listened to*".

Overall, the need for **innovation** and **reorientation to the future** was agreed to be of central importance. The need for a "*new social agenda*" and a "*shift in attitudes*" was seen to be needed, however one group asked "*what would that shift be?*". Others suggested that **conversations** needed to be facilitated about the nature of that shift, alongside "*recognition and acceptance of the need for fluidity and change*". The need for innovation and change was underlined in Angela's presentation, where she pointed out that "*If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you always had*".

What next…?

For us, this event was a valuable way of feeding in the knowledge, expertise and experience of our delegates into the developing agenda around social sustainability. As such, we would like to thank everyone who attended and participated in the activities. These findings are really useful for us firstly in understanding different perspectives on sustainability, but also for sketching out a future research agenda.

We hope you will find this a useful summary, but are also interested in hearing from you if you have any ideas about how we could keep these conversations going. We would also like to know if you have any ideas for future events or ways you would like to work with the university in the future.

To keep the conversation going, or to give feedback on this report, tweet us using #bssconf or if you have particular questions or issues you would like to raise, you can email at bss@leeds.ac.uk

Anyone interested in finding out more about the **Community Research Academy** and/or about how to engage with the university on research projects to support, evaluate or develop their work should contact Elly Layfield on e.layfield@leeds.ac.uk