



FOUNDATION FOR DEMOCRACY
AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Community self-organisation, democracy and sustainable development

Halina Ward, May 2010

The interface between local citizen-led action and representative democracy is right at the cutting edge of sustainable development.

There has already been a lot of work on community empowerment in relation to existing processes of local government (this is 'inside-out' thinking; mostly motivated by the need to reinvigorate existing processes of representative democracy).

'Outside-in' thinking would mean working with community groups that focus on sustainable development issues. It would mean a bottom-up process of thinking about how community organising could help democracy to work for sustainable development.

There are also wider questions about how community groups self-organise on issues related to sustainable development in the public sphere, and what happens when they choose *not* to engage with local government or to develop alternative approaches.

In the UK, the rapidly accelerating Transition Town movement is just one example of community self-organisation on sustainable development. Not only does it challenge economic growth models to which most democracies are committed, but it is rooted in community self-organisation: with the goal of fostering resilience in the face of climate change and peak oil.

The spread of the Transition Town movement offers insights into a potential seismic shift in the balance between civic self-organisation on key issues of public concern on the one hand and representative democracy that engages citizens on the other.

Elsewhere, the Sustainable Communities Act 2007 offers a potentially innovative pathway to community empowerment for sustainable development. And the establishment of a new 'duty to involve' local people which has been placed upon on local and regional authorities under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health (LGPIH) Act 2007 may work to promote greater accountability on the part of elected representatives and public officials and foster greater public engagement.

But if these new opportunities are implemented in ways that simply replicate existing decision-making structures in local government, they may fail to realise their potential.

In the UK, major changes to the spatial planning system have also been proposed. These include the establishment of an appointed (not elected) Infrastructure Planning Commission to decide on major infrastructure proposals of national significance, and potentially the proposed delegation of some planning roles to Regional Development Authorities tasked with promoting economic development.

Changes like these might or might not enable faster take-up of building and infrastructure development that favours sustainable development; but they also reduce the role of elected representatives and community-level participation in controversial planning matters.

There are many examples of innovation in democratic decision-making for sustainable development, but many community groups have frustrating experiences of engagement with local level representative democracy on issues related to sustainable development.

Common complaints include that consultation is largely a box-ticking exercise that takes place too late or fails to involve interested citizens or groups; unprofessional behaviour on the part of officials or lazy thinking on the part of councillors. When such perceptions dominate within community groups, elected officials can start to be viewed as obstacles to social and environmental progress, rather than allies.

FSDS wants to find ways to foster reflection within local groups working at community level on issues related to sustainable development. Our goal is to help local groups consciously to strategise sustainable development activity *in terms of its contribution to democracy*.