

TECHNICAL PROCESS, POLITICAL REALITIES: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND THE SOUTH DURBAN STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

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Summary

This paper examines the role and effectiveness of sustainable development as a planning and policy tool in the post-apartheid reconstruction of South African cities. Through the case study of the South Durban Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) the paper argues that it is within policy development and implementation that sustainable development becomes conflictual rather than consensual. It is argued that interventions supporting a sustainable development agenda fall short of attaining their goals, as these initiatives are often reduced to technical processes, whereby inadequate attention is paid to the politics of the environment. The paper offers some insights for understanding the politics of the environment and the implications this has for environmental decision-making at the local level.

1. Introduction

This paper aims to problematize the concept of sustainable development through an exploration of its origins, use, and social consequences as it is expressed in post-

apartheid policy and planning as an outcome of policy. It responds to a more general call from theorists and practitioners from the fields of planning and development who have taken up the question of sustainable development, and concluded that the theoretical or conceptual frameworks for addressing sustainable development are inadequate. To allow for any meaningful debate on sustainable development to be pursued into the future, and to ensure its long-term credibility, theoretical clarification of the concept is necessary.

More specifically, the new developmental role of government in a post-apartheid context has necessitated a re-vamping of the policy arena with the introduction of a number of inter-related policy objectives, including sustainable development, that broadly aim to re-dress inequality. Although sustainable development was initially associated with an environmental agenda, it has gained strength through its potential to foster transformation and democratisation. However, there is evidence that, between rhetoric and local level implementation, a gap exists which is resulting in the further political exclusion of the environment, a failure to address the needs of marginalised communities, and an undermining of confidence in processes of public participation.

In this paper, it is argued that not only does a gap exist between sustainable development rhetoric and practice, but also, far from engendering consensus, the processes of policy formulation and implementation are typically conflict-ridden. Furthermore, it is suggested that these policy processes fall short of attaining their goals due to the fact that policy processes are generally set up in an instrumental fashion, paying inadequate attention to policy as a social phenomenon. These points are demonstrated by drawing on a local case study of the South Durban Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), which was recently carried out as an action point emanating from Durban's Local Agenda 21 programme, the aim of which was to formulate a policy intervention to foster sustainable development for the area. In tracing this policy process, the paper aims to move beyond the technical mechanics of the process, to uncover some of the political realities that help explain the policy-implementation gap, as well as the nature of the competing forces. It is hoped that this will provide new insights for the nature of environmental politics in a post-apartheid era, and hence contribute towards answering the call for a clarification of the theoretical and conceptual understanding of sustainable development alluded to earlier.

Before presenting an analytical framework through which to examine the case study material, one caveat and two points on the broader applicability of this enquiry are presented. Firstly, reference is made here to the subject of enquiry as that of environmental policy, despite the fact that the contribution that is being made concerns sustainable development. The author's intention is not to suggest that the two are one and the same thing. Conscious of the contested and multiple discourses that abound, as well as the environmental roots of the sustainable development agenda, these two terms, together with "sustainability" are used loosely and in a holistic, non-sectoral sense. They are conflated out of concern for brevity and convenience, where the intention is not to exclude other traditionally "non-environmental" factors that are essential for a sustainable policy outcome. Secondly, despite the fact that the direct relevance of the enquiry here is linked to a key feature of Local Agenda 21 and sustainable development, i.e. local level participation, it is believed that there will be some strong resonances across the board for policy interventions requiring public input as a means of increasing

democracy in decision making. And finally, even though this paper does not deal directly with the pressing agenda of poverty as we traditionally understand it, it seeks to raise important questions for planning in areas that already have what can be considered an “adequate” level of basic services, but still suffer from issues of marginalisation on two accounts; these communities still suffer from environmental injustices, with limited scope for influencing decision making; and they fall within the blind spot that exists in policy and planning interventions that prioritise and support areas of greatest need, and hence poverty in a traditional sense, above areas that are seemingly better off in terms of service provision.

2. Technical Processes, Political Realities

There is a multitude of ways in which the policy-action gap can be addressed. Critiques of policy responses to sustainable development have shown that conceptual difficulties with the mainstream definitions of sustainable development, together with inadequate debate on what we require from a sustainable development agenda in the light of available resources, have resulted in a lack of operational clarity. Furthermore, contradictory approaches towards sustainable development are being reflected in policy, resulting in inappropriate implementation strategies. The point of entry here is to shed some light on the actual process of policy formulation, specifically the role of scientific knowledge in environmental policy and the implications this has for addressing issues of democracy and decision making. As such, the main conceptual contribution of this paper is to provide some insights into the way more global processes of modernity affect how expert and lay knowledges are used in local policy interventions aiming to promote a sustainable development agenda.

Widely ranging levels of inequality in South Africa have resulted in an equally wide range of environment and development issues that need to be addressed through policy and planning. On the one hand, there are communities that are adversely affected by the low density, long term risks associated with living at such close interface with the environment; and on the other, communities affected by risks that are less easily detectable and arising directly from processes of modernity. It follows, therefore, that strategies and interventions for rural, informal, formal, and industrial areas will vary significantly. Policy interventions therefore need to be, first and foremost, geographically and context contingent, where levels and nature of inequality, culture and politics are important components of context.

A blanket approach to sustainable development that lumps all environmental issues together will clearly not suffice. The fractured polarised nature of South African society will result in multiple framings of environmental problems and priorities, all of which are highly contested. It has been shown that the principles upon which sustainable development is based are inherently interest-based and are hence divisive. Sustainable development strategies and interventions have traditionally assumed a homogenous context of equal need and solidarity, and have typically sought to recognise and act on common interests and hence a focus on consensus building. However, in reality, there are power differentials at all levels. It is increasingly realised, therefore, that sustainable development does not always achieve reconciliation, but rather, in defining it, conflict is exposed more starkly.

A number of environmental variables come into play in the case study, primary amongst which is the issue of air pollution and its links to public health, with key institutional interventions falling within the realms of environmental democracy. When one considers that environmental problems like air pollution are increasingly of a non-material nature in a period which has been referred to as “late modernity”, there is an increased reliance on experts and scientists for the detection of, and the provision of solutions to, these problems, which in turn gives experts the pole position in defining agendas. A key feature of environmental problems is therefore that they are strongly characterised in scientific terms, even though science is often at the root of the problem itself.

Two inherent goals of environmental policy should be a) to change behaviour and b) to gain political support for initiatives. Although both of these variables are interrelated, the former is a more complicated goal to achieve as it is dependent on addressing a number of institutional and attitudinal issues. It is argued that gaining political support is often undermined by a dependence on science for the framing of environmental problems, and for the defining of solutions to these problems, which serves to de-politicise the social reality of these environmental problems. Insufficient attention is paid to the lived realities of the people who are subject to these impacts, resulting in a strategy that is not supported by the people and institutions that are directly affected by the policy intervention. This leads to increasing levels of distrust between civil society and formal institutions of government, which is more about a lack of faith in structures of government, rather than the ideals of sustainable development.

3. The South Durban Strategic Environmental Assessment

3.1. Background

Apartheid planning policy resulted in a complex land-use mix in the South Durban area, with poorer, racially-based residential areas, heavy industry, an international airport and port infrastructure all juxtaposed in a relatively small area (Figure 1). The complex land-use mix is compounded by the geography of the area, with the topography being a basin, with frequent inversion layers and poor circulation, resulting in accentuated air pollution problems. Issues of social injustice, together with the environmental injustice imposed on the communities due to the pollution levels, have not only resulted in severe ill feeling on the part of residents, but have also imposed serious constraints on future industrial development.

The area is in a state of economic decline, with industries relocating to new office parks emerging elsewhere in the city, little new investment, and few prospects for viable job creation. Local communities are concerned about their health, safety and well-being, while some businesses and industries seek sanction to expand in order to maintain competitiveness in global markets, in an increasingly degraded physical environment. In short, if one considers the three traditional pillars of sustainable development, the economy, the social environment and the natural environment, the situation in South Durban is clearly unsustainable. However, the impending movement of the airport to LaMercy (north of Durban) provides the opportunity for strategic thinking about the possibilities for change in a more sustainable direction.

In response to a number of development proposals that were being made for South Durban, and strong pressure from local communities, a Strategic Environmental Assessment was commissioned by the Environment Branch of the City Council in late 1996. An SEA as a tool in environmental decision-making aims to provide proactive policy inputs, taking into consideration the cumulative and combined effects of environmental, social, economic and institutional factors. The South Durban SEA followed directly as an action point from Durban's Local Agenda 21 Programme. The inherent guiding principle of Local Agenda 21 is that of sustainable development and local level partnerships. Other principles influencing the study included the Metropolitan Development Principles, Durban's strategic vision for the future, and objectives defined by the community leadership in South Durban. The SEA was initially commissioned by the South Central substructures of the Durban Metropolitan Council (DMC) which appointed the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) in November 1996 to carry out the R2 million project, which was submitted to the DMC at the end of 1999.

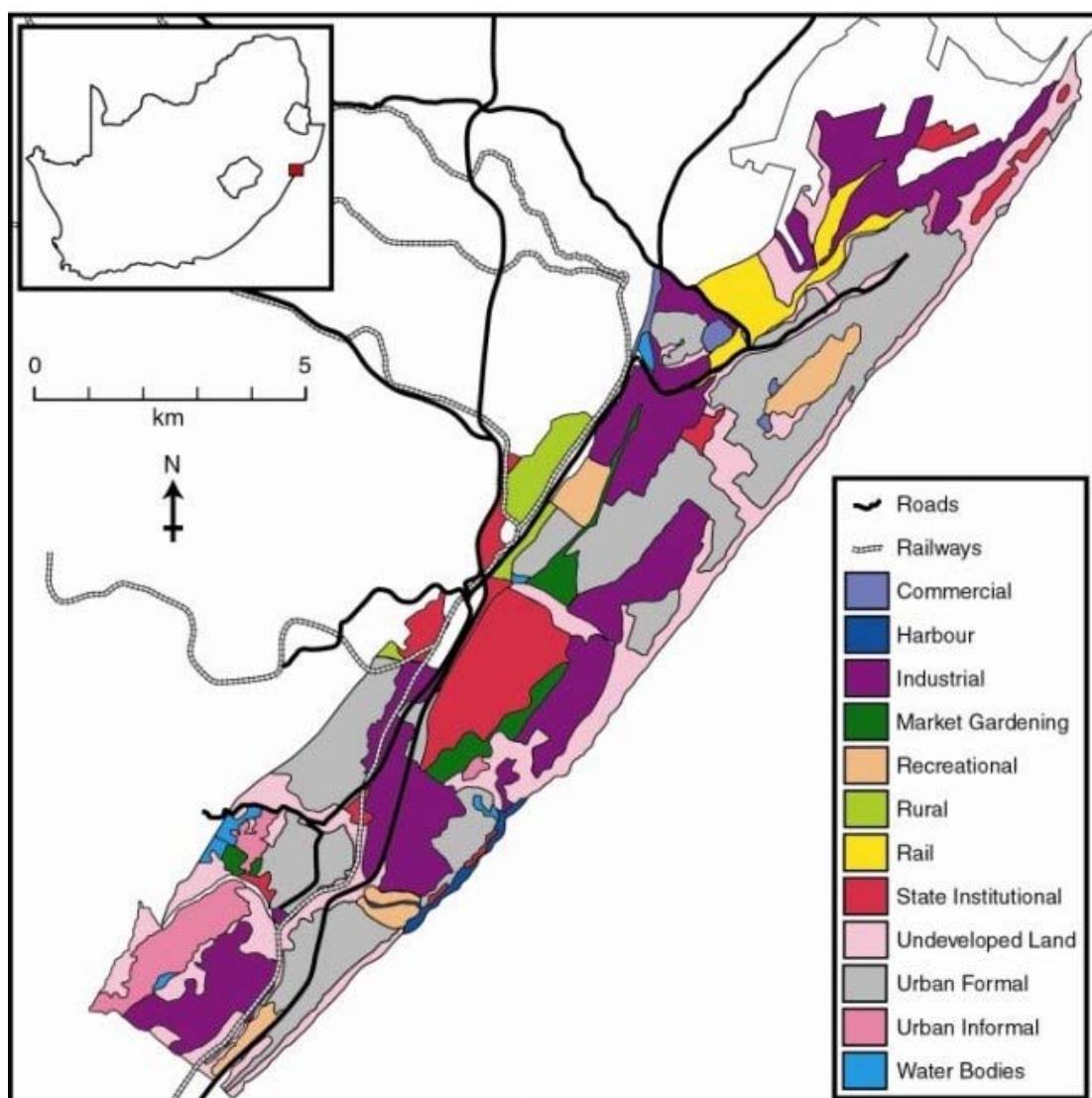


Figure 1. The study area

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Biographical Sketch

Zarina Patel joined the University of Witwatersrand School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies in October 2002. Her research interests are broadly within the field of urban sustainable development. Zarina has pursued her interests in Environmental Politics, Governance and Policy, as both a researcher and a practitioner in a range of institutions: including the School of Development Studies, University of Natal; the Durban City Council; the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research; and most recently, she project managed “Greening the World Summit on Sustainable Development”. She completed her PhD, entitled *Rethinking Sustainable Development: Power, Policy and Practice in South Durban*, through the University of Cambridge at the end of 2001. Her current research focuses on competing values in local environmental governance in Durban. Zarina serves on the Board of the South African National Parks.

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