Turning brownfield land into a successful green space

Regenerating derelict land into green space is a popular land use policy, but it is not always considered successful. Recent research examines six case studies and concludes that evaluations of greening projects tend to ignore social and environmental impacts. More continuous and focused monitoring is needed.

The urban environment is an important area of EU land policy and is the subject of one of the seven thematic strategies set out in the Sixth Community Environment Action programme. Brownfield is land that has been previously used and developed but is now currently vacant or derelict. Its regeneration into green space is often a target for land use policy.

Urban green spaces serve many environmental and social functions such as containing storm water, providing habitat for wildlife and as a place for local residents to relax. The economic benefits are harder to quantify, but include improved land values.

The researchers reviewed evaluations of brownfield greening projects. While definitions of a successful greening projects vary, the focus tends to be economic, despite the difficulty in quantifying the financial benefits. The concept of ‘success’ also tends to centre on the funder or developer’s needs, and under represents other stakeholders. For example, the social and economic wellbeing of the surrounding communities are often not considered.

This study suggests a framework for measuring success called the ‘logic model’. This describes brownfield greening projects in terms of inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes (or indirect outputs). Examples of outputs could include the area of land regenerated and facilities provided, whereas outcomes could include biodiversity targets and cohesive communities.

The researchers applied this framework to six case studies of brownfield greening projects. The projects aimed to establish trees/woodland and provide quality green space with social and amenity value as outcomes.

The aim of establishing trees and woodland had only been partially successful at the case study sites. Soil quality was poor and metal deposits had accumulated in leaves, causing poor tree health and growth. The development phase of the project was not continued after the trees were planted, which may have contributed to poor tree health. Ongoing monitoring of the projects’ aims could have prevented this.

Public surveys indicated that green spaces were not always considered to be of a high social and amenity value. Sites were not always used by a range of diverse groups and respondents highlighted aesthetic and design problems such as litter and water-logged paths.

The study does not disregard the efforts of the case studies but questions their evaluation. It suggests that the success of brownfield greening projects should not be judged on the attainment of one final desired state. Instead it should be continually evaluated in terms of on-going aims and objectives to ensure areas of concern are picked up earlier. This requires more focus on outcomes, as suggested by the logic model, and a flexible monitoring process which involves a broad range of stakeholders.

1. See http://ec.europa.eu/environment/urban/towards_com.htm


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