

Science for Environment Policy

Local people place different values on urban sustainability indicators

Progress towards achieving a sustainable urban environment may be measured by sustainability indicators (SIs), which can be chosen to represent values that are important to local communities. A recent study has assessed a set of SIs developed by both sustainability experts and local citizens and suggests that local communities can attach different values to SIs to reflect local values and understandings of sustainability.

Despite a number of SI sets having been developed to measure urban [sustainability](#), there is no single set that can be applied to all [urban](#) areas. On-going debates about how to choose the indicators have primarily focused on two methodologies: one expert-led, with SI sets mainly developed by scientists, academics and/or formal organisations, i.e. a top-down and hierarchical approach; and the other, citizen-led, where SIs draw on local knowledge by involving the public and community groups, which is a bottom-up and participatory approach.

This study explored how integrating both of these approaches can address limitations of both to produce a practical set of SIs that reflects 'local sensitivities' of urban sustainability, in a particular urban context (residential-led urban regeneration). It developed a new set of urban SIs by selecting from five existing lists of SIs which have been relatively well established in the public domain. To make the process transparent, the choice of SIs was refined during participatory consultation with 25 sustainability experts and 38 community representatives/leaders and stakeholders from three urban areas in the north of the UK.

The new set of SIs was grouped under four central themes: economic sustainability; social sustainability; environmental sustainability (natural; housing and built-environment; and services and facilities); and institutional (or governance) sustainability. Subsequently, these indicators were discussed with 134 residents drawn from the three communities. During face-to-face interviews, participants received an explanation of what the SIs were and how they had been tailored specifically for their communities. The residents were then asked to rate how important each SI was to them.

Looking across the three areas, the residents agreed that the chosen SIs captured issues that were important to them and their communities, and that they represented their concept of urban sustainability. For example, Over 60% of residents rated 'energy use' and 'green open space' as 'very important' and over 50% rated 'waste recycling' and 'water use' as 'very important'.

However, there were some differences among the three areas in terms of value or importance placed on different SIs. For example, in two areas, regeneration schemes had targeted creation of 'local jobs' and support for local 'business activity' and these two indicators were therefore seen as more important by local residents. These different perceptions of the same indicators suggest that, in addition to measuring progress towards urban sustainability, policymakers can use SIs to reveal how local communities operate and can be 'measured,' and how, in turn, this affects various aspects of sustainability. This information can also be used to stream policy targeted at urban sustainability so it complements and adds to local values and understandings of sustainability.

Finally, and despite the set's planned all-inclusiveness, when tested, the residents from the three urban areas suggested a number of additional SIs, including 'levels of traffic pollution' (to reflect concerns about increased traffic from new residential development). The study demonstrates that, despite best efforts, SIs are rarely comprehensive and fully representative of local contexts, as they do not always pick up on underlying local conditions which shape urban sustainability.



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