



Social sustainability: Do-it-yourself urbanism, start-it-yourself urbanism

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ABSTRACT

Many definitions of social sustainability focus on community engagement and economic equity as the main determinants of social sustainability. Measures to achieve social sustainability need to address (a) poverty, and (b) poverty-generating mechanisms or social and political exclusion. Governments do not take adequate steps toward social sustainability. Self-help actions of communities are an alternative route to social sustainability. Self-help actions have three main features: community leadership, focus on short-term implementation, and limited resources. Do-it-yourself (DIY) urbanism often refers to the self-help actions of communities to meet their basic needs like shelter by making changes in the urban space without government permission and resources. DIY urbanism is helpful to social sustainability more in the Global South, but it has limitations in the meaningful addressing of poverty. Start-it-yourself (SIY) urbanism refers to the ‘start’ of self-help actions (or their gesture) by communities but with the intention to pressure public and private bodies for permission and resources. SIY urbanism is helpful to social sustainability more in the Global North, but it has limitations in addressing poverty-generating mechanisms. This is because of some deals that SIY urbanism makes with public and private elites in exchange for resources to better address poverty impacts. However, we propose that SIY urbanism might be able to integrate the two aspects of social sustainability.

1. Introduction

1.1. Social sustainability

Environmental sustainability, economic sustainability, and social sustainability are the components of sustainable development. Social aspects of sustainability, referred to as social sustainability, is the least developed dimension in the theory and practice of sustainable development (Shirazi and Keivani, 2019). A basic definition of social sustainability is “Development (and/or growth) that is compatible with harmonious evolution of civil society, fostering an environment conducive to the compatible cohabitation of culturally and socially diverse groups while at the same time encouraging social integration, with improvements in the quality of life for all segments of the population.” (Polese and Stren, 2000, 15-16).

Sachs (1999) identifies several constituent elements for social sustainability, including equitable incomes and access to dwelling, goods, services and employment. Shirazi and Keivani (2017) note that social sustainability involves the key concepts of equity, democracy and social engagement, and some other concepts resulting from them including

safety and security, sense of place, and quality of the built environment. Sachs (1999) argues that cultural sustainability supports social sustainability through development which integrates diverse values, and that political sustainability supports social sustainability through participative development for collective benefit (also: Vallance et al., 2011). Many definitions of social sustainability focus on community engagement and economic equity as the main determinants of social sustainability (e.g., Magis and Shinn, 2009; Larsen, 2009; Murphy, 2012; Opp, 2017). These determinants of social sustainability are interrelated. In other words, long-term poverty is caused by social and political exclusion that block access to resources and opportunities needed for life improvements (M-Keivani et al., 2020).

In short, social sustainability may be defined as “the economic, cultural, and political inclusion of different individuals and groups in development.” (Ziafati Bafarasat, 2023). As such, measures to achieve social sustainability need to address (a) poverty or economic exclusion, and (b) poverty-generating mechanisms or social and political exclusion (Friedmann, 1996).

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1.2. Social sustainability by do-it-yourself and start-it-yourself urbanism

The expansion of urbanized environments has significant implications for social sustainability. It often leads to a concentration of economic deprivations in some neighborhoods and local communities. These pockets of economic deprivations exacerbate social and political exclusion that generate poverty (Patel and Shah, 2021). Traditional, top-down responses to these problems of social sustainability have not been helpful. By contrast, sometimes they drive the poor away from their settlements and further limit their access to resources such as affordable food, employment, and solidarity (Durizzo et al., 2021). Another response to the problems of social sustainability has been a particular type of community action that is inspired and funded by the government. However, community groups are rarely given the power to choose how they should be involved, how resources should be allocated, or how key decisions should be made (Gilbert and Ward, 1984).

As such, communities with unmet needs might choose to combat poverty and socio-political exclusion through self-help. These self-help initiatives usually have three common features: community leadership, focus on short-term implementation, and limited resources (Cavola et al., 2010; Iveson, 2013). Meanwhile, self-help might take two broad forms: do-it-yourself (DIY) urbanism and start-it-yourself (SIY) urbanism (Moulaert, 2010).

In short, DIY urbanism may refer to the self-help actions of communities to meet their basic needs (e.g., shelter, drinking water) by making changes in the urban space without government permission and resources (Tulumello, 2019). SIY urbanism refers to the 'start' of self-help actions or their gesture by communities but as a pressure tactic to gain permission and resources (Chaskin and Garg, 1997). In other words, the community uses an insurgent pose to make a deal with public and private bodies for their support of the community's projects. According to such deals, the community undertakes developments that serve both the community (e.g., affordable houses, playgrounds) and the interests of public and private bodies (e.g., a large parking lot, tourist resort) (Mayer and Keyes, 2012). Meanwhile, a community that becomes a development entity might gradually lose its original purpose and organizing capacity by acting in accordance with the requirements of its government and private sponsors (De Souza, 2006). As such, SIY urbanism helps with poverty relief, but during its development activities, the community might lose the ability to prevent and address future poverty (Farah et al., 2014).

However, this review proposes that SIY urbanism might provide alternative futures for disadvantaged urban dwellers and support social sustainability (Farah et al., 2014). To support social sustainability, SIY urbanism needs to put in place mechanisms to ensure its community organizing and development aspects go together. This review covering 50 years (1971–2021) of community organizing and development provides insight into how this might be realized.

2. A genealogy of start-it-yourself urbanism and its potential

Start-it-yourself (SIY) urbanism is a term we have coined for a concept and practice which could be traced back to the work of Twelvetrees (1989). Twelvetrees argues that neglected areas need citizen organizations that mobilize people and pressure the government and the private sector to make resources available. Making resources available means ensuring that necessary resources are accessible and available to all (Ziafati Bafarasat et al., 2023). This includes food, utilities and infrastructure, housing, healthcare, education, and employment in underserved areas (Devas, 2001). This mechanism of community action to access resources also tackles social and political exclusion. It provides the community some power to choose how they should be involved, how resources should be allocated, and how key decisions should be made (Certoma and Notteboom, 2017).

SIY urbanism applies starter actions that signal radical 'possibilities' (Rubin, 1997). The intention is to provoke but not alienate authorities

(or even attract retaliation and policing) for the subsequent negotiation. Examples of such starter actions are demonstrations and minor un-sanctioned uses of the urban space as applied in the deprived neighborhood of Fruitvale, Oakland, USA (Kirkpatrick, 2007). In this example, subsequent negotiation of the community with urban elites resulted in replacing of a multi-level parking project with a project that integrated commercial real estate developments with subsidized housing, a non-profit medical clinic, a farmers' market, and facilities for childcare, family and youth, literacy and employment training (Squazoni, 2009).

In contexts where deprivation and social exclusion are more common, the starter actions of communities might become more radical to meet their basic needs. In an autobiography of his struggle for Janata slum in Mumbai, India, Arputham (2008) mentions:

"After a year, I had become known as a leader or agitator for the settlement. We would write to the authorities asking them for something or saying that we were making a water connection or something else, and we would put in the letter: If you do not respond in 10 days, we will assume that we have your approval. One Saturday, we installed a connection to the water pipe – that was illegal. On Monday, the municipal corporation staff came with the police to remove the connection... we reinstalled it that night... "In 1967/68, the Bhabha Atomic Energy Commission gave notice to the people living in Janata colony that they should vacate their land...I got involved in a kind of community association mobilizing against this... The management of the Atomic Energy Centre treated us like shit... They would not negotiate with us, they would not recognize us." (Arputham, 2008, 324-325).

As self-help actions (or their gesture) start, the community will need to better organize in terms of mission, bureaucracy, and leadership to have standing for reaching out to decision-makers (Bailey, 2012). In this outreach, the community organization creates a micro-scale system of governance that invites government and private actors to participate (Moulaert, 2010). The purpose is to negotiate opposing claims and arrive at a deal that serves both community needs and broader stakes (Cavola et al., 2010). For example, in the Eldonian Village of Liverpool, UK, following some community demonstrations and confrontations with the city council over public housing, Tony McGann, a charismatic community leader, helped to organize the community into the Eldonian Housing Co-operative in 1983 (Roberts, 2008). The Eldonian Housing Co-operative reached out to the city council and central government with proposals to get development permission and funding (Leeming, 2000). It acquired the site of the former Tate and Lyle sugar refinery with grant support from the central government and loans to redevelop it for housing (Leadbeater, 2001).

According to Thomas's (1991) ladder of community development, communities may reach the final stage of owning and managing local facilities after the stage of working with policymakers (*the tenth rung*). However, some governments, particularly in the Global South, may not be open to negotiation with assertive grassroots. This would lead to the failure of SIY urbanism in such contexts meaning that DIY urbanism would be more helpful for immediate poverty relief. Meanwhile, democratic governments in the Global North may see a political benefit in openness to engaging with the grassroots. However, these governments may set institutional conditions for support and potential funding of grassroots communities (Bessant, 2005). For example, the local community might be required to establish a community development corporation (CDC) or a community land trust to undertake its projects. These community development entities often build affordable houses, food markets, playgrounds, etc., for the community *as well as* market-rate houses, shopping malls, tourist facilities, etc., for capital growth (Heil, 2018).

Community development entities like CDCs are non-profit. They combine their equity and government and foundation subsidies with private investments often supplemented by voluntary labor from members (Bailey, 2012). However, CDCs usually establish profit-making

subsidiaries that own, manage, rehabilitate and market housing, and broker economic development deals (Rubin, 1995). This is because CDCs need to increase revenue to sustain their growing bureaucracy or boost their credit score in response to lenders' expectations (Pichardo, 1997). Marquez (1993) describes three CDCs serving Mexican-American neighborhoods, the Mexican American Unity Council in San Antonio, Chicanos por la Causa in Phoenix, and the East Los Angeles Community Union (TELACU) in Los Angeles, as multi-million-dollar corporations with bureaucratic modes of operation. TELACU, the largest of the three, explains its involvement in for-profit activities as follows:

“Utilizing a unique business model -The TELACU Model - for community and economic development, each and every business TELACU owns and operates has a double bottom line - profitability that is inseparable from social impact. The parent, non-profit CDC owns and operates a family of companies called TELACU Industries. These for-profit businesses not only provide valuable products and services to the community; but they also provide the economic means for TELACU to sustain its non-profit community-focused entities.” (TELACU, n.d).

CDCs and their similar entities may ultimately end up working like business bodies and private landlords. They might serve the interests of their investors more than their community. This outcome is called the co-optation of CDCs (Froelich, 1999).

3. Overlaps between do-it-yourself urbanism and start-it-yourself urbanism

Both DIY and SIY urbanism offer grassroots alternatives to top-down development. However, they have differences in their focus and methods. DIY urbanism often provisionally meets basic needs through quick urban changes without government permission and resources (Talen, 2015). SIY urbanism seeks to reliably meet basic needs by gaining permission and resources (Rubin, 1997). For DIY urbanism, community organizing is a source of peer support and voluntary labor in usually unsanctioned changes to the urban space (Iveson, 2013). For SIY urbanism, community organizing is a lever of pressure to bring city officials and other stakeholders to the negotiation table, and it is then a source of voluntary labor for projects which result from that negotiation (Bailey, 2012).

DIY and SIY urbanism might both involve practices of appropriating urban space and infrastructure to serve community needs. DIY urbanism tries to hide these practices from city officials to enable them to serve the community for longer before they are stopped by city officials. However, SIY urbanism tends to confine appropriating practices to less serious and more gesture expressions, but it brings them to the attention of city officials. It is because the main purpose of SIY urbanism from these practices is to push the government toward negotiation about reliable needs satisfaction (Iveson, 2013). Provisional practices of appropriating urban space and infrastructure involve a broad range from making swimming pools from dumpsters to squatting vacant lands and buildings for community markets and services, food growing, housing, etc. (Talen, 2015). Squatting is occupying an unoccupied land or building (usually residential) that the squatter does not own, rent, or otherwise have legal permission to use (Pruijt, 2013). Some suggest that urban squatting can provide empowerment for neglected communities (Pruijt, 2013). However, squatting is illegal and often provisional, bringing about more cognitive empowerment (e.g., seeing empty land as an opportunity for needs satisfaction) than reliable material empowerment. Urban squatting might be linked to both DIY and SIY urbanism, but like other expressions of insurgent urban practice, it tends to be less common and less serious in SIY urbanism (Iveson, 2013).

Both DIY and SIY urbanism involve insurgent visioning. Meanwhile, insurgent visioning in SIY urbanism tends to be less stubborn, and it further declines over time in cooperation with urban institutions. An insurgent vision consists of a critique of the present situation and the statement of an ideal and principles of justice beyond those enshrined in

law. An insurgent vision establishes an adversarial relationship with public policy (Miraftab, 2009). Insurgent visioning is a strategy employed by less privileged citizens to hold officials accountable for their civil and political rights and actively agitate for social and political gains (Irazabal & Neville, 2007). Insurgent visioning in DIY urbanism may stigmatize negotiation with policy elites for small gains within the existing order (Miraftab, 2016). In other words, insurgent visioning in DIY urbanism might involve subversive urges that advise systematic squatting for poverty relief. This, as Verma (1995) suggests, could incapacitate the community for reliable material gains. Some parts of insurgent visioning by CREA Toulouse – a network of squats in Toulouse, France – is quoted below as an example of this:

“There are more and more empty houses, and more and more people live on the street. So, we expect nothing from the state and the authorities who mock us; we directly requisition empty buildings with those who need them. ... This form of housing allows us to emancipate ourselves, to take time to reflect on other forms of life, and organization ... We do not receive any subsidies and we do not want them. We rely on solidarity and sharing ... We have no leaders and we do not want them. Everything is decided at the General Assemblies which are open to everyone... We believe that the state is not the solution, that it is part of the problem” (Translated from CREA Toulouse, n.d.).

Cognitive empowerment (liberation) is another overlap between DIY and SIY urbanism. Cognitive empowerment enables individuals and communities to see unnoticed opportunities in the space for needs satisfaction. It sets people free from the thinking box of the authorized uses of the urban space (Talen, 2015). Although cognitive empowerment exists in both DIY and SIY urbanism, it may gradually decline in both. In DIY urbanism, cognitive empowerment might decline because of a lack of continuous satisfaction of needs in unsanctioned uses of the urban space. In SIY urbanism, cognitive empowerment might decline in adaptations to working with urban institutions (Knoche, 2004).

4. Conclusion

Community engagement and economic equity are the main determinants of social sustainability. Measures to achieve social sustainability need to address (a) poverty, and (b) poverty-generating mechanisms or social and political exclusion. DIY urbanism is helpful to social sustainability more in the Global South, but it has limitations in the meaningful addressing of poverty. SIY urbanism is helpful to social sustainability more in the Global North, but it has limitations in addressing poverty-generating mechanisms. However, SIY urbanism might be able to integrate the two aspects of social sustainability. To this end, we propose for a community two separate entities of organizing and development with mutual functions of checks and balances. The development entity addresses poverty, and the organizing entity addresses poverty-generating mechanisms. In other words, the development entity provides community needs like houses, food markets, and playgrounds, and the organizing entity holds the development entity to account to ensure that it does not act like a business entity and continues serving the community. However, this arrangement may not be always feasible in disadvantaged neighborhoods and communities, as it requires a mature political culture among community members. Meanwhile, where it is not possible to create this arrangement, SIY urbanism still provides some meaningful poverty relief before the community development entity starts to become business-oriented.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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