



## Sustainability—differently

**Mirek Dymitrow<sup>1,2, CDMR</sup>, Keith Halfacree<sup>3, CDMR</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Chalmers University of Technology, Mistra Urban Futures, Läraregatan 3, 412 96 Gothenburg, Sweden;* <sup>2</sup>*University of Gothenburg, School of Business, Economics and Law; Department of Economy and Society – Unit for Human Geography, Viktoriagatan 13, 411 25 Gothenburg, Sweden;* <sup>1</sup>e-mail: [mirek.dymitrow@chalmers.se](mailto:mirek.dymitrow@chalmers.se); <sup>2</sup>e-mail: [mirek.dymitrow@geography.gu.se](mailto:mirek.dymitrow@geography.gu.se) (*corresponding author*); <sup>3</sup>*Swansea University, Department of Geography, Singleton Park, Swansea, SA2 8PP, UK;* <sup>3</sup>e-mail: [k.h.halfacree@swansea.ac.uk](mailto:k.h.halfacree@swansea.ac.uk)

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**Abstract.** It is increasingly appreciated how all societies contain many ‘wicked problems’ or socio-cultural challenges that are multidimensional, hard to pin-down and consequently extremely challenging to solve. Obtaining functional and inclusive societal organisation is not a simple matter of ‘doing it’ by subscribing to winning formulae as there are, for example, many choices to be made in the process. Moreover, given that conceptual frameworks always guide thoughts, judgments and actions, how we relate to ‘sustainability’ specifically becomes relevant if we aim to achieve a more liveable society. This journal issue expressly engages with the consequent need to recognise this complexity. It assembles a set of ‘brave’ takes on far-advanced problems bedevilling conventionally conceptualised paths towards sustainability. Arguing against oversimplification that comes from domination of polarising concepts and unquestioned practices and rhetorics, the aim is to foster explorations into new territories from which we may learn. Ultimately, the desire to deconstruct pernicious divisions and create new hybrid syntheses can progress sustainability.

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## 1. Setting the scene: *Age of Migration* meets *Urban Rural Gothenburg*

A defining feature of the globalisation that is supposedly one of our contemporary 21<sup>st</sup>-century *zeitgeist* contexts is the heightened prevalence, prominence and pertinence of all forms of mobility, not least that of human migrations. Thus, in a celebrated text now in its 5<sup>th</sup> edition, Castles et al. (2014) outlined an *Age of Migration* seemingly continuously scripting the world anew. And whilst many of these global migrants are relocating for work, family and/or lifestyle, many others have very little choice of when and where to go as they flee their homes as equally diversely displaced refugees (Barcus, Halfacree, 2017).

Sweden is one country widely-noted for its policy of relative border and official openness to such refugee flows. Although with a population of under 10 million persons, it received 340,000 refugees between 2013 and 2017 (Migrationsverket, 2017). Yet, as is the case elsewhere, on arrival in Sweden these refugees do not generally simply socially ‘vanish’ into an abundant, accessible and welcoming prosperous and contented society (*sic.*) but frequently immediately become embroiled in the challenges posed by a second key feature of our times, the quest for a more sustainable society.

‘Sustainability’ is itself mobile, a slippery and elusive concept to pin down precisely. In essence though, it is a quest set for humanity to attain the long-term continuity of that which is valued in the world, maintaining the best of what is there already but allowing and even promoting changes for the better (based on Adams, 2005). Commonly, it is re-phrased as ‘sustainable development’, adopting the definition from 1987’s highly-influential Brundtland Report of ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (cited in Adams, 2005: 286). Moreover, an overtly holistic emphasis is central to the concept but highlights the considerable sustainability challenge. The need is for humanity to accept responsibility and act: to rein in ‘endless’ growth for economic sustainability; solve the Earth’s numerous environmental crises for ecological sustainability; and realise an equal, diverse, socially cohesive, high-quality, fairly governed and

democratic order for social sustainability (Washington, 2015).

Entanglement of the aforementioned refugees to Sweden with this country’s challenge to attain the economic and social dimensions of sustainability, in particular, is well demonstrated in the city of Gothenburg. As is the norm in Sweden (and elsewhere), refugees arriving in the city and granted residence permits are typically wind up in specific districts where apartments are available but which may be very challenging for them to reside in rewardingly from other perspectives, such as through suitable employment and rewarding community relations. Others, moreover, in lieu of such apartments, are forced to reconvene with friends and relatives already living in the city. Unfortunately, as noted generally for refugee-receiving countries, such practices often result in the emergence of clusters of far-reaching poverty and even social unrest. Thus, with Gothenburg’s north-eastern districts having received almost every second immigrant, pressing housing shortages have reinforced and helped to lock-in a depressing pattern of poor living conditions, ill health and dire future outlooks (Göteborgs stad, SCB, 2016). Indeed, Gothenburg remains a more generally socio-economically segregated city, in strong need for enhanced development to increase the level of self-sufficiency for *all* its residents. It needs to find new ways to break negative patterns (cf. Tillväxtverket, 2016) and create the desired experiences of meaningful economic and social sustainability for all. In other words, for the sake of sustainability in Gothenburg as a whole, the negative trends in some of its parts have to be broken.

Of course, Gothenburg is far from alone in the world in being challenged to sustainably address the issues of increased numbers of impoverished refugee migrants (Papademetriou, 2017) resident in already depressed neighbourhoods. While such extensive migration is predominantly scripted, not least through civil society and more right-wing politicians, in a largely negative light, more nuanced research has shown there to be significant positive potential for such migration for various stakeholders (cf. Veebel, Markus, 2015; Anthias, Pajnik, 2014), “including the countries of origin, host countries and communities, the migrants themselves and the wider global society” (Al-Husban, Adams, 2016:

460). Realisation of this potential, however, remains elusive and certainly requires going beyond simply repeating rhetorical calls for multiculturalism and realisation of the dormant potential of refugee human capital.

Within Gothenburg, after many more conventional efforts to settle refugees sustainably have had limited success, there has come the EU-sponsored *Urban Rural Gothenburg* project (2017–19). This has a strikingly different agenda with respect to usual articulations of the ‘refugee problem’, eschewing endless expressions of ‘inclusive rhetoric’, for example. Instead, focused on the impoverished north-east of the city, it is seeking more implicitly to incorporate migrants within its overall aim to achieve broader social and economic sustainability through improved conditions for green innovation and green business development. It also wants to link and transcend physical and conceptual boundaries between city and countryside, especially important given that the north-east forms a transitional zone between the two spheres.

Operating in five test beds and four local hubs, *Urban Rural Gothenburg* tests low-carbon approaches and links them to food production, logistics, tourism, and new business models. Through promoting cooperation between the city, the business sector, residents, civil society and academia, *Urban Rural Gothenburg* aims to contribute to the fulfilment of the city’s wider sustainability goals, as set in 2017. These span the holistic frame of sustainability to involve, for example, combining innovations for social improvement with reduction of the city’s environmental and climate impact, promoting a sustainable Gothenburg with global and locally equitable emissions (Göteborgs stad, 2016).

And yet, despite these overt good intentions, innovativeness and inclusivity, *Urban Rural Gothenburg* has sparked considerable controversy. It has faced some opprobrium and a torrent of vitriolic comments from both national and international media, including occasional academic interventions (Karlsson, 2017; Jörnmark, 2018). The project has been accused of fuzzily-formulated goals with questionable evaluation markers and unmeasurable targets. It has been mercilessly characterised as “green, locally grown intercultural waste” (Bred, 2017) and as “some kind of exotic circus with immigrants, an-

imals and cultivation plots”. An interviewed refugee resident even supposedly classified the project’s efforts as colonialist, stating that “Had I wanted to work with animals or farms I would return to Namibia” (cf. Jörnmark, 2018), an articulation that has initially placed the project into some disrepute. Despite being led and developed by reputable investors, this level of critique directed at an intended embracing project has, amongst other things, acutely raised the suggestion that sustainability – seemingly still more so where refugees are involved – truly is one of society’s ‘wicked problems’, in need of much detailed attention if we are to realise its imperative-ness. The need, in short, is for consideration of what we are calling ‘sustainability—differently’.

## 2. Sustainability—differently

As Al-Husban and Adams (2016: 451) argue, “[s]ustainable long-term solutions ... will require a rethink to the existing dominant models of containment and charity”. While *Urban Rural Gothenburg* is only one amongst a flurry of intrepid projects globally trying to think outside the box, it manages to capture and epitomise the character of several recurring problems haunting our society today and, arguably, progress within it. ‘Sustainability’ seemingly falls, like poverty, migration, food shortage, ethnic tensions, climate change and informality, within the definition of a ‘wicked problem’ (Rittel, Webber, 1973; Peterson, 2009; Blok et al., 2016).

Succinctly put, a wicked problem is a social or cultural problem that is difficult or impossible to solve. In other words, its ‘wickedness’ comes from its difficulty of resolution rather than it being somehow ‘evil’. Wicked problems are “complex and messy” (Peterson, 2009: 71) for numerous, often overlapping, reasons (after Rittel, Webber, 1973):

1. They have no definitive formulation or definition;
2. Individual wicked problem typically bleed into others and are also often symptoms of other problems;
3. There is no conclusive end-state to arrive at;
4. There is no template to follow, not least because every wicked problem is unique;

5. Wicked problems always incorporate more than one explanation;
6. Strictly scientific strategies are unhelpful because wicked problems are ultimately social inventions;
7. Attempted 'solutions' to wicked problems are frequently overly narrow and limited one-shot efforts;
8. Trying to resolve wicked problems entails huge levels of commitment and responsibility.

Building on point 6, wicked problems typically arise from the almost built-in imprecisions emergent from language, representation and the construction of concepts. For example, concepts, once established, inevitably change more slowly than culture and society, not least because of various psychological and socio-material factors (West, 1985; Hodgkinson, 1997; Bruner et al., 1999; Anderson, 2007; Winthrop-Young, 2014; Dymitrow, Brauer, 2018). Moreover, concepts governed by powerful mental schemata become easily embroiled in common parlance – lay discourses (Halfacree, 1993) – and are further entwined in various more or less rigid institutional structures (Kegan, Lahey, 2009; O'Brien, 2013). What happens is that, over time, constitutive aspects of an outbound concept decreasingly support its purported analytical and explanatory value, and the concept reciprocates less and less with the needs of society.

One example of a wicked problem expressing conceptual inadequacy involves how we conceptualise space through language in the concepts 'rural' and 'urban' (Halfacree, 1993, 2006). As scholarly evidence thoroughly notes, these concepts are widely recognised as cultural constructs rather than sets of geographically precise spaces (e.g. Dymitrow, 2017a, 2017b; Dymitrow, Stenseke, 2016; Bosworth, Somerville, 2014; Brenner, 2013; Woods, 2011; Scott et al., 2007; Halfacree, 1993, 2006, 2009). Steady, fast-paced transformations in the environmental, economic and social dimensions have generally rendered simple spatial classifications inadequate to social and planning theory, especially – as here – those rooted in an old dichotomous imaginary that defies the contemporary reality of interconnectedness in a globalised world. However, although 'rural' and 'urban' today should perhaps best be under-

stood almost exclusively as 'categories of thought', 'narratives', or 'conversational realities', they continue to assume more robust and supposedly authoritative identities that enable them to underpin large sectors of societal spatial organisation as acceptable guiding perspectives. Furthermore, due to increasing rural-urban blurring and the lack of satisfactory working definitions, there is now an ever-greater likelihood that a lack of reflexivity directed at these terms in both 'rural' and 'urban' policy and planning may severely confound informed analyses and the making of sound development decisions.

In the Global North, for instance, practices of urban farming (including animal husbandry, aquaculture, agroforestry, beekeeping, and horticulture) mostly take the form of social movements for sustainable communities founded on a shared ethos of nature and community holism but also as a branding activity directed towards tourists (Cavallo et al., 2016; Prové et al., 2016; Dymitrow et al., 2018). Nevertheless, considering current (in-)migration patterns and Northern cities' often large-scale unemployment and poverty, Northern urban food production has begun taking on elements of food security and safety dimensions more usually associated with urban farming in the Global South, not least in the face of rising food prices (Lawal, Aliu, 2012; Miccoli et al., 2016). Yet, this more 'materialistic' sense of farming is still strongly associated in the representational imagination with the rural rather than the urban. Consequently, continuing to keep food-oriented rural and urban policies separate – along with their associated practices and geographical associations – may be most unhelpful (also visible in the case of *Urban Rural Gothenburg*).

As with urban and rural, the migrant issue cannot be addressed one-sidedly through simplistic, typically dualistic, representations. Notwithstanding the widely – and justifiably – critiqued concept of a 'migrant problem', supposedly positive migrant discourses can also prove unhelpful. While motivated mainly by a desire to help refugees and by a vision of multiculturalism as a positive driver for socio-economic development, problems experienced by migrant communities can as a result be swept under the carpet so as not to confuse the discourse. A wicked problem – there is no apportionment of blame here – is misleadingly and ul-



timately unhelpfully made ‘tame’ (Rittel, Webber, 1973). In Sweden, for instance, the National Criminal Investigation Service stated in 2016 that “more than 50 areas were now labelled as ‘no-go zones’ as sex crimes, attacks on police, drug dealing and children carrying weapons were common occurrences” (Stromme, 2017). Stories like this, in turn, stoke the proliferation and popularity of right-wing, nationalist parties, often as a sign of protest. So, while the term ‘multiculturalism’ generally assumes the existence of relationships of mutual respect despite ethnic, religious or political differences (inherent of cities like New York, London or Amsterdam), it is perhaps unsurprising that often traumatised and abused immigrants from war-torn zones frequently do not inscribe themselves into that definition. Multiculturalism implies hybridity (cf. Forsberg, 2005) – “a process of cultural translation, which is agonistic because it is never completed, but rests with its undecidability” (Hall, 2000: 226). One might even say that political correctness, itself a problematic term, rather than sound, pragmatic solutions to *real* problems, obstructs adequately-nuanced engagement with the wicked problem. As Shapiro (2015) acutely observed, “[a]nytime [we] put a modifier in front of a term that is inherently good [we] turn it into a perversion of itself”: in this respect, ‘political correctness’ is no longer a question of true or false (i.e. ‘correctness’) but a conscious avoidance of consequences and complexity.

And so, to return directly to the wicked problem of sustainability. Understood this way, it is clear that it cannot be reduced to simple representation and to any equally simple and one-dimensional prescriptions that come from this. Instead, we must recognise how “[n]o definitive formulation of the problem exists; its solution is not true or false, but rather better or worse; stakeholders have radically different frames of reference concerning the problem; constraints and resources for solution change over time; and the problem is never solved” (Peterson, 2009: 81). We do, though, need to work on ‘solving’ this problem – to make our world more sustainable – and this imperative must involve disentangling substance from instinct and facileness from complexity, especially in cases where knowledge is incomplete, fragmented or contradictory. Certainly, for the case of sustainability, letting this problem remain unresolved for largely political

reasons or from inadequate levels of understanding will have potentially highly negative consequences for the stakeholders; ultimately all of us. So, instead, let us open up discussion by beginning to approach sustainability—differently...

### 3. The eleven perspectives

In view of the outlined problems, this issue of the *Bulletin* assembles a set of brave takes on far-advanced problems that seem to counteract conventionally conceptualised paths towards a more sustainable society. It has been 30 years since the Centre for Our Common Future was started in April 1988 in the wake of the Brundtland Report, and we are still a very long way from recognising any reasonably sustainable world. Thus, on this anniversary, the 40<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Bulletin* has motivated us to invite scholars of different affiliations to write and share their reflections on alternative ways towards sustainability within their respective fields. Embracing a desire to argue against the domination of polarising concepts and questionable practices, the eleven papers that follow have fostered theoretical, philosophical and practical explorations of new ways to address the wicked problem of sustainability.

Arsovski et al. (2018) address the problem of severe pollution in Skopje in the face of costly nationalistic urban development programs, which place ‘glittering façade’ identity building before health preservation and overall welfare priorities. The authors make a case for sustainability as an intricate concept and the sometimes-immense friction between its three facets (economic, ecological, social). Its realisation in extreme cases such as Skopje must engage currently lose–lose situations of shattered prosperity (EU/NATO non-inclusion), social fragmentation (ethnic tensions) and the world’s most polluted city. The authors elaborate on how such situations can both be resolved and counteracted.

In the sight of sustainable “urban futures”, the study of ordinary, non-‘world’ cities cannot be side-lined. Dessie (2018) tests the robustness of social-ecological resilience thinking in this context by removing it from its home turf in ecology and applying it to an element of postcolonial urban theo-

ry. The analysis suggests that, despite its perceived discomfort, resilience thinking has the potential of contributing to advancing sustainability within a theory that views all cities as 'ordinary'.

Positive Development (PD) theory, on the other hand, proposes a set of physical, institutional and intellectual constructs that could reverse the toxic relationship that cities create with their natural life-support systems. It states that urban environments, if retrofitted with net-positive design principles, could become drivers of social and ecological transformation – at no extra cost. Birkeland (2018) examines representative sustainable urban policies, tools and incentive schemes through this positive prism to show how they omit the biophysical prerequisites of sustainability.

In a context of increasing concerns with urban food security and vulnerability, Olsson (2018) elaborates on how urban food strategies are produced within wider sustainability aspirations and often cover multiple UN-SDGs (United Nations Sustainable Development Goals). Importantly, as Olsson shows, these strategies often include more than the city-region itself by involving and linking the urban-rural regions. In this aspect, the author calls for the utility of such urban food strategies in the anticipated sustainability transition efforts ahead.

Food strategies resurface in the paper by Marino et al. (2018), which analyses the strategies of farms adhering to Alternative Food Networks (AFN) in relation to their proximity to city markets in Italy. Deriving from a dataset of 217 sellers, they demonstrate the existence of a territorialisation process, identifying four main AFN strategies. The recognition of these results can make it possible to identify targeted support strategies for AFN farms, with a view to improving rural-urban connections.

Rural-urban linkages, but also labour markets and migration policies, reappear in Eriksson and Tollefsen's (2018) paper on wild berry global food chains originating in Norrland, northern Sweden. The challenges of sustainability cannot be addressed without taking into account place and industry-specific patterns in producing and reproducing labour relations. Eriksson and Tollefsen provide a different narrative of the wild berry industry by centring on Thai migrant workers and the production of a distinct spatiality with a starting point in a particular place in the desolate interior of northern Sweden.

The enduring problem of peripherality, although in a different connotation, resurfaces in Wójcik et al. (2018)'s richly contextualised account of a Polish experience of transition. The authors relate the case of Wieruszów County, a locality both "on the edge" of administrative regions and "on the inside", i.e. between regional centres of socio-economic activity and growth. The present strategy for overcoming peripherality of the area focuses on the newly built expressway as a strong potential trigger for changing its economic profile into a strong intermediary centre and engaging with its loss of young well-educated population elements.

Transport, and particularly public transport, is a challenge in many cities in the Global South and especially within unplanned settlements. Onyango (2018) explores the experiences of the residents of the informal suburban areas of Kisumu City in Kenya, which comprise half the city population, where local entrepreneurs have taken advantage of the versatility and affordability of the bicycles, motorbikes and so-called *tuktuks* (covered motorbikes) in providing affordable public transport for the urban underserved.

Indeed, managing 'informality' and the informal economy represent major policy challenges for sustainable urban development in the Global South. In the context of post-apartheid South Africa there has emerged a substantial segment of international migrants in the informal economy. Examining the case of inner-city Cape Town, Rogerson (2018) reveals 'limits to sustainability' in the face of city policy makers failing to acknowledge contributions made by international migrant entrepreneurs for the urban economy, even seeking to exclude them via the politics of residence permits and the challenge of obtaining supporting finance.

South Africa resurfaces in Kotze's (2018) account of the practice of community-based conservation within a management authority structure. Using the example of Driftsands Nature Reserve, the author investigates critically how community-based conservation can develop and contribute to sustainable conservation economies. Through the exploration of values held by community members and management authority staff the sustainability of community-based conservation in this context is scrutinised.

The topic of community values segues into the final paper by Hansson (2018), which explores the

key importance of trust in urban planning if we are to find different ways of achieving sustainability. As participation and inclusion have been confirmed as necessary tools in planning processes, Hansson's investigation of a Swedish case – the Gothenburg suburb of Hammarkullen – shows how local configurations of trust shape the possibility of opening up planning processes to the influence of residents.

#### 4. Conclusion

Back where we started, in Gothenburg, it can be concluded that 'sustainability' merits an 'approach with care' warning. The aim of this issue has been to highlight some of the tenets of the complexity that make sustainability such a 'wicked problem' through a number of different perspectives, many of which have to date been pushed into the background amidst an otherwise exceptionally rich geographical literature on sustainability. Obtaining sustainability involves thinking differently, even if such thinking must also sometimes both provoke and cauterise dissent and revisit divergent ideological standpoints in order not to dismiss out-of-hand new possible ways towards supposedly common goals. Furthermore, not least given the embedding, not least through language, of wicked problems more generally, stirring up this hornet's nest from time-to-time may even be a requirement in order not to elevate 'sustainability' to the status of some unexamined special currency, out-dated understanding or empty rhetorical 'tick-box'.

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