Abstract:
Currently, various dimensions of sustainability are being discussed in relation to housing both on the scientific and on the policy and practice level of European cities and regions. However, discussions tend to address the issue in a fragmented way.
Thus, 'integrated sustainability', namely the simultaneous consideration of all three dimensions of the concept, lacks a coherent theoretical framework that can be applied to policy and practice. This paper aims to address this gap and to bring thought-provoking insights from policy and practice initiatives from the urban and housing fields to the scientific discourse. To do this, the paper will draw on findings and recommendations from a recent EU project involving local authorities from nine European cities: the 'SUITE – Integrated Sustainability in Housing’ project within the URBACT Programme.

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Reflections on Integrated Sustainability in Housing

Introduction –

*Reflections on the dimensions of sustainability, and their use in the European Policy discourse*

Currently, various dimensions of sustainability are being discussed in relation to housing both on the scientific and on the policy and practice level of European cities and regions. However, discussions tend to address the issue in a fragmented way, i.e. focusing on just one or two of the three pillars of sustainability. In addition, the debate is characterised by great diversity in terms of data comparability and of geographical and cultural contexts.

Thus, 'integrated sustainability', namely the simultaneous consideration of all three dimensions of the concept, lacks a coherent theoretical framework that can be applied to policy and practice. This paper aims to address this gap and to bring thought-provoking insights from policy and practice initiatives from the urban and housing fields to the scientific discourse. To do this, the paper will draw on empirical findings, conclusions and recommendations from a recent EU project involving local authorities from nine European cities.

The main aim of this project, SUITE – Integrated Sustainability in Housing, carried out in the framework of the EU programme URBACT in the context of the European Territorial Cohesion Policy, was to cooperate among partner cities to optimize sustainability in housing by means of an affordable supply of housing, social cohesion and high environmental standards. The URBACT programme promotes 'sustainable urban development' based on the Leipzig Charter from 2007 on 'Sustainable European Cities'.

Methods of data collection included: structured surveys amongst the cities on each of the three pillars of sustainability (social, environmental and economic) and one on the synthesis of the three; outcomes of discussions held at workshops with representatives of each partner city and other experts and stakeholders; and a review of secondary data on the cities and the issues under discussion. These findings were systematised and conceptualised by both authors. In addition, by means of so-called 'Local Action Plans' findings have been tested with a view to achieving 'integrated sustainability' at city level.

These results provided the opportunity to enter a European discussion, by publishing, presenting them at a final conference in Brussels in March 2011 and presenting and debating at various seminars with a wide variety of stakeholders. The Toulouse ENHR Conference 2011 was a key moment to discuss some of the main ideas on a scientific level.

**Conclusions from the SUITE exchange process -**

*Sustainable housing: an ambitious but worthwhile goal*

The SUITE project posed itself an ambitious question: how to integrate the three pillars of sustainability in the field of housing. What does this mean? As defined initially by the project, sustainable housing should be, at the same time, environmentally sound, economically viable and socially inclusive. Achieving these three goals in one project at the same time is indeed an ambitious aim. While there are many initiatives dealing with the issue of housing sustainability, evidence shows that most of these have focused on one or at the most on two of the three components. Often, the lack of resources or the need to achieve quick results has led to 'sustainability' being hijacked by a specific bias within the three dimensions of the original concept.

Therefore, tackling housing sustainability while balancing its three pillars has resulted in a challenging task. There are many reasons for this, such as lack of integrated planning cultures and strategies; scarce funding to fulfil all three (or at least two of the three) sustainability dimensions; different priorities, etc. However, as a result of a systematic exchange within this network, the work carried out by the SUITE partner cities over the last two years has born interesting lessons for other cities aiming at the same goal.
In this chapter we will summarize these lessons and turn them into policy dilemmas and recommendations by adopting a multi-level perspective.

**Integrating the three aspects of sustainability**

Within the three aspects of sustainability, some criteria have proven to be essential to be addressed:
- For social sustainability - social mix, needs of target groups, housing and services
- For economic sustainability – access to housing, avoiding indebtedness and eviction, affordability of good quality housing, but also: city budgets …
- For environmental sustainability – preserving resources, low-emission, running costs...

Table 1 provides an overview of the main lessons resulting from each of the three thematic meetings of SUITE. When asked about which of the three aspects was most difficult to integrate, the majority of the project’s partners answered the ‘economic’ aspect. Perhaps this answer relates not only to the availability of actual funding but also to highly volatile macro contexts (e.g. economic crisis, changing governmental agendas, regulation, etc.), which render this dimension more difficult to pin down at city level. On a second place, some partner cities also mentioned the environmental aspect as difficult. For example, for some cities from new EU member states, confronting a huge need of housing provision and of renovation of the stock while including the involvement of tenants / home-owners is not yet high on the agenda.

Last but not least, it was interesting to hear from partners that the ‘social’ dimension seemed to be the most included in their future actions. This contrasts with the overall tendency, as we explain later on, to overlook this aspect in the context of major development or city investment projects. Perhaps it is an issue of scale: at smaller scale, investing in social sustainability (e.g. contained, pilot-style projects) might seem easier, while at a larger scale this seems to be to costly and not effective enough.

Graph 1: Table - Main lessons of each of the three Thematic Meetings of SUITE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOCIAL:</th>
<th>ECONOMIC:</th>
<th>ENVIRONMENTAL:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social sustainability of housing depends on a variety of factors, amongst which <strong>social mix is one possible tool</strong>.</td>
<td>Despite the impact of the global economic crisis, <strong>housing affordability</strong> / <strong>housing exclusion</strong> has been and continues to be a problem in most cities. Therefore, <strong>sustainable solutions</strong> are needed, which go beyond contingent factors.</td>
<td>Environmental sustainability is <strong>holistic</strong>, it includes more than energy efficiency, i.e. a wide array of technical, urban and social measures. Higher <strong>initial investment can ‘pay off’</strong>: monitoring and evaluation shows positive effects. Some countries/cities are already <strong>mainstreaming high-grade solutions</strong>. There are numerous <strong>information platforms</strong>. To be user-friendly, innovative solutions have to be accepted by residents. <strong>Early resident’s involvement</strong> and easy descriptions are crucial.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be successful, social mix policies should count on at least two conditions: <strong>political leadership and funding</strong>.</td>
<td>From the Newcastle meeting, <strong>interesting initiatives dealing with housing exclusion</strong> were: Case management in prevention from eviction; Joined-up services and strategies linking housing and communities; emphasis on the social aspects of regeneration.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying social mix policies depends on a <strong>case-by-case assessment</strong> on whether it is necessary and feasible.</td>
<td><strong>Policy on homelessness in</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Social Sustainability Workshop showcased <strong>useful tools to implement social mix</strong> (e.g. life-cycle approach; planning and land use policies;</td>
<td></td>
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compulsory purchase; minimum targets of social housing; etc.)

Robust contracting agreements are needed to create a lasting consensus about regeneration of housing areas to develop a mixture of tenure, accommodation and people.

Newcastle was considered a good example, as well as the social work carried out with young people. Some partners (in particular, those from new member states) recognized that, while learning many interesting things during the meeting, they face a severe lack of funding to put anything in place.

Robust contracting agreements are needed to create a lasting consensus about regeneration of housing areas to develop a mixture of tenure, accommodation and people.

High-level new construction is easier. However, even modest solutions in the old stock have the biggest overall impact (renovation, running costs; residents’ information and training.)

However, a fourth and last meeting of the network focused on achieving a synthesis of these three groups of lessons. The aim was to realise the main objective of the project, i.e. to work on how to integrate the three pillars of housing sustainability.

Common traps and challenges were addressed. It became clear, that one main interest of the network is to find useful ways of ‘Good Governance’. These have been summarised in the following ‘six key principles’.

The added value of these principles, which refer to a more general level of policy and administration than only focussing on housing related issues, is that they can, and should, be used in a broad range of future urban planning and implementation dealing with a variety of issues. This has lifted the project’s findings to a higher level.

Six key principles for Integrated Sustainability in Housing

The outcome of the discussions held during that meetings could be summarized in the following general points:

1. Sustainable housing: complementarity and synergies

Partners recognized that in practice it is very difficult to fully integrate all three pillars of sustainability in one and the same project. In most cases there is a bias towards one or two of the aspects. For instance, the ‘environmental’ aspect is often privileged, perhaps because issues such as energy-efficiency are relatively easier to implement and to measure compared to social aspects, for example. In addition, short-term, output-oriented considerations such as those of elected politicians lead projects to dismiss aspects that require a more long-term vision to bear results, notably those related to ‘social’ sustainability. As pointed out above, only smaller-scale ‘social’ projects are put in place, which not always amount to longer-term social inclusion processes. Instead, concrete or ‘tangible’ outputs such as physical infrastructure or very targeted physical improvement measures that can be put to use fairly quickly tend to be favoured.

There is a strong case, however, to attempt the simultaneous implementation of the three (or at least two) pillars of sustainability. As partners highlighted, different aspects of sustainability tend to reinforce each other. For example, improving energy performance (environmental aspect) in residential buildings contributes to improving the economic and social situation of residents. Another example is the improvement of social integration of residents in a neighbourhood, which is likely to result in lower levels of anti-social behaviour and better care of the common areas, thereby enhancing the environmental quality of the neighbourhood/city. On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that partners also highlighted that to achieve these synergies and complementarity it is not necessary to aim for a 100% implementation of every aspect of sustainability. Insofar the three aspects are taken into account simultaneously in the same project, progress is made.
2. Need to balance short-term pressures with a long-term view

While it is true that there are strong political pressures to achieve short-term, tangible results when it comes to investing public money, it is also true that the very concept of sustainability implies a long-term vision that requires continuous commitment to the original goal. In fact, representative of SUITE’s partner cities highlighted ‘continuity’ repeatedly as a key success factor in sustainable housing projects. The importance of this element was demonstrated by the best practice examples visited and discussed by partners across the three thematic meetings. It became evident from these examples that continuity needs to stretch to at least three elements: a) Political leadership; b) Funding; and c) Collaboration between partners.

Robust institutional agreements, which cut across governments of different political signs, are key to achieving a coherent final result. In addition, this involves a good working relationship between all project partners: private, public, third sector, citizens, etc. Continuity and coherence throughout the project are key to make it work. As with the thematic visits, the best practice examples from SUITE partners have proven that high initial investments do pay-off in the longer term, such as in the case of: the comprehensive regeneration project of the Nantes Malakoff social housing estate; the current new construction program in Rennes; the Newcastle Riverside Dene refurbishment; the Hamburg large scale regeneration World Quarter, or small scale Greve's Garden; and also Santiago de Compostela's variety of new housing offers, based on a targeted land policy show promising results.

In the spirit of longer-term sustainability, evidence from the SUITE project shows that the value of prevention (of housing loss, of downgrading neighbourhoods, of high running costs and of early refurbishment needs) needs to be embedded in housing programmes on the local level. This requires a shift in budget planning, as illustrated by the example of Newcastle partner and their ‘Pathways to independence – assistance for young people under 18’ project (a detailed description of this project was published in the URBACT website).

3. The value of evidence-based policy making

Another lesson highlighted by partner cities was the strong role of knowledge and evidence in policy decisions in the cities visited. This was seen particularly in Nantes Métropole and Rennes Métropole, where technical teams are in a constant working relationship with elected politicians, feeding into every decision. Colleagues were impressed of the sound evidence base for policy making that this collaboration provides to each project. Another good example came from the British partner cities, Newcastle and Medway, where there is a consequent linkage of programs and projects with monitoring and evaluation, in addition to a strict time scale for feeding back and adjustments. On the other hand, Tallinn, despite being heavily hit by the global economic crisis (including the housing field) made an impression on the other partner cities by its early, pro-active recovery plan based on a sound data basis.

4. Integrating policy and actions across territorial scales

Project partners emphasised that sustainable housing cannot be seen in isolation from its wider territorial and administrative context. Sustainability is about networks, grids, and interdependencies between all these territorial/administrative levels. These interdependences stretch across the three dimensions, economic, environmental and social. To be sustainable at local level (housing project, neighbourhood), thinking about infrastructure and service provision at urban and regional scale needs to be embedded. Socially sustainable communities require social infrastructure such as schools, health centres, social care services that are at good distance / accessible to people not only by car, by public transport. Location of housing needs to be in connection with actual and possible job sources for its residents. Road networks, public transport systems, waste collection provision – all these and more elements of urban and territorial planning require holistic planning. As in the case of Nantes-Metropole and Rennes-Metropole, sustainable communities are built over time, through robust inter-sector and institutional arrangements. And, as stressed above, the success of these arrangements rely on sustained political and financial commitment over time. At the same time, this holistic, integrated approach requires a move towards a different ‘planning culture’ that avoids a fragmented vision of all these elements.
5. Working with enablers and obstacles
The project’s synthesis survey showed that it is crucial to identify, understand and work with ‘obstacles’ and ‘enablers’ to achieve sustainable housing. For example, we found that there are so-called “cocks of enablers”, i.e. not one single formula. Each city finds its ‘own way to sustainability’. Amongst the key factors mentioned by partners in this process are: working with human resources (i.e. staff skills can be the greatest asset or a big obstacle); collaboration between professionals and politicians; early resident involvement/support for sustainable housing projects; continuity of funding/political support/robust institutional arrangements, etc.

6. The West/East divide: a challenge to transferability
As with other URBACT (or in general, European) projects, the question arose as to what extent are lessons/experiences (i.e. Policies, programmes) transferable? While the partners from New Member States valued having access to experiences and examples from ‘old’ member states’ cities, they recognized being still far away in terms of resources, institutional capacity, etc. In addition, these cities are facing challenges on a higher scale, such as acute housing needs; a much stronger impact of the global economic crisis; policies strongly favouring home-ownership and transferring the older stock to the sitting tenants. On the other hand, often actors and stakeholders in these countries seem to be more engaged and interested, more open for innovative, unconventional solutions, and quicker in decision making as compared to their ‘old’ member states’ counterparts. In these conclusions we would just like to mention this divide, but it is clearly an issue that goes beyond the scope of one specific project or network. Indeed, this seems like a wider challenge for URBACT and for any transnational exchange in the EU.

Policy recommendations for Sustainable Housing at different implementation levels

The general points developed above can be declined into specific policy recommendations to be implemented at different scales or territorial/administrative levels:

Cities and regions
- Think ‘integrated’ from the beginning, on two fronts: sustainability triangle (economic, social, environmental) and across territorial scales (local/urban/regional).
- Choose one of the three pillars as a focus, and link to it the other aspects of sustainability.
- Secure local political support and leadership from the onset.
- Build trust over the long-term.
- Dare high initial investment – make a strong case to investors and decision-makers on the expected pay-off.
- Ensure robust institutional agreements as a foundation of the project.
- Integrate robust evidence and prospective analyses in policy-making.
- Consider maintenance of physical stock as greatly contributing to sustainability in some cases (e.g. Eastern Europe)
- Integrate 'soft measures' (services, empowerment) in physically driven projects.
- View homelessness policies as an integrated part of housing policy.
- Promote EU housing-related activities and contribute to the discussion from the cities-point-of view.

Those recommendations were summed up, in a nutshell, in six very simple 'key messages'

- Numbers – 1+1+1 is more than 3
- Time – give priority to the longer term
- Evidence – prove the value
- Extension – think big
- Mix – find the recipe
- And transfer – see the potential.
**National housing policies**
- Promote and support the integration of housing-related projects into your Operational Programmes (ERDF) and other EU-funded programmes (ESF and more), and secure national co-funding
- Actively promote the integration of housing-related funding at national level and within the future Cohesion Policy.
- Start a national exchange forum on how to proceed on a national to local level.
- Encourage progress from pilot projects to mainstreaming.

**European policies**
- Maximise the benefits from broader European frameworks in connection to housing and urban issues (e.g. funding, exchange, support for city-level initiatives, etc.)
- Support exchange and training activities on how to integrate housing related actions.
- Maximise funding opportunities through the cohesion policy and 2020 Lisbon strategy.
- Improve cross-fertilization between ‘West’ and ‘East’ policy transfer across the European Union by identifying obstacles and enablers.

**Towards a synthesis of the three aspects of sustainability in housing**

Housing plays a key role in progressing towards sustainable development in cities. As we have seen, the three dimensions of sustainability come together in housing to ensure better quality of life for urban residents: evidence has shown repeatedly that there is high potential for CO2 reduction, higher energy efficiency and quality of life in new and refurbished housing; affordable and secure housing is a factor of stability for households and society at large, in particular in the context of highly volatile markets and recurrent economic crisis. Housing can play a leading role in integrating and stabilising the most disadvantaged, boosting a more inclusive society, without isolating vulnerable households in difficult times. In addition, housing construction, refurbishment and services adds dynamism to the economy and creates jobs. However, these goals require broad cooperation of various fields. In an increasingly urbanised world, cities are on the forefront of the most pressing challenges of our societies and should therefore be encouraged and supported not only to meet these challenges but moreover to be frontrunners in creating solutions for integrated sustainability.

**Approach and methods**

A brief description of the project’s approach and methods used is added here for a better understanding of the background of these findings.

As previously mentioned the network brought together nine European cities or agglomerations both from 'Convergence Regions' and from 'Competitive Regions': Hamburg, Iasi, Krakow. Newcastle upon Tyne, Medway, Nantes Métropole, Rennes Métropole, Santiago de Compostela (the Lead Partner) and Tallinn. The exchange was structured, accompanied and moderated by experts: a Lead Expert, Heidrun Feigelfeld, and a Thematic Expert, Darinka Czischke, both authors of this paper.

Thematic focus groups had been created around the three 'pillars of sustainability'. Their work culminated in thematic workshops, plus, towards the end, the essential 'synthesis workshop' where the level of integration of the 'pillars' was tested and discussed. The final results were published in a report and broadly discussed at the final conference.

The network used various means for feedback inside and outside the groups, opening the discourse to a broader level. 'Inside', the basis of the work was defined by the help of a 'Baseline Study', written by the Lead Expert, integrating comprehensive fact sheets from the partner cities on their housing situation and interests. Small surveys via Thematic Fact Sheets' formed the basis for a comparative overview in
preparation for the Thematic Workshops. This material plus input from the experts and results from the workshop discussion were published in 'reports on the focuses'.

A 'Board of Counsellors' was associated with the network from the beginning so as better to include a European view of the issues discussed, and to provide access for dissemination. This board included EUROCITIES Working Group Housing, FEANTSA European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless and IUT International Union of Tenants. Still closer cooperation was organised with CECODHAS Housing Europe, the European Federation of Public, Cooperative and Social Housing.

A key instrument in URBACT projects to foster links to the local level and to initiate visible results was the commitment of each partner city to develop a Local Action Plan related to the project issue, co-produced with a Local Support Group, bringing together as many relevant stakeholders and groups representing people affected as was useful and possible. A Local Action Plan provides a concrete road map and a range of solutions. If feasible, these Local Action Plans should include funding from ERDF European Regional Development Funds based on the national or regional Operational Programmes.

Within the SUITE project, nine Local Action Plans on a variety of topics, forming part of local housing programmes were developed. Short descriptions are included in the final report and a broad range of findings are integrated in this article. All Local Action Plans succeeded in providing aspects of integrated sustainability.

The whole range of outputs can be found on the project website, please see the references.

Final remarks and outlook

Research and discussion on 'integrated sustainability in housing', and promotion of promising results should help to stress the importance of housing in the European context.

The starting situation is ‘favourable’ in itself. The financial and economic crises have shown the painful effects of aggressive housing markets, a very one-sided orientation in housing supply and the lack of public intervention connected with it.

A lack of transparency about the close interdependence of the housing market and the economy as a whole leads to political uncertainty about meaningful ways of using housing as a strong instrument in social policy but also in employment policy.

There are numerous specialist and academic studies proving the inter-relationships described. The role of European housing research (within the ENHR) as a backbone for European housing related policies is crucial. The facts can be backed up but public perception and especially that of decision-makers and stakeholders still leaves much to be desired. Together, research and European specialist networks and Forums must continue to stress the housing and urban question. The time for intensified efforts has arrived – especially for the upcoming process of discussion on Territorial Cohesion Policy from 2013 and the connected funding for housing-related issues.

Some References:

Publications


Reflections on Integrated Sustainability in Housing


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ENHR Conference 2011 Toulouse

Project:
