



Sustainable Places
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Debates in Sustainability Science

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From austerity to susterity: the urgency of progressing sustainable place-making and circular economies.

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Introduction: We need a new approach to the economy

As Matthew Spencer (Director of the Green Alliance, Inside Track, 30, 2012) has recently put it: 'the financial crisis has acted as an effective filibuster, blocking debate about both sustainable economics and the value of nature and natural beauty, but it doesn't have to be that way'. Out of the current financial and fiscal crises need to emerge a stronger policy, business and civic society partnership to progress the post-carbon and more 'circular' economy. Here in PLACE we are discussing how this 'ecological economy' could be progressed in different types of places: from city regions, to small towns, collections of villages, and water catchments. This is not just a matter of 'going local' and trying to resist the vulnerabilities of some of the global forces (not least financial) which seem to be largely beyond our control. Rather, it is to begin to appreciate that 'place-based'- solutions where the full range of economic and social assets and trading relationships can be assessed and acted upon- is a critical way to begin to frame the necessary adaptations we need to make in becoming more sustainable and resilient.

Bodies like the CBI, for instance, are urging governments to give clearer frameworks to support resource efficiency, and many leading businesses are calling for targeted government intervention so as to ensure that the full range of resources circulate more effectively in the economy. More so than ever, it is necessary to incorporate the possibilities of new forms of economy as part of sustainable adaptation. In the past we have been too restricted in seeing 'the economy' in either its abstract 'macro' or 'micro' framings, or assuming that its workings are necessarily antithetical to the environment. In fact there is not one 'economy' but complex and nested sets of different economies running through and between different places. This is particularly so when we consider the gradual steps towards the 'circular' or ecological economy. These framings have to embody or internalise a greater vector of assets, 'capitals'

and resources and services, and to suggest rearranging these in new and innovative ways such that new or revised markets can be created. Whatever the neo-liberal rhetoric, the role of government and the state is critical for this re-evaluation of the spatial economy to occur; and we need to take seriously the point that markets are there to be made and designed and not just responded to.

If we are to progress notions of 'green growth' we need a more sensitised and spatial approach to the encouragement of ecological economies. For instance, in the food sector many British cities are recognising the need to harness and foster new markets between themselves and the wider regions in which they are situated; creating innovative food strategies, charters and trusts which link food with community development, health and nutrition and place identity. Another example concerns the growing markets for household energy saving, renewable systems and the businesses and jobs these new demands are creating. Growing household and fuel costs and poverty in parts of our cities and neighbourhoods will require more urgent adaptation and policy innovation. Whilst aggregated notions of the need for adaptation and mitigation abound, it is at the lower spatial scales of cities, regions and the countryside where we are beginning to witness a more active and reflexive reassessment of needs and actions in delivering the sustainability transition. These place-based debates need to address the key production-consumption resource areas, such as energy, food, transport, household goods and services, water in more holistic ways. We need governments and planners to ask of their regions, of their cities and wider countryside, how can these key economic -ecological spaces be adapted in order to create more ecologically efficient systems of production and consumption? We need these regions, cities and the countryside to also ask of their governments and planners: how can innovative policy interventions help to stimulate their own distinctive ecological economies?

In Wales at the moment, and over the forthcoming years, we have a unique opportunity to be creative and innovative in this area, given the current government's ambitious legislative programme to further its sustainability obligations by a new Sustainability Bill and related Planning and Natural Environmental Framework proposals. At the same time there is a significant amount of interest and activity surrounding the adaptation of the key environmental and economic sectors concerning the creation of a more sustainable economy which embraces low or post-carbon thinking. At the UK level also the 'Green deal' could set forth an acceleration in the much needed harnessing of household water and energy usage in our cities, whilst a green investment bank could provide a much need stimulus (real and green quantitative easing!) for SME innovation in energy and waste management.

No doubt these issues will be hotly contested, but the times are ripe for both UK and devolved governments to stimulate the circular economy thinking at the same time as avoiding circular arguments, and to create new ways of intervening in developing ecological markets through more carefully customised and spatially sensitive policy interventions. It is not just governments alone who are responsible for this of course; we need a more aligned research and development base which can not only progress sustainability science in the laboratory and in the field, but also can refine ways to engage, vision and intervene more effectively with our partners in business, the community as well as government sectors.