

EMPOWERMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY IN THE URBAN SECTOR

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Abstract

This paper attempts to portray the causal relationship between empowerment and sustainability in the urban sector through an extensive review of contemporary literature. Sustainable development is a program to change the process of economic development so that it ensures a basic quality of life for the people, and protects the ecosystems and community systems that make life possible and worthwhile. Planning for sustainable development is a process that brings planning for economic growth, community development and protecting the environment into balance with each other. It involves negotiation among the primary stakeholders in these three spheres. Sustainable development requires building partnerships amongst the stakeholders because it is a balance between the interests of business, environment and community development.

The most important relationships in society are those of power. They are relationships of domination. Power relationships make it possible to defend existing rights (including, but not restricted to, property rights) and to create and acquire new rights. Power relationships determine whose rights count and whose voice is heard in decision-making.

Any product of an urban settlement is the resultant of financial capital; physical capital; human capital, social capital: including institutions, relationships and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions; and last but not least, natural capital. The mixing of these factors of production is the function of decisions made according to power relations. Those powerless groups often incur the cost of these decisions because they are represented when decisions were made.

In developing countries, usually powerless groups, such as the youth, women, slum residents and squatter dwellers.etc. or future generations pay the costs of environmental pollution because they are often absent when decisions are made. Their voices are not heard for one reason or another. In developed countries, illegal immigrants and colored minorities usually pay these costs. The market forces cannot and will not consider the views and interests of powerless groups, since they do not have the initial endowments to support an effective demand. By the same token, institutions, even in democratic states, pay little attention to these groups of population, since their votes might not count, or they are not well organized. Empowering these groups is a process by which they gain the ability to influence outcome-oriented outputs that have political, socio-economic, gender and knowledge implications. A plan for sustainable urban development often includes a component for knowledge sharing and empowerment that will likely prove to be the most difficult to realize.

Planning for sustainable urban development requires transformations in the profession, theory and education. For planners to be able to plan for sustainable development there is a need to acquire skills and competencies beside those technical ones they have acquired through formal education and training. Planning for sustainable development requires three dimensions of knowledge: technical knowledge for analytical actions, inter-subjective knowledge for communicative actions, and critico-ethical knowledge for enlightening and empowering the public.