BOOK REVIEW

The struggles and success in community sustainability efforts, a book review of - Hope and hard times: Communities, collaboration, and sustainability

Cooksey Christy

University of North Texas, Denton, TX, USA

It is not without trial and error that communities move forward in pursuit of becoming more sustainable. In his book, Hope and hard times: Communities, collaboration and sustainability, Ted Bernard follows a selection of communities throughout the United States from the 1990's to 2010, outlining the path to identify, seek out, and remedy constraints to becoming more sustainable. For students or city leaders seeking to understand the defining characteristics of a sustainable community, Bernard successfully illustrates the dynamic difficulties, while at the same time praising the "collaborative conservation" efforts of individuals and groups involved in movement towards a more sustainable future (193).

The unique nature of this book is in the detailed exploration of the path communities take to become more sustainable through the process of collaborative construction of plans of action, assessment, and, when necessary, reconstruction of pathways to ensure continued progress. Bernard demonstrates that communities must strive to become better while adopting new technologies and knowledge for the purpose of strengthening existing social systems and the surrounding natural environment. The reader is invited to develop a deep understanding of the struggles that independent landowners, activists, and businesses face while working with each other and local government to preserve culture and environment in development of successful sustainable business practices. The delicate interplay between invested community activists and stakeholders creates a sense of urgency and understanding for the reader, something that is all too often glossed over within the literature.

Throughout the book, and within each community discussed, there are real discussions of how each member of the movement worked tirelessly to help plan for the bottom-up grass-roots activism and top-down policy management of sustainable development within the community. These are real discussions, real solutions, and real results. In this way, this work fills a need within the literature by demonstrating that reality is oftentimes messier while at the same time more rewarding, illuminating the misconceptions that the promise of sustainability seems to embody.

Bernard demonstrates that sustainability planning within various communities is as diverse and complex as the communities for which the planning is designed. Obstacles of today's sustainability efforts lie in not only the complexity of the decision-making process, but also and almost surprisingly in things as basic as the conceptualization of sustainability itself. For instance, Bernard states that even the [term] "environment obviously mean[t] different things to different people," and that some people define sustainability as a "cutting-edge urban form," while others would say it is more the embodiment of "equity" (223). The difference here is that the former description of sustainability is focused on aesthetics and commerce first, with equity second, while the latter is focused on equitable outcomes for individuals first and profitability second. As such, each group may conceptualize the movement towards sustainability in different ways which, in turn, complicates the sustainability design process. Interestingly, Bernard found that even if basic differences such as this exist, the communities remain able show some progress towards the original goals of increasing sustainability for the community. Simply put, some progress is better than no progress and demonstrates a movement in the right direction for these communities.

Movement towards a more sustainable community is not a linear advancement towards a fixed endpoint as it is often one step back for every two taken. Moreover, even "sustainability as a word is not always helpful" as it has become associated with various side interests or profitability as one mayor stated (235). This may be because the word itself has been so overused or abused that it has fundamentally "lost its meaning" and has become more of a sales pitch for business growth by those who consider finances first and the environment second (235). In this way, groups in these communities have spent their time defining and redefining the future of their sustainability path. It becomes evident while reading that sustainability is a dynamic process by which communities fight oppositional forces to move towards increased social equity, environmental justice, and economic profitability. For instance, community leaders and activists still face uphill battles that resemble the David versus Goliath like struggles seen at the beginning of the movement, even after 20 years of work. In fact, even if a community has shown substantial promise due to strong sustainability leadership in the beginning, it is not immune to the struggles seen in communities with weaker leadership. Part of the issue is that political leaders may come and go while community activists remain dedicated to the hope for increased sustainability, having to re-pitch sustainability with each change in political leadership.

Bernard discloses when failures to meet sustainability expectations result in disappointment of city activists as nerves wear thin from decades of weaving through an oftentimes muddy political process in the quest to increase social equity and environmental health. He warns that even when there is an increase in policies designed to move towards a greener city, it should not be given the stamp of a 'sustainable community' if there remains inadequate effort to dissolve social inequality. Prematurely labeling a community as sustainable only leads to a stifled sustainability planning model and

the inability to think past immediate crisis management. To overcome the stifled sustainability models of "crisis management and response," (261) each community needs to enter that "third wave of the environmental movement" (252) whereby individual community members accept responsibility and work in tandem with city leaders and local business in creation of "human-ecological systems" (257). In this regard, readers are left with an encouraging report from this work in that progress is possible amidst the trials. Moreover, once the threshold of acceptance and ownership of sustainability with human-ecological systems has taken hold among, individuals, politicians, and business owners, it becomes much easier to make changes that benefit the growth of sustainability. Among the blunt illumination of the pitfalls and difficulties faced within these communities as they struggle to move towards a sustainable future, Bernard has teased out some common benchmarks that indicate community progress in moving forward towards these goals. These benchmarks demonstrate a real positive movement towards the original goals, even in the face of much trial and adversity along the way within these communities.

First, each of these communities are navigating the "journey" of sustainability with the help of a "visionary leadership," someone or group which leads the community in response to an immediate crisis (258). To necessitate initial action, an overwhelming crisis of great magnitude imposing on the environment or people leaves little choice was but to take action. At this point in response to the crisis, change is necessary, and the visionary leadership can gain traction quickly to correct the crisis. Depending upon the strength of the visionary leadership, the sustainability movement is defined at this point. Changes to the traditional business-as-usual approach are adopted to accommodate repair of the crisis. If the visionary leadership is strong, those changes can set a strong foundation to the impending sustainability movement in the community. If the visionary leadership is weak, the foundation is weaker and takes longer to develop. No matter the strength of the visionary leadership, the success of dealing with the crisis itself leads to collaborations which, in turn, lead to a continuance in working towards sustainability.

Second, the collaborative effort to correct for crisis, led by the visionaries, creates a place or places within the community whereby community members can gather as a community, enjoying the efforts of the movement. For instance, imagine a crisis such as toxic buildup in a local river necessitating an effort to clean and revitalize the area, which then results in an appealing riverfront park surrounded by a healthy and clean environment. Areas such as these become the prized location for future celebrations and community gatherings to celebrate the natural environment. Of course, the third and final benchmark that each of these communities have in common is crucial. That is, the community must want a continued success and growth of a more sustainable future and have a willingness to dedicate time and energy into securing funding for future projects, despite obstacles faced. The community must coalesce with the stated goal of designing and fighting for increased sustainability within the community, even without immediate crises. Each of the

presented communities in this work have these three main benchmarks in common.

These benchmarks provide evidence that a certain resilience must exist that allow for the communities to persevere in the sustainability movement based upon the extent to which each community has dedicated time and effort into the human-ecological systems. This book contributes to existing literature as Bernard has outlined a set of benchmarks that define what it means to be resilient in the pursuit of increasing sustainable community development. Each community discussed within the book, whether they are wildly successful or not in the pursuit of sustainability, demonstrates the complex interplay between individuals, policy, economy, and the environment.

This book is more informational as opposed to a feel-good cheerleader for the sustainability movement. In that regard, it is beneficial to read this book when seeking to understand the practical aspects of planning for sustainability at the community level and to gain an understanding of what to expect in the field.

References

Bernard, T. (2010). Hope and hard times: Communities, collaboration and sustainability. Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers.