



Informed cities, making research work for local sustainability

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BOOK REVIEW

Informed cities, making research work for local sustainability, edited by Marko Joas, Kate Theobald, David McGuinness, Cristina Garzillo and Stefan Kuhn, Abingdon [Oxon], Earthscan, 2014, 173 pp., US\$190 (hbk) (Amazon), ISBN 978-0-415-71256-9; US\$54.95 (pbk) (Amazon), ISBN 978-0-415-71256-9; US\$54.95 (ebk) (Amazon), ISBN 978-0-415-71256-9

This book by Joas et al. takes its title from a project of the same name run by the European *Informed Cities Initiative* (ICI) in 2009–2012, which collected and analysed primary data on the use of urban sustainability monitoring tools (i.e. urban sustainability indicators) by European local government authorities. The book takes the form of a report on the findings of this project, in case-study fashion, and with a strong focus on two particular tools (*Urban Ecosystem Europe*, EEU and *Local Evaluation 21*, LE21), as well as limited, complementary discussions of knowledge brokering theory in the first and last chapters. This is important to note since, for the unknowing reader, the title and preface actually suggest a more theoretical or analytical angle on the issue of knowledge brokering.

Of the book's nine chapters, six are dedicated to the presentation of case studies in the use of urban sustainability indicators by local governments (often outside brokering processes with researchers/academics) (Chapters 2–7); another (Chapter 8) presents case studies of successful brokering experiences of various types (i.e. research projects, secondments) between local government agencies and local universities; and two others (Chapters 1 and 9) have a more theoretical orientation (literature review, blue-sky recommendations for local government–academia partnerships).

The contents would be relevant for anyone studying urban indicator tools in general, and the hurdles for their implementation and continuity by local government in particular. In that regard, it is important to note the book contents rest heavily on the side of local government, with a rather superficial and often uncritical view of the role played by research institutions in brokering processes.

Possibly the main contribution of the book is in its systematic, large-scale exploration of the systemic and/or institutional problems that make it difficult to obtain high-quality, timely data on the state of the environment in cities. It approaches the fundamental question of *why is it so hard to monitor the state of the environment in cities?*, based on direct consultation with government officials.

Whilst some of the causes for these gaps have long been known to practitioners and researchers (i.e. inadequately resourced projects, lack of political support and leadership), this continent-wide exercise hits the spot in showing the sheer pervasiveness of failures in the social institutions and the governance systems that are blocking efforts to understand and progress sustainability (Chapter 6, by Sam Grönholm, on the implementation of LE21 is highly valuable in that regard).

Putting aside the fact that the book falls short on its promise to address broader knowledge brokering processes for urban sustainability, its main weaknesses have to do with its nature as a project report: analysis does not stretch too far beyond the bounds of the project (what stakeholders say is the end, not the starting point for further scholarly enquiry or contrasting against theory or other data); it contains a surfeit of bureaucratic history (project titles, government departments, acronyms, dates) which make uninteresting reading and risk dating very quickly; since most chapters draw from same pool of data, there is a significant degree of repetition (matters such as the challenges faced by local governments when implementing different indicator systems are brought up in most chapters without significant change in perspective or depth); and most chapters miss the mark in providing an explicit answer to the question of *how and why this content improves our current understanding of the knowledge brokering process*. There might also be a problem in the fact that, as the authors themselves admit, the tools evaluated were designed by the very own ICI partners.

In sum, this book makes an important and timely contribution to the understanding of governance issues in the way sustainability monitoring is structured in local governments, which create difficulties for gathering high-quality, urban sustainability data – a pressing need in our times. It is also notable in that it reports findings from primary data, gathered from consultation with European local government representatives at an unusually large scale (200 cities from across Europe). Arguably, though, it falls short of its promise for a broad discussion of knowledge brokering, and might have been more accurately described as a case study or project report.

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