

Integrating environment and development in the Thames Gateway through social innovation

April 2011

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Kemp, M. 2011. Integrating environment and development in the Thames Gateway through social innovation. Available at:

<http://www.elcvsnetwork.org.uk/resources/research/>

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Introduction

This paper reports some of the learning from a piece of policy research that sought to explore the role of social innovation in sustainable development in the Thames Gateway. It aims to assess the relevance of social innovation in achieving sustainable development goals for the Gateway. The paper argues that social innovation provides a powerful means of integrating the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Community and voluntary sector organisations can help to build a more environmentally sustainable Gateway by working with local people to develop innovative social solutions to environmental challenges.

Research aims

The aims of the research were:

First, to identify how the principles and concept of sustainable development have been applied in the Thames Gateway regeneration programme;

Second, to explore the diversity of perspectives on sustainable development in the Thames Gateway;

Third, to assess the role of social innovation in achieving sustainable development goals in the Thames Gateway.

Research design

A combination of documentary and qualitative methods were used to address these research aims. The research consisted of the following research activities:

- a review of the literature relating to social innovation and environmental social enterprise;
- a review of the policy literature on the Thames Gateway;
- A series of 21 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from across the Gateway area. Participants were selected because of their strategic involvement in regeneration activity in the Gateway, or because of their expertise on social innovation or environmental issues. In addition to these interviews, more focused discussions took place with some stakeholders around specific environmental or social innovation projects.
- The research also sought to identify examples of community-based environmental initiatives in the Gateway from a combination of online

and documentary sources and participants' local knowledge.

What is the Thames Gateway?

The UK's Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) has described the Thames Gateway as "Europe's largest regeneration programme stretching 40 miles along the estuary from Canary Wharf in London to Southend in Essex, and Sittingbourne in Kent" (CLG, 2007:5). Similarly, the Homes and Community Agency (HCA) has described the Thames Gateway as "a long-term agenda for sustainable economic growth, which is transforming communities along 40 miles of the Thames Estuary".¹ Some key characteristics of the Gateway area include:

- a population of approximately 1.5 million people, living in over 600,000 households (CLG, 2006a:1);
- around 20 miles wide and 40 miles long, covering around 100,000 hectares;
- abundant in natural assets;
- significant areas of brownfield land (3,150 hectares in 2006);
- two world heritage sites (the Tower of London, Maritime Greenwich);
- a long history of industrial activity.

Sources: CLG/Oxford Brookes University (2006); CLG (2006a), EA (2010).

The participants interviewed for this study mostly saw the Thames Gateway as a programme or project, and, more specifically, as a "regeneration programme". Some understood it as a set of intersecting programmes that involved a plurality of agencies, developers, business organisations, local authorities, and partnerships.

Most participants understood the purpose of the Gateway as physical and economic development - building new homes, promoting economic activity, and creating new jobs. The regeneration plans for the Gateway under the previous Labour Government encompassed two sets of priorities (CLG, 2006b, 2007): first, economic growth: to secure high levels of economic and housing growth in Gateway area and to act as an engine for growth in the southeast region more generally. Second, social justice: to tackle sources of deprivation and to improve opportunities for local people. A key assumption underpinning the programme has been that economic growth and

physical development of the Gateway areas would help to tackle entrenched deprivation and socio-economic disadvantage in the area.

The Sustainable Development Challenge for the Thames Gateway

As a large physical and economic regeneration programme, the Gateway faces some significant environmental challenges. A recent *State of the Environment* (SoE) report by the Environment Agency (EA) and its partners has identified some of the environmental pressures and opportunities in the area (EA, 2010). According to this report, the environmental challenges facing the Thames Gateway include: mitigating and adapting to climate change; pressure on water resources; flood risk; environmental protection; access to green space; energy efficiency in buildings; the generation of energy from low-carbon and renewable sources; fuel poverty; the large amount of construction and demolition waste associated with developments in the Gateway (EA, 2010).

Participants identified many of these environmental issues in their accounts, but they prioritised them in different ways. For example, one participant was particularly concerned about how the challenges of water scarcity and the risk of flooding in some parts of the Gateway would be met; another was more concerned about energy efficiency and how to retrofit existing homes; and yet another was concerned about how to enhance and integrate the green spaces in the Gateway. Some participants pointed to a tension between environmental sustainability and growth goals for the Gateway.

There is a risk that some of the negative environmental impacts of economic growth and physical development in the Gateway might eventually feed back to undermine the process of development itself. This potentially self-defeating nature of environmentally unsustainable development is particularly acute in the case of climate change.

The sustainability challenge for the Thames Gateway is how to bring these potentially conflicting priorities into alignment— as one participant put it, how to grow whilst preserving the “ecological balance” in the Gateway. The problem is how to increase levels of economic activity, housing growth, and physical infrastructure in the Gateway in a way that is environmentally sustainable. For example, one participant argued that a more sustainable model of growth was needed for the Gateway:

“The growth that takes place from here on in, or even over the last 10 yrs, can’t be done on: I’m struggling for the words: but it can’t occur the way the growth occurred in the last 20 or 30 years. That is unsustainable”.

Narratives of sustainable growth in the Thames Gateway

The research assessed the policy responses to the challenge of integrating development and environment in the Gateway. Four overlapping strategic narratives were identified in the sustainable development and regeneration discourse relating to the Thames Gateway.² These strategic narratives represent overlapping approaches to achieving economic growth in a way that takes into account environmental priorities:

Socially cohesive growth: The former Labour Government set out its ambitions for socially cohesive growth in the Gateway in the *Sustainable Communities Plan* (ODPM, 2003). The concept of a “sustainable community” was at the heart of this vision, expressing a commitment to economic inclusion and social integration. In this policy discourse, a sustainable community was defined as a place that delivers prosperity and quality of life through a robust economy, good employment opportunities, and affordable, good quality housing (ODPM, 2003).

Modified or ‘low-carbon’ growth: This approach to integrating environmental and economic goals is exemplified in the national *Low Carbon Transition Plan* which followed on from the *Climate Change Act* 2008 (Great Britain, 2008). The *Plan* set out how cuts in greenhouse gas emissions could be achieved (HM Government, 2009). More directly relevant to the Thames Gateway, the Mayor of London has set an ambitious carbon reduction target for London: to reduce emissions by 60% by 2025.³ And the London Development Agency (LDA) has published a strategy which sets out eight core initiatives that seek to establish London as a ‘low-carbon capital’ (LDA, 2010).

In this discourse on low-carbon transition, the ambition to achieve further economic growth in the Gateway is *modified* to take into account the need to tackle climate change. This represents a more narrow approach to sustainable development that focuses on reducing carbon emissions through a combination of market mechanisms, new technologies, and behaviour change.

Accommodated growth: This strategic narrative represents a more ecological approach to managing the environmental impact of growth in the Gateway. The natural environment is seen to *accommodate* economic growth and is reconfigured as an economic asset rather than a barrier to growth.

This strategic narrative is well exemplified in the *Parklands* initiative which expresses a vision of the Gateway as a network of green spaces, 'landscapes and waterways' (CLG, 2007). In 2008, CLG published the *Parklands Vision* which set out in visual terms how the Gateway could be regenerated by investing in green space and improving the quality of and access to the Gateway's environmental assets (CLG, 2008a).

Integrated growth: In this sustainable growth narrative, the goals of economic growth and environmental protection are integrated more systematically. This is captured in the "eco-region" concept⁴, as articulated in the *Thames Gateway Eco-region: a prospectus*, published by CLG in 2008. The eco-region idea expresses an aspiration that the Gateway should become a "showcase for environmental sustainability"; that it has the potential to become

"an exemplar low-carbon region, playing a strong role in combating the impact of climate change. The efficient use of water and wastewater will be maximised, and flood risk will be effectively managed. Construction waste will be minimised" (CLG, 2007:17).

The eco-region concept incorporates ambitions to tackle both climate change and to improve the quality of and access to the natural environment. Its environmental scope is broader than the other strategies described above – it does not narrowly focus on a single environmental issue such as climate change, but takes in a broader range of environmental issues such as biodiversity, protection against flood risk, and resource depletion.

The vision of the Gateway as an eco-region is a persuasive one and goes well beyond an attempt to mitigate the negative environmental impacts of further development and growth. In this strategic narrative, environmental sustainability is constructed as an opportunity for business; the economic case for tackling the environmental challenges facing the Gateway is a central part of the story. *Parklands* is a good example of this – by improving the quality of the natural environment and people's access to it, the Gateway becomes a more attractive place for

people to live in and for companies to invest in. Other examples cited in the *Eco-region Prospectus* are sustainable industries and environmental technologies.

Whilst the eco-region concept is the most systematically worked out strategy for sustainable growth so far proposed, it falls short of full integration. The social dimension receives less attention than the economic and environmental dimensions. It is unlikely that technological innovation will be enough *on its own* to shift the Thames Gateway onto a genuinely sustainable pathway. The achievement of higher levels of integration between the economic and environmental ambitions for the area will partly depend on changes in how the people of the Gateway live, and on how they perceive and respond to the environmental challenges identified above. This means finding innovative ways to engage local people in the sustainable development of the Gateway.

What is social innovation?

Mulgan has defined social innovation simply as "new ideas that work to meet pressing unmet needs and improve peoples' lives" (2007:7). In a joint paper by Social Innovation Exchange (SIX) and the Young Foundation, social innovations are described as

"innovations that are social both in their ends and in their means. Specifically, we define social innovations as new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations" (2010:18-19).

Social innovation can also be seen as the process by which new services, products or ways of doing things come about - as a process of "invention, diffusion and adoption of new services or organisational models" (SIX and the Young Foundation, 2010:16). This process can be driven by individuals or entrepreneurs, social movements, or organisations. Innovations can originate in any sector: household, third or non-profit, public, or private or out of partnerships between them.

Participants in this study were asked how they understood the term "social innovation". Whilst some were unfamiliar or only vaguely familiar with it, most understood it as a kind of activity - as "new approaches"; "doing things differently"; "new ways of working" or delivering services. Participants saw social innovation as being about:

Working together: as “new ways of working together” or “changing the way we work informally together”.

Action towards social goals: as action to promote health or improve education. A few participants understood social innovation as being about finding new ways of addressing social needs.

Community engagement: as new ways of engaging people; for example, one participant described social innovations as “new models for engagement and delivery of social objectives”.

Social action: as new forms of community action to tackle local problems; or as “new ways of organising” and the development of “community-led solutions”.

Social enterprise: one participant observed that social innovation and social enterprise share the same social goals and a similar set of underlying values. Others associated it with the “voluntary and community sector” more broadly. And a few participants thought that social innovation chimed in well with the Coalition Government’s “Big Society” policy agenda.

Changing mind-sets: one participant saw social innovation in more psychological terms - as a shift in “mindset” or thinking about a problem in a new way which then makes innovative solutions possible.

Many recognized the potential of social innovation to help tackle some of the environmental challenges facing the Gateway – for example, by fostering novel forms of community action around environmental issues; developing new ways of delivering services; or encouraging the growth of environmental social enterprises as a means of aligning economic, social, and environmental priorities at the local level.

Social innovation and engaging the people of the Gateway around environmental issues

As has already been remarked upon, some participants equated social innovation with new ways of engaging people around environmental issues such as climate change, pollution, resource depletion, environmental improvement, or flood risk. Others associated social innovation with community or social action. They recognized the relevance of social action for tackling environmental problems and were able to point to a few examples of grassroots initiatives in the Gateway with environmental goals – for example,

Transition Towns;⁵ the community recycling movement in east London; or the food action movement.⁶

Some participants recognized the potential for the people of the Gateway to make a greater contribution to addressing the area’s environmental challenges. One saw an opportunity for community energy production. Another thought that innovative ways of sharing and pooling resources such as “car-clubs” could help to reduce consumption, save people money, and help to forge connections between people. One other participant thought that local people living in the Gateway area could play a more active role in natural resource management:

“I think the more important things in terms of environment are engaging communities in maintaining their own environment and so gaining ownership. I think that is absolutely crucial [...] There’s a whole opportunity there to allow communities to start taking control of the land around them”.

An online search helped to identify a few examples of initiatives that have sought to engage people living in east London around environmental issues – such as *East London Green Doctor & Eco-hub*⁷ (Groundwork London/C-Change, Hackney) and *Wildspace*⁸ (RSPB, Rainham). Examples of community-based environmental services operating in east London include: *East London Community Recycling Partnership*⁹; and the *Safe Neighbourhoods Unit*.¹⁰

Environmental social enterprise in the Thames Gateway

Several participants associated social innovation with social or community enterprises. For example, one pointed out that social innovation and social enterprise are based on a common set of underlying values and a shared concern with the “triple bottom-line”:

“People see that there’s more to life than financial gain [...] the triple bottom line, the environmental, the social, is starting to mean as much to them as taking home a wage packet at the end of the month”.

However, whilst social enterprise and social innovation may share some common ground, they are not quite the same thing. One participant put it like this: “I think it’s a dangerous assumption that just because something’s a social enterprise, it will be innovative [...] some are, some aren’t”. Not all social enterprises are socially innovative

and social innovation is not exclusive to social enterprise.

Environmental social enterprises can help to integrate social, environmental and economic goals and priorities. One way they can do this is by ensuring that local people are directly involved in and benefit from development. As one participant argued:

“I think social enterprises have the ability to try and bring the community on board and get involved in the development, and influence it. And ensure that they get improvements for the existing communities, rather than the creation of these new communities”.

In a paper prepared as a contribution to the development of DEFRA’s *Third Sector Strategy* (DEFRA, 2008), Co-operatives UK and its third-sector partners argued that social enterprises have the potential to make a valuable contribution to the UK Government’s environmental goals; for example, by helping to tackle climate change and to protect the natural environment, and by promoting sustainable consumption (Co-operatives UK *et al*, 2008). Social enterprises have advantages over conventional businesses in this respect: they focus on multiple outcomes, working to a “triple bottom line”. They provide a mechanism for integrating social and/or environmental goals with business objectives within a single operational framework.¹¹ This means that social enterprises are more likely than conventional businesses to rank social or environmental goals over “short-term self-interest” (Co-operatives UK *et al*, 2008:2).

Similarly, a participant argued that, because social enterprises are businesses that seek to integrate social or environmental priorities into their activities, they are more likely to work in the interests of the communities they serve. Conventional businesses, on the other hand, are primarily focused on commercial objectives and meeting customers’ needs:

“The reason why there is often such a disconnect between commercial enterprises and the private sector as we know it, and the benefits it brings for its customers, and the ways it serves or tries to serve certain communities, is because what underpins their operations is a mainstream, single bottom-line approach. Whereas if you adopt a triple bottom line approach, you will automatically set up your operations quite differently, so that the business also achieves wider community benefits”.

Another participant observed, however, that the development of environmental social enterprises in the Gateway had been “very limited to date”, and struggled to think of any good examples:

“It’s pretty sporadic. And I can’t think: point to a lot of big examples or that have been included in dialogue and discourse, being worked with [...] I think that’s a very weak area in the Thames Gateway”.

Nonetheless, there are a few examples of social enterprises operating in the London part of the Gateway which have an environmental or sustainable development focus to their work. Drawing on documentary sources, online databases¹², and participants’ knowledge, it was possible to identify several examples, such as Leaside Regeneration¹³; Mapping for Change¹⁴; Tower Hamlets Community Recycling Consortium Ltd¹⁵; London Remade¹⁶; London Community Reuse Network¹⁷; Emmaus Greenwich¹⁸; Bikeworks CIC¹⁹; and Growing Communities²⁰. The most common services provided by these social enterprises are in the areas of re-use, restoration, or recycling. Other areas of activity include organic food, green mapping, and sustainable regeneration.

Participants were also asked about the potential of social enterprises to help tackle the environmental challenges facing the Gateway. One participant argued that the transition to a low-carbon economy provides an opportunity for social enterprises to “compliment” economic growth:

“[Social enterprises] have definitely got a role. If you’re going to have an aspiration of low-carbon growth in the Gateway, then there’s going to be a demand for certain products and services. There’s no reason why this sector couldn’t step up to the plate, and meet some of those needs. In a sense, you’re not only creating a market, you’re also creating a local economy. Or developing an aspect of the local economy which would actually compliment the growth that is going on”.

Similarly, another participant thought that there was “definitely room to develop” environmental social enterprises – for example, he saw opportunities in the following areas: “green roofs [...] an industry there that can be developed”; “alternative energy”; “healthier living approaches”; “local food growing”, “environmental education”. One other participant thought that there might be opportunities for social enterprises to deliver environmental services in “niche areas” – areas that are not easily convertible into financial terms;

for example, services that promote resource efficiency. Another saw an opportunity for social enterprise involvement in the retrofitting of existing homes in the Gateway:

“There is an opportunity [...] to create local sustainable supply chains. [...] You’re going to have major contractors involved in something as massive as this. But there is an opportunity to create more sustainable enterprise, social enterprise locally”.

Summary

Sustainable development means much more than low-carbon growth or eco-modernisation. With the current dominance of technological and market solutions to climate change in the UK, it is vital that the social dimension of sustainable development is properly integrated in any response to the environmental challenges facing the Gateway. Environmentally sustainable economic development in the Gateway should occur in a way that is consistent with the principles of equity, inclusion, social justice, and the meaningful participation of local people in decisions that affect their lives.

Making the transition to an environmentally sustainable Thames Gateway and establishing the Gateway as an Eco-region depends on achieving higher levels of engagement among the people of the Gateway around environmental issues. Social innovation has a significant role to play here; it can help to develop social solutions to environmental challenges. Moreover, an enhanced capacity for social innovation in the Gateway would complement more technological responses to environmental problems. The Community and Voluntary Sector(s) across the Gateway²¹ could lead the way here, working with local people to develop innovative social solutions.

The challenge for the Gateway is to ensure that economic growth and physical regeneration occur in a way that is both environmentally and socially sustainable. Environmental social enterprises have significant potential to help to meet this challenge by integrating economic, social, and environmental goals and values in the work they do.

Acknowledgement

The material included in this document is drawn from a dissertation submitted for the award of MSc Environmental Strategy at the Centre for Environmental Strategy, University of Surrey in October 2010.

Notes

1 HCA "Thames Gateway" at <http://www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/page.aspx?pointerid=51d3b50eb36a45138219441b59f93c07> [Accessed: 29.09.10]

2 These strategic narratives are discussed in full in Kemp (2010) and in a forthcoming paper which explores these policy narratives in more depth.

3 The Mayor of London's carbon emissions reduction ambitions are set out at: <http://www.london.gov.uk/priorities/environment/climate-change> [Accessed: 01.03.11]

4 <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/thamesgateway/ecoregion>

5 Some areas of the Gateway such as Lewisham, Hackney and Southend have active Transition Town initiatives. A "Transition Initiative" can be a town, village, university etc, and is defined as "a community-led response to the pressures of climate change, fossil fuel depletion and increasingly, economic contraction" (<http://www.transitionnetwork.org/support/what-transition-initiative>; accessed: 30.09.10). For more information about Transition Towns, see <http://www.transitiontowns.org> or <http://www.transitionnetwork.org>

6 e.g. London's Capital Growth programme - <http://www.capitalgrowth.org/home>

7 <http://www.cchangeproject.org/eastlondonecohub>

8 <http://www.rspb.org.uk/reserves/guide/r/rainhammarshes/index.aspx>

9 <http://www.elcrp-recycling.com/>

10 <http://www.snu.co.uk/>

11 <http://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/pages/environmental-sustainability.html>

12 In a search of a directory of social enterprises active in the southeast region, 21 were identified with an environmental focus (<http://www.se2partnership.co.uk/market.asp>). None of these were in the Kent or Essex parts of the Gateway area. A search of the London Community Re-use Network online database (<http://www.lcrn.org.uk/network>) helped to identify a small number of community organisations and social enterprises working around environmental issues in the London part of the Gateway.

13 Leaside Regeneration is a community-based social enterprise with a focus on east London's Lower Lea Valley area (Source: <http://www.leasideregeneration.com/about-us/our-vision/>)

14 Mapping for Change provides a "participatory mapping service" to support the development of sustainable communities (Source: <http://www.mappingforchange.org.uk/about-us/>).

15 THCRC describes itself as "a community recycling company in Tower Hamlets" (Source: <http://www.thcrc.co.uk/>).

16 London Remade is a not-for-profit company which aims to promote resource efficiency and recycling London-wide (Source: <http://www.londonremade.com/>).

17 LCRN provides a "community-based waste prevention, re-use, and recycling" service (Source: <http://www.lcrn.org.uk/>)

18 <http://www.emmausgreenwich.org/>

19 <http://www.lcrn.org.uk/network/member/bikeworks-cic> and <http://www.bikeworks.org.uk/>

20 Growing Communities is a community-led enterprise that grows/sells organic food (Source: <http://www.growingcommunities.org/>)

21 East and southeast London, north Kent, and south Essex.

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