

# What does a review of literature on urban sustainability reveal about the study and practice of urban sustainability?

3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Interdisciplinary Ph.D. Workshop in Sustainable Development  
Columbia University, New York City

12 April 2013

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# Aims

- Clarify how concept of urban sustainability is used in academic literature
- Provide insights into “real world” practice (as observed and described by academics) of urban sustainability *and* academic practice of studying urban sustainability
- Inform research design for Ph.D. studies

# Scope

- Non-comprehensive review – focus only recent publicly-available articles found in Scopus database
- Does not cover books or book chapters
- Articles from many disciplines = less focus on theories, more on themes



# Method

- Content analysis
  - Type, role and purpose of literature
  - Methods or analytical tools
  - Themes or topics addressed

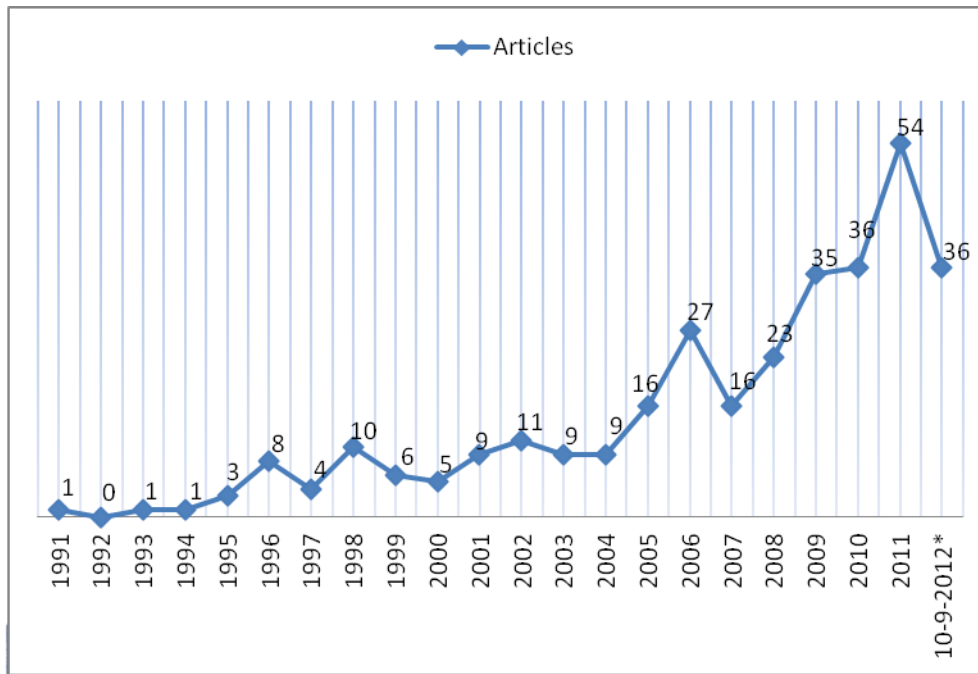
Note: the focus is on content, analysis and results, i.e. what does the literature *say*, not what theories do the authors use?

- Avoiding definitions
  - narrow focus on *urban sustainability* not variations
  - cover the spread rather than cover everything
  - not aiming to provide definitions, but to explore use of concept



# Literature review

- Indicative search on Scopus, 10 September 2012
- TITLE-ABS-KEY("urban sustainability") AND SUBJAREA(mult OR arts OR busi OR deci OR econ OR psyc OR soci)
- 320 results (261 articles), more articles in recent years. Most frequent authors M. Holden and P. Nijkamp (5 each)
- 85 most recent selected for study; of these 38 unavailable/ abstract only/ not relevant.
- Content analysis of 47 articles.



Source: Fenton (2013, forthcoming)

<i>Category</i>	<i>Governance and participation</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Physical planning</i>	<i>Strategic planning</i>	<i>Theory</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Single case study</i>	8 studies	3 studies	6 studies	2 studies	4 studies	0	23 studies
<i>Type of cases</i>	5 on single municipalities; 1 on sub-national region in single country; 1 project in single country; 1 continental	2 on single municipalities; 1 on national approach	Different single municipalities	Different single municipalities	Different single municipalities	n/a	1 continental; 1 national; 1 region; 1 project; 19 single municipalities
<i>Multiple case study</i>	4 studies	0	3 studies	1 study	1 study	2 studies	11 studies
<i>Type of cases</i>	3 focus on municipalities (2 national, 1 cross-border); 1 on single country municipal network membership	n/a	2 focus on municipalities in a single country; one on single continent	Different municipalities in single country	Different municipalities in single country	1 municipal (two countries); 1 historical (continental)	2 continental; 2 (cross-border); 1 municipal network; 6 national
<i>Dataset</i>	0	5 studies	2 studies	0	0	0	7 studies
<i>Type of cases</i>	n/a	4 national studies of municipalities; 1 global study	2 focus on municipalities in one continent	n/a	n/a	n/a	1 global; 2 continental; 4 national
<i>No case study / theory</i>	0	1 study	0	0	5 studies	0	6 studies
<i>Focus of review</i>	n/a	Metrics	n/a	n/a	Themes are political economy; social cohesion; teleconnections; innovation; paradigm shift.	n/a	6 different themes

Source: Fenton (2013, forthcoming)

# Content analysis

- **Strong consensus** on the importance of urban sustainability (and related issues e.g. sustainable development, urbanisation, population increase, anthropocene)
- **Dissatisfaction** about definition and use of concept
  - too much geographic specificity?
  - failing to account for up/downstream impacts?
  - relativism – “more sustainable than” is not sustainable?
  - solutions proposed by some authors accentuate problems identified by others – risk that definitions become normative/exclusive?
- **Need** for more holistic approach, wider scope, stronger relationship with relevant reference points
- **Challenge: how to achieve what ideally should occur, given the constraints that determine what actually happens**



## Content analysis cont.

- **Trade-offs** are identified as a recurring challenge and risk making urban sustainability the art of doing only things that aren't impractical/inconvenient – i.e. raise the standards of the worst, but not raise standards
- **Short-termism** is supported by factors such as wilful ignorance/myopia, clientalism, lack of competence or capacity
- **Norm-reinforcement** of the observed norm, unsustainable development
- **Literature downplays the importance of non-specific contextual factors** (e.g. the prevalence of socio-political pressures in any context)



# Content analysis cont.

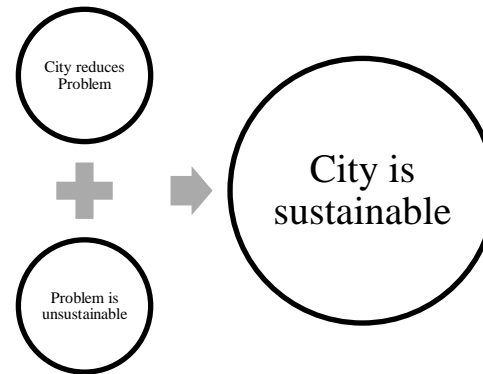
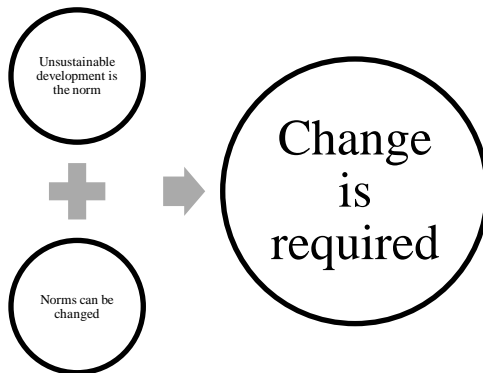
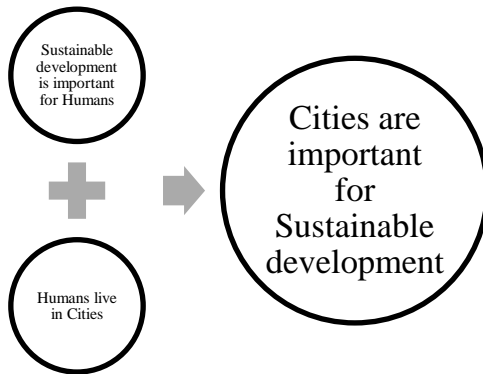
- **Fragmentation** occurs as a result of context-specific analysis
  - imbalance, e.g. ethnocentrism
  - more focus on formal mechanisms and specific categories, e.g. megacities, or actors, e.g. municipal organisations
- **Triumph of pragmatism** – Literature self-reinforcing its own problems?
  - 42/47 studies focus on case studies, metrics or data
  - over-emphasis of specific contexts or indicators reduces scope of analysis and action?
- **Narrow, striated use of concepts**

“By narrating or measuring the history of incremental actions in atomised locations, with emphasis on the specific role of municipalities, an isolationist and elitist norm is consolidated” Fenton (2013).

  - need for more dynamic, flexible, inclusive, multi-dimensional definitions



# Logic of urban sustainability studies



... but in relation to what?

Does the literature's emphasis on case studies and observed, specific, micro-level examples distort our perception of urban sustainability?

# Conclusions

- Need for more dynamic, flexible, inclusive, multi-dimensional definitions
- Need for proactive leadership, plurality of visions, greater participation
- Research should make better assessment of issues including the various forms of organisation, processes, capacities, participation and their influence of scope, will and mandate
- Research should focus on overcoming factors such as inertia that occur because of past “urban sustainability” and impede future implementation
- If the scale of challenges is increasing faster than the scale of achievement, then unsustainable development is still the norm – does this mean the scientific study of urban sustainability is contributing to unsustainable development?



# Ph.D. research questions

RQ1 - What does literature on urban sustainability reveal about the study and practice of urban sustainability?

Expanding on core themes in the literature review...

RQ2 - How are strategic planning processes for urban sustainability organised?

RQ3 - What is the role of stakeholders in strategic planning processes for urban sustainability?

RQ4 - How do municipalities conceptualise and operationalise the concept of urban sustainability in their behaviour, policy and planning?

RQ5 - In what ways may existing methodologies, tools, concepts and approaches enhance or undermine the study and practice of urban sustainability?

