

Town Planning Review

Response to Bruce Stiftel

In his 2020 Abercrombie Lecture set out here, Bruce Stiftel has provided planners with a timely reminder to engage with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and particularly with the New Urban Agenda (NUA) (UN 2016) that supports the implementation of SDG 11 (UN 2015). Stiftel poses two key questions in his challenge to planners. Will planners lead the NUA or be led by it? In setting the context for this question, Stiftel recalls the lengthy negotiations, trade offs and compromises that were required on the way to adopting the NUA. This reminds planners that the same processes are likely to be required to implement it within each signatory state. Stiftel wonders if the NUA will serve to increase the power of planners or to hold them back, as the implementation of all the SDGs takes a leading role. In order to implement the NUA, he argues that a new generation of planners will be required across OECD countries. By making a comparison of the number of planners per 100,000 population, he finds the UK at the top of the list, with the US and the EU having half as many and then much smaller numbers in developing countries. Stiftel sees this supply of planners as a major challenge to planning schools globally. However, for example, the EU's Urban Agenda policies and programmes that support the integrated application of NUA priorities have a core role in the 2021-27 Cohesion Programme and may not rely solely on planners for its delivery (CEC 2018).

Stiftel also questions whether the assumptions about urban development in the NUA are sufficiently accurate to support change or whether they are fixed in a post-1945 paradigm of scalar practices of nesting plans. While not perfect, Stiftel concludes that the NUA is increasing the profile of planners globally and ensuring their role in the delivery of these international commitments within each signatory state (Hague 2018; Geraghty 2020). Until recently, the UK government has regarded the SDGs as targets for developing countries rather than its own policies (Cabinet Office et al 2019; Lunn 2019). The UK reporting regimes are being provided by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) (2020) and the first reference to the SDGs has appeared in a proposed revision of the National Planning Policy Framework for England (NPPF) (MHCLG 2021a) although this does not include any specific reference to the NUA and its commitments, including to the preparation of a national plan.

While Stiftel considers the paucity of planners and its likely effects on the delivery of the NUA in many countries, it is worth considering the position in the UK. As noted above, while Stiftel identified the UK as having most planners per head of population globally, this is a statistic that many English planners consider as a target for reduction in austerity and recentralisation programmes of successive national governments since 2010 (Gamble 2015). The funding for planning has suffered the greatest reduction of all services in English local authorities (NAO 2018) while the planning system continues to go through processes of practical dismantling through successive regulatory reforms, removing the need for planning consent (Clifford et al 2019). At the same time, the penalties on local authorities for not having an adopted local plan are increasing, particularly through the requirements on these local authorities to release more housing land. Councils are also penalised for the failure of housing completions despite their having no power over the private sector's delivery programmes (NAO 2019). It would be reasonable to expect that the successive planning reforms since 2015 (MHCLG 2018, 2019, 2020) would provide an opportunity to respond to the SDGs and, particularly, the NUA within these contexts but it was not until the consultation on further planning reforms (MHCLG 2021a) that any mention of the SDGs appeared in a very general way.

In a more typical approach to the implementation of international policy commitments (Morphet 2013, 2021 a and b), the government in England has been taking forward some of the elements of the NUA that Stiftel cites. The particular focus on the increasing use of digital methodologies in the English planning system have appeared in the forefront of proposed planning reforms (MHCLG 2020, 2021a). While these have been suggested as mechanisms for greater efficiency in the planning process, it is clear that they also provide opportunities to examine distributional outcomes. The RTPI recently established a new digital taskforce as well as having been engaged in the delivery of other parts of this agenda (RTPI 2019). There has also been a review of the relationship between the NUA and new urban analytics (Morphet, Morphet and Batty 2020) and how these can be taken forward together. While the new regionalism has been critical of the challenge to planning scalecraft (McLeod 2001), the use of digital technologies can help to remake spaces and boundaries which have more relevance to people, communities and their lives than administrative boundaries set in 200 year old legacy of land ownership systems. The English government is also providing a new code for sustainable building and the necessity of retrofitting existing building stock is now being set into investment programmes. A few local authorities have started to engage with the SDGs through their own local planning (Southend-on-Sea Council 2020).

While the progress in England has been slow, a different scale of activity can be seen in the UK nations. In Wales, the functions and processes of planning are located within the SDGs and the NUA through the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015) (Hutt 2019) and delivered through the revision of the role of planning following the COVID-19 pandemic (Welsh Government 2020). In Scotland, the SDGs are being addressed directly with a specific focus on SDG 11 (Scottish Government 2020a) and in a revised National Planning Framework (Scottish Government 2020b), where a new National Outcome for Communities has been proposed. This focuses on communities but also adopts the NUA's priorities for land reform and the creation of the Scottish Land Fund. In another example of the submerged approach to the delivery of the NUA, the government in England has also proposed a greater role for communities in relation to the acquisition and ownership of vacant and underused land (MHCLG 2021b). In Scotland, proposed legislation has created more powers for communities to prepare local place plans and in England there are proposals for extended roles for neighbourhood plans (HMG 2019).

In Northern Ireland, there is as yet little evidence of the explicit introduction of the SDGs or the NUA but there are moves to reform the planning system in the context of the UK and the island of Ireland, particularly for major infrastructure investment (Mackinnon 2020). It is in the Republic of Ireland that the SDGs and NUA have had the most significant effects in re-shaping the planning system, associating the outcomes with a national programme of investment, integrating planning and delivery (Irish Government 2018). This National Plan for Ireland includes positive urban policies which support the priorities of the NUA and sets these within an associated timeframe (Moore-Cherry 2019). Again, there are signs of this approach in England that are centrally led and driven. The strategic planning policies for the Oxford to Cambridge Arc (MHCLG 2021c) related to the NUA's priorities for integrated investment for places by linking the creation of new communities with a range of public infrastructure investment although with no external links or recognition for the NUA agenda. The independent 2070 Commission (Kerslake 2020) has set its approach for England within the NUA and its proposals are more similar to the planning reforms in Scotland and Wales. It has argued for this integrated approach at a sub-regional scale and has recognised the potential for the One Powerhouse approach to four large regions covering England that could create a strategic context for the delivery of the NUA (RSA 2021).

In conclusion to return to Stiftel's challenging questions – will planning lead the NUA or be led by it, it seems that both may be true. In its delivery of changing places, a return to consideration of equity and the use of land for society's benefit, then planners will be leading this process. However, unless the planning system is set within a broader social and governance context, then the necessary integration and linkages that are required across wider ranges of government policy will not occur. The international signatory states will be compared using benchmarks and policy communities will share practices for delivery. This may change the long standing paradigm of scalar planning operating from the top down. Will the NUA, through the way it is constructed, start to reinforce priorities through bottom up approaches in new practices? Managing COVID-19 has shown the power of local action (Morphet 2021b). Will this continue into the post-pandemic world as states apply their focus to delivering their 2030 SDG commitments including the NUA? We have yet to see.

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