

Understanding City Engagement in Community-Focused Sustainability Initiatives

Dorothy M. Daley
Department of Political Science & Environmental Studies Program
University of Kansas
Lawrence, KS 66044
Email: daley@ku.edu

Elaine B. Sharp
Department of Political Science
University of Kansas
Lawrence KS 66044
Email: esharp@ku.edu

Jungah Bae
Askew School of Public Administration and Policy
Bellamy Building
Florida State University
Tallahassee, FL 32306
jb07e@my.fsu.edu

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Abstract

Many local governments are promoting sustainability initiatives ranging from progressive urban design and development to climate protection. Past research suggests that governments are often motivated to act because of the possible co-benefits, such as cost savings, associated with sustainability. However, many sustainability programs target in-house city operations, thus ensuring that co-benefits accrue to local government while not imposing regulations on businesses or residents. Co-benefits may be less likely to drive decision making when sustainability initiatives are directed to the larger community. In this paper, we examine why some cities actively pursue the more difficult prospect of community-wide sustainability policy. We merge secondary data with original survey data of local governments to explore three broad theoretical influences on decision making: interest group pressure; problem severity or need; and network strength. Our results suggest that regardless of the institutional structure within a city, participation in some inter-local networks promotes community wide sustainability initiatives.