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Beyond critique: the value of co-production in realising just cities?

Beth Perry ^a and Mark Atherton^b

^aUrban Institute, University of Sheffield, ICOS, Sheffield, UK; ^bGreater Manchester Director of Environment, Association of Greater Manchester Authorities, Manchester, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the burgeoning literature on the role of academic–practice relationships in contributing to sustainable urban development. We argue that co-production offers a potential pathway for academics to work with policy-makers in moving towards the realisation of more just cities. The paper starts from the position that there is an essential need for, but limit to, critique alone in contributing to the possibility of urban change. Moving towards a shared critique as a basis for future action is an important precondition for realising more just cities, adding weight to the voices arguing for alternative urban visions. These arguments are advanced through a study conducted by academic researchers and policy-makers in the Greater Manchester Low Carbon Hub. The paper outlines a process for working with existing urban institutions within institutional constraints to develop affirmative actions with the aim of longer term transformations. A key contribution is then the identification of eight markers for assessing progress towards the realisation of more just cities.

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Introduction

In many cities, there is a strong informal tier of governance, comprising local community groups and movements, loosely networked and articulating alternatives to mainstream urban policy via claims for greater social, environmental, cultural and economic justice. Such activities can be understood as part of an emergent trend to develop alternative forms of urbanism that are more socially inclusive, economically viable and ecologically sound (Brenner *et al.* 2012). These demands contribute to a growing sense that individuals and groups need to reclaim their “right to the city” and bring about “just” urban transformations (Marcuse *et al.* 2011). Debates on the “just city” (Fainstein 2010) are a reaction to a strong critique of existing urban governance and policy processes: a sense that economic growth and strengthened public–private partnerships have not delivered on the promises of democratisation or civic engagement (Harvey 1989, Logan and Molotch 2007, Purcell 2008, Davies 2011), and that urban policy objectives have done little to address social, environmental or economic inequalities. Within cities’ strategic programmes, Fainstein (2010, p. 2) notes that: “the desirability of growth is usually assumed, while the consequences for social equity are rarely mentioned”.

There is less consensus, however, over *how* just urban transformations can be realised, pointing to two key gaps in the current literature. Firstly, as attention has focussed on the role of grass-roots movements and civil society in catalysing urban transformations, existing institutions and

CONTACT Beth Perry  b.perry@sheffield.ac.uk  Urban Institute, University of Sheffield, ICOS, 219 Portobello Street, Sheffield S1 4DP, UK

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governance structures have been positioned as part of the problem, rather than routes through which positive change can be sought. Bulkeley *et al.* (2014, p. 32, original italics) argue that “urban responses to climate change are *always* and *already* engaging notions of justice and that these engagements are critical to the ways in which they come to have effect and are contested”. A central challenge is, therefore, to understand the mechanisms, contexts and constraints under which such organisations work. Secondly, whilst much academic framing of the theory and practice of urban justice is deeply critical of existing institutions, there is a gap in understanding the potential role of engaged research–practice relationships in catalysing urban transformations. Greater attention has been paid to universities as partners in strategic urban alliances through triple helix partnerships or innovation platforms than in their potential role in facilitating urban social and ecological justice (Durose and Richardson 2015, Polk 2015, May and Perry 2016).

This paper addresses these gaps through setting out and evaluating the value of co-production in realising just cities. We define co-production not as a single method, rather as a cooperative ethos of enquiry and set of practices. Whilst typically highly relevant and contextualised by the increasing emphasis on impact and transdisciplinarity, recent work in Cape Town, Kisumu, Gothenburg and Greater Manchester suggests that the main value of co-production is in participative enquiry and process (Palmer and Walasek 2016). Co-productive “boundary spaces” are said to enable the knowledge and expertise of different participants to be recognised based on respect, openness and deliberation (Pohl *et al.* 2010, p. 271). This paper suggests that co-production is one pathway to develop spaces for learning and cross-institutional reflection between academia and policy, in the spirit of more sustainable urban transformations (see also Davison *et al.* 2015).

The empirical data to address this question are drawn from a study of the governance and policy for sustainability between academic researchers and policy-makers in the Greater Manchester Low Carbon Hub (GMLCH) of the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA). City-regional policy in Greater Manchester in recent years has tended to be focussed on low carbon, developed as part of a broader sustainable *economic* agenda, with Greater Manchester keen to position itself as “first mover” in relation to numerous government environmental initiatives. This is in line with broader trends concerning the fracturing of sustainability discourses and the ascendancy of a low-carbon economic framing of urban environmental governance (While *et al.* 2004).

Our analysis confirms such conclusions. Yet the distinctiveness of this paper is in exploring how we might move *beyond critique* without losing critical voice. The paper starts from the position that there is an essential need for, but limit to, critique alone in contributing to the possibility of urban change. It is not enough to simply map and chart possibilities underpinned by critical urban theory, if pathways to change cannot be imagined, tested, assessed and revised. Yet those seeking to navigate this path, through action research methodologies in a pragmatist tradition for instance, have often been critiqued for “going native” or “selling out” (Levin and Greenwood 2016). How then can distance and engagement be maintained? What kinds of approaches might generate “new social realities” through “telling it as it might become” in the search for options and alternatives? (Gergen and Thatchenkery 1996, p. 370). This paper contributes to these broader epistemological and philosophical questions through a reflection on the value of co-production in supporting collaboration on the challenges, options and actions for existing institutions to develop “more just” approaches to environmental policy and governance.

Firstly, it adds detail to the generic yet increasing claims about the value of co-production through close documentation and reflexive analysis of the process (May and Perry 2013). The three steps followed here – developing a shared critique, exploring options and pilot actions to mobilise for change – constitute one approach to implementing the co-production ideal in practice. Secondly, the paper adds to debates on the purpose of co-production and emphasises the importance of ensuring that processes contribute towards the realisation of city futures that are more socially inclusive, economically viable and ecologically sound. Given the institutional pressures on both urban policy actors and universities, moving towards a *shared critique* as a basis for future action is an important precondition for realising more just cities, adding weight to the voices arguing for alternative urban

visions. Finally, through the process of working with the GMLCH, a series of progress markers are developed which seek to provide a yardstick for assessing the value of co-production in realising just cities.

Realising the just city

The concept of the “just city” is in part a response to the ascendancy of urban entrepreneurialism and growth-first economics (Harvey 2002, Fainstein 2010, p. 3). A central issue within debates on the “just city” is to move from theory to action. Here we find a distinction between those that advocate radical change from below and those that believe that change is possible from within existing institutions. On the one hand, scholars such as Purcell (2008, 2013) argue that the project of governance has “failed”, requiring new democratic movements, forms of politics and institutions. Marcuse *et al.* (2011) argue that we need to move from abstract discussions on the just city to the Right to the City (Lefebvre 1968), drawing intellectually on Lefebvre, and on the groundswell of counter-publics and counter-claims that are being made about the right to occupy urban space. For Harvey (1973, 1989), urban transformations will not be possible without radical system change, given the path dependency of urban institutions, as well as the self-perpetuating dynamics of urban growth coalitions (Molotoch 1976).

From such studies there is little doubt concerning the obduracy and entrenched vested interests that can saturate urban politics, governance and practice. However, this negative positioning of existing urban institutions has two key effects. Firstly, it enables “business as usual” to continue unchallenged, through relieving those in positions of authority from the responsibility of enacting positive change. Overemphasising the role of grass-roots activism through an uncritical celebration of “everyday” environmentalism, whilst at the same time neglecting urban institutions, runs the risk of increasing the chasm between informal and formal governance practices in the city (Davies 2011). Secondly, treating institutions as monoliths relegates any supportive critical voices to an internal wilderness. Those holding urban office, who are convinced that change is necessary, are tarnished by monochrome critiques and left unsupported by the pertinent grass-roots voice. Instead, an unhelpful binary opposition is established between formal institutions and informal actors, without due attention to the nuanced positions, values and actions of different individuals, groups and organisations.

This produces a real gap in understanding the conditions under which existing urban institutions operate and the dynamics and struggles of those seeking to work within mainstream urban governance organisations to deliver incremental step changes. Fainstein (2010) argues that change needs to be conceptualised and achieved within existing capitalist systems, noting that transforming existing institutions incrementally and continuing the pressure for justice will eventually bring about change. Her emphases are, firstly, on establishing the clarion call from above and below for justice, and, secondly, on redesigning appropriate urban institutions that could achieve it. In this conceptualisation, success would be in changing the discourse around policy-making in terms of “the justice of the decision rather than simply its contribution to competitiveness” (Fainstein 2010, p. 184) and in developing alternative institutional designs as part of a pragmatic politics of social reform. Realistically, she notes, this calls for better-selected representation, rather than broader participation in urban decision-making processes. In a similar vein, Agyeman and Evans (2004, p. 163) argue that urban institutions need to learn from more progressive environmental justice organisations to embed “just” principles in sustainable development policy. This implies focussing on *actual* rather than *imagined* institutions (Young 1990, p. 22). There is a tension between abstract and real-world situations of justice such that the search for the just city: “is about starting from an understanding of the socio-economic and institutional context ... *not an idealization of that context*, and then seeking to relate that context to a conception of justice which interweaves both substantive and process oriented elements” (Campbell and Marshall 2006, p. 240, italics added).

These two schools of thought on how to realise the just city are captured in the distinction between “transformative” and “affirmative” strategies (Fraser and Honneth 2003). Transformative strategies seek to change social and structural frameworks which have given rise to unequal outcomes. Affirmative strategies seek “non-reformist” reforms which aim to transform cities from within existing

frameworks, whilst setting in motion a trajectory of change over time in which more radical reforms are practicable. These two strategies are not mutually incompatible, which raises the question: “how, then, are we able to go beyond the limits set by existing practices and beliefs and produce something new?” (Callinicos 2006, p. 1). Such a concern sits between critical and pragmatist traditions of undertaking urban research (May and Perry 2017). This involves first “*understanding* the nature of contemporary patterns of urban restructuring and, then, on that basis, analysing their implications for action” (Brenner *et al.* 2012, p. 3). Going beyond critique means not stopping there, but directly entering that terrain of action to take the inquiry further. The challenge for academic researchers, working in partnership with existing urban institutions, is how to do this.

In this context, there is a growing interest in co-production as a means for undertaking both critical and engaged urban scholarship. Co-production is seen as a “woolly word”, but one which has traction and roots in designing and delivering better public services (Osborne *et al.* 2016). Processes may be state-, business-, society- or researcher-initiated and are influenced by complex institutional and epistemic considerations (Watson 2014, Perry and May 2015). Fundamentally, co-production requires that “contributions from specific disciplines and social actors are not privileged over what other disciplines and social actors contribute” (Pohl *et al.* 2010, p. 217). On the one hand, this can be seen as the latest manifestation of a long lineage in participatory research (Facer and Enright 2016), drawing on a rich vein of action research and co-operative inquiry (Greenwood and Levin 2006, Reason and Bradbury 2013). Accounts are largely positive and optimistic about both the quality and impact of co-production. The emphasis on excellence and relevance as mutually compatible and achievable goals of a mature and reflexive social science (Perry and May 2006, May with Perry 2011) has been more recently echoed in the insistence that, through co-production, both “social relevance” and “scientific reliability” (Polk 2015) or “intellectual insight” and “wider public benefit” (Campbell and Vanderhoven 2016) are possible. Many studies report positive effects and experiences and focus on trust, reciprocity and commitment as factors in building successful relationships.

A less favourable interpretation is that the co-production imperative is the result of the extension of the narrow instrumentalisation of research and the “impact agenda” into the social sciences and arts and humanities, reaching in and through processes of knowledge production. The result is an increasing attempt to regulate, manage, control and direct science in a new form of “knowledge politics”, with resultant implications for not only social scientific knowledge but also the university itself (Stehr 1992). The criticism that policy-makers seek evidence to support policies, rather than designing policies around evidence (Sharman and Holmes 2010), raises the spectre that closer co-operation between academics replicates a delivery mode of consultancy in which critique evaporates in place of supporting existing policy implementation. What is sought to be avoided is a “symptomatic social science” (May 2015, p. 411), a “process of co-optation to which we are all subject that should be open to analysis”.

If existing institutions are to be enrolled into a more transformative agenda, the line between critique and co-optation must be carefully navigated. This means designing processes in which values are centred in the co-definition of critique and building institutional empathy and trust. Co-production is a necessary part of, but not sufficient for, the realisation of more just cities. Multiple strategies of influencing and change are needed. This means reframing the concept of co-production as working *with* existing institutions *in order to* move beyond critique in the development of alternative futures (Holloway 2005). The tactic suggested is to work through an affirmative mode, whilst remoulding the conditions for transformation to take place. To this extent, as Conti (2005) notes, the goal of research is not the interpretation of the world, but the organisation of transformation.

The co-production process

Background

As in many other city-regions, addressing urban sustainability problems requires the capacity to integrate and manage a huge range of intersecting forms of global and local knowledge in order to

develop appropriate policy responses, instruments and interventions (Moser 2013). These include planning, housing, transport, energy and waste, economic development, social inclusion, equality, diversity, biodiversity, green and blue infrastructure and so on, to develop an understanding of the interplay between different priorities and interests and the tensions that may arise. This challenge is increasingly common to many urban coalitions seeking to develop strategic solutions to urban sustainability problems, represented as a quintessential “epistemic mess” (Bulkeley and Betsill 2013), whose causes and consequences are embedded within multiple layers of urban society. In Greater Manchester, there was no single sustainability agency in 2012 which incorporated the triple bottom line of social, environmental and economic development. The decision was therefore taken, by the academic researchers, to work with and through GMLCH. The work of the GMLCH was primarily environmental, through an economic lens.

The work with the GMLCH was part of a comparative international project exploring the governance and policy of urban sustainability in city-regions across the Global North and South. The project was funded for two years from 2012 to 2014, although the collaboration lasted beyond the availability of financial resources. The aim was to identify sustainability challenges, consider existing responses, understand the ways in which knowledges and skills were being deployed to inform policy choices and identify alternative transition pathways. Importantly, the work was co-funded with significant time and in-kind resource provided by the GMLCH, which was deployed by the primary international funder as a proxy for commitment and relevance. Whilst initiated internationally, there was significant freedom within each city-region to determine research methods and develop a context-sensitive approach to addressing the core questions. At the time of commencing the project in 2012, there was considerable flux in governance and policy arrangements, in the wake of the abolition of Regional Development Agencies in England and the election of the Conservative–Liberal Coalition government (see Table 1).

A series of collaborative steps were defined between the academic research team and the GMLCH. In Phase 1 (2012–2013), a baseline assessment of existing challenges was developed through

Table 1. The Greater Manchester context.

Regional governance

The Greater Manchester region in the North-West of England is made up of its ten local authority areas (Bolton, Bury, Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford and Wigan). The Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) was established in 1986 to voluntarily co-ordinate a range of functions across the city-region. AGMA made a successful bid to the government to constitute Greater Manchester as a statutory City Region and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) was established in 2011, enabling strategic responsibility for economic development, jobs, skills, housing and transport for 2.7 m people across 500 square miles. The GMCA’s strength in governance underpinned the negotiation of Greater Manchester’s City Deal with the government in 2012 for the devolution of significant powers from central to regional government. The “Northern Powerhouse” concept was defined in 2014 by the UK’s Chancellor of the Exchequer as an explicit focus on improving the connections and connectivity between England’s Northern cities and city-regions, including GMCA, to contribute to the UK’s economic growth.

Jobs and growth

The region was part of the North West Regional Development Agency (RDA) between 1998 and 2012, one of the government’s nine RDAs set up to promote regional economic development, funded by the Treasury and reporting to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. The RDA network was abolished in 2012 as part of the central government plans to reduce the budget deficit, and regional responsibility for economic development was shifted to 39 new Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs) between local authorities and businesses. Greater Manchester’s LEP, which covers the ten local authority areas of the Greater Manchester region, has joint ownership, with the GMCA, of the Greater Manchester Strategy (GMS), published in 2013, which defines the themes of growth and reform, underlines priorities to deliver sustainable economic growth and job creation and recognises the challenges and opportunities of adapting to climate change.

Climate change

Greater Manchester was designated the UK’s first Low-Carbon Economic Area (LCEA) for the Built Environment in 2009. A Joint Delivery Plan to 2015 was agreed by AGMA in 2010, with responsibility owned by AGMA’s Environment Commission. The Commission established the GMLCH as part of the City Deal, set up in 2012 and led by a partnership Board of public, private, university and government representatives to deliver Greater Manchester’s Climate Change Strategy on behalf of AGMA. The Climate Change Strategy co-ordinates and integrates the carbon reduction plans of the ten local authorities and embodies four principles: a commitment to a 48% reduction in carbon emissions from 1990 levels by 2020; a rapid transition to a low-carbon economy; active adaptation to a changing climate and the establishment of carbon literacy in organisations, lifestyles and behaviours. *Compiled by Catherine Barlow, University of Salford*

reflection, documentation and a workshop, consisting of mapping organisations, stakeholders, processes, timelines, policy initiatives and the evidence base underpinning sustainable urban development in the city-region. In Phase 2 (2013–2014), a number of options for addressing these challenges were developed through a series of parallel processes. The GMLCH undertook an internal options analysis; the academic researchers undertook semi-structured interviews with local district officials to extend perspectives into how challenges were perceived and being acted upon at different scales; and four focus groups were also carried out with the Social Action and Research Foundation (SARF). This led to a workshop in November 2014 bringing together city-regional officials, local authority representatives and third and voluntary sector organisations. Phase 3 (2012–2016) ran alongside Phase 2 and consisted of real-time analysis and activities to put emerging findings into practice.

Overall the process of joint working included defining individual tasks, reflexive interviews, parallel and collaborative research activities, “check and challenge” meetings, combined presentations, joint project management and planning and, latterly, co-analysis and co-writing. The time-rhythms and processes of peer review have certainly not been conducive in supporting this latter task. From a position of author equality in early drafts, the final version undoubtedly favours the academic voice. The question “what is an author?” (Foucault 1977) is relevant here, a provocation which problematises the relationship between the act of writing and the concept of authorship, where the latter relates not to the production but a sense of *responsibility for a text*. Co-production did not involve dual ownership of every aspect of the research process, nor carrying out every task collaboratively. Instead, it involved episodes of separateness and day-jobbing, whilst coming together at key moments to reflect on experiences, share expertise, document contextual shifts and revisit emerging findings.

From options to critique

The first step of the process involved developing a mutual understanding of challenges around the areas of collaborative governance, the knowledge base and integrated policy development across the “triple bottom line” of environmental, social and economic sustainability. The GMLCH developed a baseline assessment drawing, in the first instance, on existing institutional and professional knowledge and, secondly, on desk-based analysis and evidence gathering. The Director of Environment and his team worked to produce this and one-to-one reflexive interviews were then undertaken by researchers and used to constructively critique and expand the written baseline. The process involved mapping organisations, stakeholders, processes, timelines, policy initiatives and the evidence base underpinning sustainable urban development in the city-region. The GMLCH produced a table which was used as the basis for a workshop across teams within the AGMA responsible for policy development and implementation across a range of areas, including housing, planning, environment and transport. This workshop enabled internal coordination around the question of integrated sustainability governance and policy and tested the accuracy of the results of the baseline.

The baseline assessment identified three sets of interlinked challenges in the areas of governance, policy and knowledge for sustainable urban development. These included: the need for greater clarity of roles between local and city-regional authorities and appropriate and effective engagement with community groups; underdeveloped joined-up thinking between and across policy areas for sustainable urban development, particularly around social inclusion, diversity and equality; and a fragmented and incomplete knowledge base for sustainability with minimal evidence of learning from grass-roots initiatives and limited connections with academic research. Collectively, these three challenges confirmed the distance still to travel towards the realisation of Greater Manchester as a “just city”, highlighting the need to broaden the focus from green growth and low-carbon economics towards a broader environmental quality agenda which considered issues of distributional and procedural justice, responsibilities, rights and recognition (Bulkeley *et al.* 2013).

Such a critique is neither new nor surprising. Urban geographers and climate change scholars have written widely on the econo-centric, growth-oriented capture of the urban sustainability

agenda and the difficulties associated with the multilevel governance of climate change at the urban level (Krueger and Gibbs 2007). Urban political scientists have noted the gaps between strategy and implementation and the complexity of decision-making processes, in which structures change whilst outcomes remain the same (Davison *et al.* 2015). However, the generation of *original* critique was not the purpose or outcome of this first stage of the co-production process. Rather, the value was in *shared* critique in which the collaborative language of “challenges” provided the basis for constituting a shared and critical view of current barriers to the realisation of a more just city as a precursor to exploring actual and potential options for change. At the same time, the co-production of the baseline assessment gave privileged insight into a dynamic and moving governance terrain, enabling the illumination of actually existing conditions and challenges facing the GMLCH in the context of austerity, public sector reform and new Coalition government politics. Importantly this revealed the extent to which the governance and operation of the broader Greater Manchester city-region both curtailed and enabled strategic action fields for the GMLCH.

Exploring options

The second phase of the process involved exploring how the GMLCH might respond to these challenges, at the same time as being locked into a broader city-regional and national-urban set of policy imperatives and responses to global issues. Four parallel approaches were undertaken through the formation of a transdisciplinary project team, bringing policy-makers, researchers and community representatives together. Firstly, the Director of Environment and his team undertook a self-directed “options analysis” for each of the challenges identified, examining how existing initiatives might have a positive or negative impact on the issue; how these impacts might be mitigated or initiatives adapted; and other options for responding to the challenges and any barriers to effecting change. Secondly, a new partner, the SARF, joined the project team and took responsibility for focus groups exploring responses and options for addressing the challenges with community representatives at Greater Manchester, Manchester City and City of Salford levels. A total of eighteen organisations participated in discussions, coming from a range of different specialities including food producers and retailers, businesses, the advice sector, refugee community organisations, community centres, business, anti-poverty campaigners, environmentalists and local tenants and residents’ groups. At these focus groups, issues around community involvement, AGMA structures and the meaning and value of the concept of sustainable urban development were discussed. Thirdly, the academics undertook interviews with 8 of the 10 climate change leads within the Greater Manchester local authorities. The interviews sought to understand the differences between local authority approaches and the extent to which districts were subject to pressures from “above” from the national level; how they worked with each other; their relationships and experiences of working with AGMA and the Low Carbon Hub and how they engaged with community groups in their role.

At this point, a joint synthesis and review meeting took place to compare and contrast perspectives. Rather than relying only on inputs from a traditional academic interview programme, practice-based, institutionally sensitive and community-based knowledges were first compared and then synthesised. It was important to undertake this comparison collectively as a transdisciplinary group, particularly in identifying where there were challenges to the assumptions that underpinned the original GMLCH baseline assessment. One example illustrates this. The GMLCH baseline assessment identified concern from within the institution that a “localist focus” could blinker approaches to cross-local authority responses, leading to a lack of uniformity which could both hinder cohesive policy development and reduce the dissemination and uptake of best practice. From a city-regional perspective, the diversity of local authority responses was seen as potentially problematic in developing city-regional-wide strategies. Such a view was contested from the local authorities, where interviewees revealed differences in “sign up” to the Greater Manchester project and a perception that AGMA and the GMLCH were forces acting *on* rather than *with* officers in the districts. The sheer complexity of governance relationships in the “AGMA family” was felt to be increasingly less transparent

the further outside the system individuals were located. For many within the local authorities, differences in approach were seen in a positive light, enabling them to pursue particular agendas relevant to each locality and for each to play to their strengths. Diversity was seen as positive in facilitating policy experimentation and innovation, along with greater connections with local people and community groups. The benefits of this difference in approach was recognised and welcomed by the GMLCH.

Transdisciplinary knowledge production led not only to testing, but also to refining and honing the shared critique. Whilst the effectiveness of a top-down approach created confidence with the central government, the baseline assessment confirmed the need first to acknowledge and then to bridge the gap between formalised city-regionalism and more informal grass-roots activism. However, it became apparent through the focus groups that the nature of this connection was not self-evident. "Greater Manchester" was seen to be increasingly relevant as a scale for decision-making, but had little resonance with those outside the system; the GMLCH was not widely understood as a vehicle for environmental/low-carbon work and communication through the websites and bulletins had only been reaching traditional and "safe" audiences. At the same time, connections with voluntary sector networks were weak with little engagement with the myriad grass-roots and bottom-up community initiatives, around the city-region, largely due to resource constraints. A constraint was also seen to be the lack of capacity, and sometime willingness, for community interest groups to engage. A central challenge was, therefore, defined as the creation of more efficient two-way channels of communication to make the collective scale of these initiatives visible, to better understand and support the conditions for their success and to learn from their experiences in terms of policy development and implementation. This was identified as important to build momentum for policy change and to convince politicians that the electorate would support more focus on sustainable activities within the city-region.

The "Options Analysis" enabled a wide variety of views, perspectives and possibilities to be "on the table" for how these challenges might be addressed. Local authorities, community groups and activists, city-regional officials and academics were given "voice" (Couldry 2010), enabling differences and commonalities to be identified. The parallel processes generated three distinct types of option for developing more just urban transformations. Type 1 included options around affirmative action to mitigate unequal processes and outcomes within existing systems. Type 2 reflected a series of non-reformist reforms where short-term incremental changes could be implemented for long-term gain. Whilst accepting the case for change, this option reflected a pragmatic response for existing institutions through reliance on Offe's (1984) "conjectural strategies"; that is, through incrementally adapting the existing structures of the state. Type 3 reflected a transformative orientation, the need for radical change and restructuring of the city-regional system and with it the machinery of the urban growth regime. This option most clearly aligned with the explicit discourse and practice of the "just city" in terms of demands for greater procedural and distributive justice, clear division of responsibilities and recognition of diversity and dissent within policy-making processes.

At one level, the palatability of these options to the study participants appeared to correlate with their position in the formal structures and decision-making arenas of the city-region. Affirmative action was largely advocated by those *within* and more radical changes were proposed by those *outwith* the system. Yet this misses the nuance and potential cracks for change in working not only against, but also within and beyond existing structures (Holloway 2005). The GMLCH Options Analysis was largely framed in the context of perceived existing institutional constraints and hence included statements such as "no political will" and "insufficient resources" as reasons behind the lack of viability of different courses of action. Affirmative options identified by the GMLCH team tended to reduce the concept of "barriers" to questions of resource and capacity, without attending to underlying structural conditions or processes. At the same time, other options focussed on developing "coalitions of the willing", engaging in capacity-building and exploring the replicability and scalability of grass-roots innovations. This suggests a broader desire to explore how conditions might be changed to legitimate more radical transformations. The options

Table 2. Options from the community focus groups.

Option 1: Networked Localism: developing the Low Carbon Hub as a hub for networked good practice and upscaling from hyperlocal approaches into large-scale solutions.

Option 2: Catalysing Local Social Action: a series of events for two-way knowledge exchange around key themes between Low Carbon Hub and the voluntary and community sector. Examples included the development of Community Land Trusts and the presentation and explanation of open data.

Option 3: Supporting Sustainable Enterprise: there is a potential to deliver some targeted work with more sustainable enterprises to be able to identify the barriers and challenges that exist for them to be able to provide a policy framework that is more supportive of their ambitions and supports economic growth for the sectors that are more sustainable.

Option 4: Role for Low Carbon Hub in coordinating collaborative development of strategy on particular policy areas: the Low Carbon Hub could coordinate a collaborative network on a particular policy area, such as food or fuel.

Option 5: Shadowing Scheme: allowing AGMA officers and voluntary sector workers to spend time together to learn from the respective experiences and knowledge on the ground.

Developed by Dan Silver, Social Action Research Foundation

produced by SARF were also mixed type (see Table 2), aimed, on the one hand, at recognising existing institutional constraints and translating the views of diverse community representatives into a series of tangible actions and, on the other, at recalibrating between a top-down city-regionalism and local social action.

The language of “options” created a safe vernacular in which radical, utopian and incremental reformist views could be assessed. Importantly, this allowed the identification and sharing of similarities in values. This was constituted around three value statements which were developed by the joint team based on the parallel processes and their subsequent synthesis: (1) *governing together, not governing from the top*, reflecting the need to shift from more formal structural solutions towards a more practice-based approach; (2) *an enabling policy framework to support and nurture grass-roots activism*, as a mechanism to begin to address the implementation gap between strategy and delivery to support multi-scalar innovations; and (3) *valuing different forms of knowledge and expertise*, to develop a two-way flow of knowledge between community groups, informal actors and policy-makers with a clear sense of purpose and outcome. These were developed and tested in a workshop held in 2013 in which policy-makers, local authority representatives and the participants in the focus groups came together. Priorities were defined as identifying ways of working across districts in a more “networked and facilitative” manner which valued diversity and giving greater attention to using existing relationship management processes to engage with grass-roots groups within existing local authorities.

Pilot actions to mobilise for change

In parallel with the process of options analysis, the GMLCH had already begun to take actions in discrete areas in which it had the authority and legitimacy to act independently of the project team. The GMLCH held meetings with representatives of third-sector groups and internal AGMA communications staff to discuss issues of engagement. A Communications Plan was presented to the GMLCH Board recommending more varied and open forms of communication, including the use of social media (twitter @GMLowCarbonHub) and digital technologies. Subsequently, two AGMA groups (the Climate Change Leads/Low Carbon Hub Board and the Chief Officer Group) successfully brought forward an initiative to move communications onto the new publicly facing digital sustainability portal, Platform, developed in collaboration between the project team and the sustainability communications agency, Creative Concern. This created a new community of articles and updates about the work of the GMLCH and user-oriented newsletter (<http://GMLCH.ontheplatform.org.uk/>). The future development of Platform was hoped to provide an accessible repository for archived policy and strategy.

The Director of Environment and his staff reworked the work programmes to include key performance indicators on environmental and climate change impacts, as a way of improving the evidence

base. Two forum meetings were held in which the GMLCH sought to diversify the organisational profile of its stakeholder base beyond the usual suspects. In recognition of the need for greater procedural justice, efforts to engage with different stakeholders, consider the role of third- and voluntary sector organisations and improve the diversity and robustness of the evidence base were undertaken – particularly in support of the refreshed Climate Change Implementation Plan (2015). Already by 2013, the GMLCH stakeholder base had doubled and had improved on gender balance, though the proportion of voluntary sector stakeholders remained similar.

A new forum – the Greater Manchester Low Carbon Research Forum – was instigated to bring together representatives from the three local universities, Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan and Salford, to support the GMLCH's efforts to better utilise academic research in public policy and programme development; this initially met on a quarterly basis. Funding from the project was drawn upon for this latter development, especially through using the University of Salford ThinkLab's digital crowdsourcing tool to harness academic knowledge to support the Low Carbon Hub Implementation Plan Refresh 2015–2020. In the process, several constraints to the engagement of Greater Manchester universities with this initiative were observed. These included inherent competition between the universities and academics which inhibited free collaboration; a depth, rather than breadth, of specialisms limiting the ability of academics to advise on broader, interrelated topics; and, despite a shared commitment in principle, difficulties in ensuring that academic research could support the development of public policy and knowledge without a paid commission. The relevance of these reflections was in turning the reflexive gaze back on universities themselves as sites of knowledge production in terms of the contexts and cultures in which they work (May and Perry 2011). To this extent, reflection and learning was a two-way process in highlighting the equal need for changes in the context of research as well as policy.

Through formulating a shared critique through the baseline assessment, the case that changes were necessary had already been accepted by the GMLCH. In taking internal actions within the context of the GMLCH, the driving question was not a normative one (what "should"/"ought" be done?), but a pragmatic (what "can" be done?) response to the circumstances surrounding the genesis, structure and content of the GMLCH agenda. Addressing challenges relating to communication and academic engagement was, at least initially, seen as an easy win to start working on within the existing institutional remit of the GMLCH. Yet contextual changes militated against simplistic fixes to complex challenges. In particular, the central question alighted on by the GMLCH through the project – how does the GMLCH have meaningful engagement with the 2.7 m people in Greater Manchester – became inseparable from broader governance and structural issues around the absence of civic participation in city-regional strategy development as a whole.

A clear distinction emerged between those actions deliverable within the existing capacity of the GMLCH (communication, workshops and knowledge transfer) and those structural issues relating to the broader "crisis" of urban governance (Jones and Ward 2002) stemming from more global economic and political factors (notably, the question of civic participation in the city-regional project). Actions were – and continue to be – taken on the former, whilst the latter is embroiled in and dependent on a series of more systemic debates and developments (not least the announcement that Greater Manchester will be the first English city-region to receive greater devolved powers from the central government). Under such circumstances, layered on top of public sector reform, budget cuts and uncertain political commitment to environmental policy at the national level, it is unsurprising that "affirmative" actions were favoured over "transformational" ones. This does not speak to conflicting expressed personal values regarding the need for greater environmental justice, but to an orientation from the GMLCH that "pragmatic responses" are required within (perceived) existing institutional constraints. Scaling environmental justice was acknowledged as necessary, but beyond the bounds of current possibilities. Instead, "communication" became an issue easier to work on, in terms of improving information flows and the transparency of existing organisations.

To this extent, we frame the *co-production process itself* as a potential longer term response to acting on the shared critique. Retrospectively, small collaborative actions can be understood as an

incremental process of case-making to support wider urban transformations. As the directly funded project work ended in 2014, collaboration continued between project partners to make the case for more transformative action. This has taken the form, for instance, of brokerage, liaison and promotion of the project and sharing the options with different spheres of public policy-making within the city-region. The GMLCH has considered existing strategies and action plans and used existing meetings to promote the principles underpinning the project in the spirit of the “shared critique”. The project space provided for mutual “check and challenge” and “cross-mentoring” enabled the GMLCH to articulate broader aspirations, relating, for instance, to the broadening of the low-carbon agenda; a mainstreaming of environmental issues into other policy domains; strengthening local authority capacity and connecting with local communities; unifying the knowledge base to contribute to city-regional developments and bridging between more “top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches. Democratic oversight of the GMLCH was also on the agenda, for instance, in relation to assessing the interrelationship between environmental, social and economic issues under the general power to promote well-being. A different vision for the GMLCH was articulated and proposed as a networked organisation with an enabling and coordinating role, a vehicle for learning lessons and sharing practices.

Building on the institutional empathy and trust developed through the project, mutual invitations have kept issues live – for instance, via presentations at the Greater Manchester Low Carbon Stakeholder Forum, at international conferences and via video testimonies reporting on the value of the work.¹ The production of this article is one such example of collaborative case-making for action on ecological, social and economic justice in the city-region. It serves as a testament to the shared critique and sits alongside other forms of non-academic representation of the findings of the research.²

Importantly, the collaborative process has served to support the legitimisation of discourse and action on “just cities”. Through sharing contacts, writing letters of support and brokering into wider circles of power and influence, the GMLCH has supported a new programme of work (2016–2019) to co-design and implement action research on urban justice in Greater Manchester. This is significant in supporting a momentum for change. The foundation of the project relied on individualised more than institutional relationships, in which informality, flexibility, trust and reciprocity were central. The steps taken were initially fragile, especially given that the trust and time-intensive nature of any co-productive process prioritise individual rather than institutional relationships. Individual buy-in and project support have been strong; however, this was not initially mainstreamed or embedded within wider AGMA structures. However, the experiences and positive endorsements of the process have subsequently led to a scaling up from the prefigurative possibilities of co-production into a more substantive programme of work. Since 2016, this totalled an additional £2.5 m of funding from national Research Councils and international funders, enabling renewed focus on the mechanisms, processes and practices for realising just cities.

This is not to deny the inexorable logics of economic growth that pervade modern cities. Distributive issues and the structural conditions that produce inequality have remained untouched. Yet by working on the practices rather than on the systems of governance through a collaborative endeavour, an incremental, pragmatic, but nonetheless progressive, approach to social and ecological justice is suggested. As the Director of the GMLCH noted: “it is clear – and has been demonstrated this year – that, by prioritising the actions identified in the Options Analysis, and focussing on a small number to be addressed each year, progress can be made”.

The value of co-production in realising just cities

Whilst there were tangible and immediate outcomes from the work, as documented above, the value of co-production lay in the sometimes intangible and initially modest progress made towards building the capacity and case for realising more just cities. This progress included the following:

- A shared understanding developed amongst project participants leading to new projects to sustain commitment to address them;
- Weight added to growing pressures to deal with distributional issues relating to environmental justice, supporting the need to act, particularly on food and fuel poverty;
- Written and verbal statements from the GMLCH recognising the need to protect the most vulnerable and ensure social equity is centred within low-carbon economy discourses;
- More diverse stakeholder networks, facilitated through project events and workshops;
- Explorations of alternative coordination mechanisms in areas such as urban food governance;
- Increasing public communications and transparency via city-wide sustainability portal and enhanced use of social media;
- Explorations of options for institutional design of city-regional organisations and
- Efforts to engage with universities via new forums and/or ways of working.

The primary outcome has been to suggest ways that a “justice” discourse may be legitimised in new spaces of decision-making and discussion. An alternative between business as usual and radical system transformation is suggested through creating mutual learning spaces in which critique can be discussed, absorbed and translated, albeit incrementally, into policy (Durose and Richardson 2015). This suggests that co-production may offer an alternative pathway for how to realise more just urban transformations within the context of existing institutions, balancing critique with pragmatism in the hope of more sustainable futures (Boltanski 2011). Craig argues that co-production can create the conditions for achieving an “epistemic good life” in collaborative sharing and pooling of information and individual dispositions that encourage trust (Craig 1990). Other studies have reached similar conclusions, for instance, that co-production offers an alternative to stale and recycled notions of “best practice” that plague sustainable urban development policies (Patel *et al.* 2015).

The challenge is how to assess and monitor progress. What are the markers that can valorise, through formative processes of documentation and learning, co-production in realising just cities? The aims of transformative strategies are often expressed as abstract values, for instance; *procedural justice* – referring to issues of inclusivity, participation and representation in the processes of governance at the urban level; *distributive justice* – here relating to how policy impacts on the most disadvantaged groups in society; or *recognition and difference* of the multiplicity of groups in the city as a means to acknowledge how different groups are positioned and enabled to challenge structural inequalities in the first place (Benhabib 1996, Young 2000). These abstract values relate to absolute indicators of success. Defining and assessing the values and indicators of affirmative strategies involving existing urban institutions are more difficult. It requires greater relativity, expressed by more intangible markers for *progress towards*, rather than *realisation of*, the just city. What does “more” justice look like? Here we are dealing with the likelihood that certain courses of action *might* contribute towards the possibility of alternative urban development pathways.

The lens of co-production raises an additional issue – what claims can be made about the values and limitations of the process itself? If “more justice” requires dealing with intangibles, so too does co-production – particularly given the narrowness of many impact indicators and the emphasis on outputs rather than outcomes from research. Furthermore, emerging evidence suggests that the value of co-production may only be truly identified with a medium-term or long-term perspective (Palmer and Walasek 2016). Drawing on this specific study – and the bullet points above – eight progress markers can be identified which are less concerned with measuring outcomes than with documenting shifts in emphasis and capacity (Table 3).

It is against such markers that the merits of working in a co-productive ethos need to be assessed. They speak not to the grand revolution, but to quieter, steady transformations. To go beyond critique, the proposition developed in this article is that you have to co-produce it. This may not be the stuff of interstellar “original knowledge” to which many academics aspire. The process can be slow and frustrating, initially limited to the reproduction of “knowledge of a ‘possible’ that is constantly being defined on our behalf” (Russell *et al.* 2011, p. 580). An ethical co-production starts in the present,

Table 3. Eight progress markers for recognising “More” just cities.

	Progress marker
Mood	“A sense that radical changes are needed” (Marcuse <i>et al.</i> 2011): shared understanding of challenges and commitment to address them
Distribution	Strategic consideration and policy options on the table, such as, food and fuel poverty
Discourse	Increasing consideration of “justice”, “fairness” and “distribution” within official and popular discourse
Coordination	Framework for making disparate and multiple efforts and initiatives visible, such as, strategic alliances, networks and platforms
Capacity and networks	Strengthened coalitions and partnerships; extending networks to previously disconnected stakeholders
Transparency/ communication	More transparency in decision-making structures and processes and improved efforts to open up the “black box” of policy
Structure	Alternative institutional designs incorporating greater downward accountability to citizens; citizen-led partnerships; participatory governance experiments
Knowledge/Metrics	Expansion of evidence base to challenge economic target-driven culture and draw on wider networks of expertise, including lay and community knowledges
<i>Authors’ own</i>	

whilst remaining committed to expanding the horizons of hope, through parallel processes of affirmative action and transformative goals.

Conclusion

Against a backdrop of constant institutional change and budgetary pressures, working collaboratively between policy-makers and researchers permitted real-time engagement with a complex case and offered privileged insights into the policy-making process. This contributes to addressing the research gap of “mov[ing] beyond discursive representations to engage with how climate justice is actually practiced and embedded in the city” (Bulkeley *et al.* 2013, p. 25). This raises critical issues concerning what kinds of new governance spaces are needed (Durose and Richardson 2015), the extent to which they challenge or reinforce existing knowledge pathways (Jasanoff 2012) and how they support innovative policy outcomes that benefit a wide range of urban stakeholders, both now and in the future.

The claim is that co-production offers a way of undertaking research that engages in real time with different stakeholder groups. This moves beyond the idea that universities are only valuable to their immediate localities in terms of economic multiplier effects and instead focuses on the potential transformative potential of knowledge in urban sustainability transitions (May and Perry 2016). Our work suggests that co-production may be a potential pathway for moving from affirmative to transformative strategies for urban justice at the urban level, gaining traction within existing institutional settings, without ruling out more fundamental transformation. As Fainstein notes (2010, p. 6):

While in isolation such endeavours would not be structurally transformative, as a component of broader national and international movements they would add to overall pressure for restructuring capitalism into a more humane system.

This speaks to the role of academia in bringing about urban transformations, through critique, engagement and reconstruction of possibilities for action, rather than through the application of a narrow impact-led agenda, via technology transfer, commercialisation and patenting (Pineiro *et al.* 2013). Informed by a “meliorist” outlook (Dewey 1957), trust-based relationships, dialogue and safe spaces for collaborative reflexivity (May and Perry 2013, 2017) may offer ways to reform existing institutions from within. Language plays an important role in shifting from a detached to an engaged critique: the terms of the project were framed around “challenges”, “options”, “stakeholders” and “joined-up thinking”, rather than “critique”, “transition pathways” and “environmental justice”. By enrolling decision-makers in the analysis of challenges and opportunities and creating

spaces of productive tension with different groups, knowledge ceases to be denigrated as “academic” and instead has the potential to legitimise and validate the need to “take the time out” to think about contexts, conditions and values underpinning actions. Academic-policy collaborations thereby may contribute to legitimating agendas – including that of environmental justice – which move beyond the critique of the post-political and post-sustainable urban development agenda. As Oxford Dictionaries chose “post-truth” as its word of the year (Guardian 2016), our paper speaks not to the decentering of expertise, but the recentring of multiple forms of expertise in the search for more sustainable urban futures.

Notes

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOKvilom8qw&t=99s>.
2. <http://ontheplatform.org.uk/article/governing-sustainability-greater-manchester/>.

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ORCID

Beth Perry  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4335-1869>

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