Green Recovery Dialogues

Deryck Irving, Green Action Trust - Transcript

See the video at https://youtu.be/kQee0yJ135I

Hi, I'm Deryck Irving from the Green Action Trust. I've been asked, I think, to give this thinkpiece because I have about 30-odd years' worth of experience of working in policy and delivery in urban environments, with relation to green infrastructure and green space. I considered doing this presentation as a PowerPoint but I think most of us in the United Kingdom have seen quite how bad PowerPoint can be at getting points across to people so I think we'll just stick with talking heads. I'm going to focus on this short piece on nature-based solutions but also on place-based solutions. And I'll touch on the importance of the way in which the Glasgow open space strategy is being developed. When I was first introduced to the term 'nature-based solutions' I've got to admit my first reaction was to think, 'oh God, here we go again!' My entire career has been based on looking at the importance of high quality accessible green environments within towns and cities. And I've heard, and I've used, a seemingly never-ending stream of changing terminology to describe subtly different versions of pretty much the same principles and aspirations: urban wildlife, green space, green networks, climate change parks, salutogenic environments, ecological urbanism, green infrastructure, urban ecosystem services, and now nature-based solutions. Having said that, having spent a bit of time looking at the ideas behind nature-based solutions and the way they're being expressed I'm actually now quite a fan because I think it really starts to set a tone for the changes of thinking that we need to be addressing. Three of the terms that I mentioned already actually work very well together: we've got green *infrastructure*, ecosystems *services* and nature-based *solutions.* So we're talking about green and open spaces which have a defined set of functions which deliver benefits and which address issues, challenges and problems that we're seeking to resolve. High quality multifunctional spaces and networks of spaces can deliver environmental, social and economic benefits ranging from increasing social capital through public health and wellbeing to climate change mitigation and adaptation. With good design and management these benefits. and many others. can be achieved together. But are they all required everywhere? What happens if they compete or conflict with each other? So, for nature-based solutions to be effective we need clarity about what combinations of problems, issues and challenges we're seeking to address, and how these relate and interact with the places in which action is being considered. If I can digress for a moment - and given that I'm filming and directing I suspect I can - I'd like to highlight at the dangers of overly focusing on single issues, which I think is very dangerous at the moment. We focus on single issues and their solutions to the exclusion of other equally valid issues. I've been working recently with the Vacant and Derelict Land Taskforce here in Scotland. I would like to use two pieces of work that have arisen from that work to highlight the dangers of not thinking holistically. But I'd stress that I'm doing this as an illustration of what not to do, not a description of what we genuinely did. A primary objective of the Taskforce is the reduction of Scotland's vacant and derelict land in terms of quantity, particularly with a view to reducing the number of long-standing derelict sites. One aspect of this that the Green Action Trust has actually led on is an identification of which of these sites have naturalised. The system allows for sites which have another function, such as natural habitat, to be removed from the vacant and derelict land register. This could definitely be described as a nature-based solution. However if I'm someone living with a derelict site on my doorstep which attracts antisocial behaviour, which makes me stressed, which makes me fearful of

going outdoors, simply telling me that it's now natural habitat and no longer derelict, that it's not on the register, doesn't change any of those problems for me. So, to get these sites genuinely to be different we need some work to look at how people engage with them and how they solve issues and problems that people are facing on a day-to-day basis. Similarly, we've been asked to do some work looking at the potential for these vacant derelict sites to accommodate woodland creation:. Primarily this is about carbon sequestration. We can certainly make some case for biodiversity benefits and for some climate adaptation around temperature and potentially water. But it's quite a narrow set of focuses, and what if these sites have existing or potential uses that are also valuable? Are they the informal local green spaces for people? Could they be contributing to net zero as a site for renewables like solar or ground source heat? Are there other economic or community uses for those sites that are already envisaged, which are actually beneficial in other ways? And so on. So this brings me to the importance of place-based approaches as stated in the recent recommendations from Scotland's Landscape Alliance. If we're going to deliver a sustainable mix of land use of actions and of solutions, a mix which minimises conflict and maximises the acceptable accommodations between vastly different needs, we have to start with place. Starting with real places from a single neighbourhood up to the scale of, say a river catchment, it allows us to understand the issues and problems that we're seeking to address. It allows us to capture existing and potential uses and aspirations for these places and spaces. And it allows us to identify the services and solutions that are needed and the actors who have a part to play in delivering them. And moving on, place-based based approaches allow us to work with local stakeholders to develop solutions which minimise conflict and are truly multifunctional. It allows us to create places which are successful, healthy, welcoming, as well as carbon neutral, and it allows us to engage and empower communities in a way which increases their resilience to the challenges that they face. And it's important in this context to remember that climate change is a multiplier of other challenges and it frequently increases inequality - the strong evidence is that community resilience is greatest when people feel they're involved in decision-making in action. Glasgow's Open Space Strategy, which is part of the City Council's contribution to the Connecting Nature programme, is an important step forward in this respect, and it's the best open space strategy that I've seen in Scotland. It looks at a wide range of nature-based solutions and prioritises multi-functionality; it breaks the city down into smaller places where local issues and opportunities can be more fully assessed and addressed; and it enables communities to feed back, correcting errors and assumptions, expanding ideas and allowing communities to take a role in the aspects of action that they can best take forward themselves. If I can steal and wilfully misquote a statement from Professor Brian Evans, Glasgow city urbanist, by bringing together nature-based solutions with place-based design and planning approaches, we're combining the zeitgeist - climate and ecological crisis, green recovery post-COVID - with the genius loci - the spirit and identity of place - and that's got to be a recipe for success. Thank you.