

We have a responsibility to be a bit more pragmatic

An interview with Dr Yvonne Rydin, conducted by Christian Schulz

Yvonne Rydin is Professor and Chair of Planning, Environment and Public Policy at the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London. In her research on sustainable development, she focuses on planning processes, questions of democratic participation, political power and governance, and the role of civil-society organisations. Her ground-breaking book 'The future of planning: Beyond growth dependence' (2007, Policy Press) critically addresses the growth paradigm of spatial planning.

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What do degrowth approaches mean for your own research?

Yvonne Rydin: My current work is actually focused on planning for low-growth areas. What I'm interested in is looking at areas that seem to be beyond the reach of growth-orientated policies and seeing how they are coping, what their options are. So, the work I'm focusing on at the moment is a comparative study.

In England, this looks at Cambridge and Cambridgeshire. Cambridge is very well known for the Cambridge Phenomenon, a lot of growth both in the hi-tech industry, but also housing and residential development with new urban centres, and I'm setting that in the context of Cambridgeshire, which is very much a county of two halves. In the area to the north and the east, an area we call Fenland and East Cambridgeshire, the settlements are much poorer, with some severe public health problems, severe problems of unemployment, and benefit dependency. It's very, very different to the city of Cambridge, so that makes a good contrast. I'm comparing that with a case

in Sweden, in southern Sweden, which is Malmö, also very well known for undergoing a shift from a post-industrial city to a knowledge city. There is also growth along the Malmö-Helsingborg corridor. But in the county of Skåne and in the eastern and northern areas, there is much less economic growth to drive change.

So, what I'm really interested in is looking at the contrasts and identifying what are the options in both cases to the areas to the north and east of the growth centres, beyond simply trying and failing to attract growth. What do you do with the bits that are – and I don't like this language, but people use it – 'left behind areas'? Maybe it's not so much that they are left behind, but that they need something else. For the future, they need a new kind of planning.

I think that planners have very little in the way of tools or visions available for these areas. For instance, in Cambridgeshire I looked at the different districts and their plans; all of them bar one are basically saying 'well, we need more growth' and they just have no idea of how to get that! One district has gone for a more community-based approach, but interestingly they find themselves in conflict with the central government organisation that examines local plans, and that's an interesting story that is still ongoing.

To what extent do these phenomena challenge your textbooks for future planners?

Yvonne Rydin: We have less reliance on textbooks today to be honest, but I think if you look at the syllabuses, even in my own school, and what most of the research is about, it tends to focus on big developments, the big money, the big shifts, urban regeneration, public-private partnerships, mega-projects; it's all very focused on the growth paradigm. I think that's fairly embedded, and I think it does take a bit of rethinking right down at the core; what is the economic model behind this and is it a model that is actually working or not? And I do think this is very much about rethinking the differences between working with big capital and working with small capital, and also working across the economy/society divide. The conventional economic model starts from the differentiation between the household and the firm, two sectors, two sides of the diagram, and I think we need to reconceptualise that relationship as well. So, I've started to play around with ideas of – and I'm sure other people are doing this too – the localised economy, the localised society and localised planning as a way of rethinking how these relationships actually work.

Certainly, what we need is a more hybrid planning system; we need to move away from a one-size-fits-all solution which tends to be the growth solution, and we need hybridity in the planning system, with a recognition that you need to know your context and you need to customise your solution to that context. When you look at context, a localised context, we've got used to looking at the resources of civil society, but I think we're much less used to looking at the resources of endogenous, very small-scale capital. And we need to think about how to work better across the civil society / small-scale capital divide, and consider what capital can do in relation to this. Also we need to work with some of the more localised, embedded, larger scale capital. It might be private sector, it might be public sector, or be on the very fuzzy boundary we now have between the public and the private sector.

I've been reading quite a lot about what happens in the United States; it's very interesting the way that universities and philanthropic foundations very often act as anchor institutions helping to build different kinds of local economy, often with the cooperation of smaller, endogenous, locally owned businesses. They are more accepting of growth coalitions, they are more accepting of urban regimes, and they don't have the same trust in the planning sector that we have, so they are starting from a different place, but there is something here that we can learn from.

Do you see particular methodological implications resulting from this?

Yvonne Rydin: It's much easier, as I tell all my students, to research what's there, and what has happened. And of course, if one is looking, in these lower growth areas, for the options that haven't been tried, that's really, really difficult! You end up in thought experiments, and as academics, you can sort-of look a little silly. You can promote ideas that are not realistic. So, I think there are quite important methodological issues here about how you actually look for what has been missed – the silences, the absences – and then think about how those can be filled, but in a way that makes sense, that isn't just idealism. I think we have a lot of academic papers that do very rigorous research but end with rather idealistic suggestions; we have a responsibility to be a bit more pragmatic in what we actually recommend.

The local scale seems to be of key interest for your work. Why is that?

Yvonne Rydin: In planning, there is a national and even international framework, and we must always take into account that it makes a huge difference: that is, the institutional arrangements that central government puts in place, or state governments in different kinds of political systems. But the question is usually what can you do at a local level – with this site, with this city? So the locality is very much the scale that we want to operate at – to think about what is actually possible at that kind of scale. My hunch or hypothesis is that the kind of knowledge that local planning works with is absolutely central. And the kind of knowledge used – not just data, but also assessments and evaluations – focus the attention in particular kinds of ways. Certainly in the UK system, where I have studied this so far, knowledge is very focused on particular growth dynamics and concerns about releasing land to meet those growth dynamics. I suppose one of the things I am looking for is: what are the alternative knowledge claims, the alternative knowledge sets that we might draw upon to think about doing planning in a different way?

There is a lot of interest in lay and experiential knowledge, and I think that's important where communities are trying to resist the negative effects of growth. But beyond this, I have a feeling that we really need to develop new knowledge, and I suspect some of this is around the knowledge of the local economy, what actually is happening particularly in the SME sector, and what is going on there; generally, we know very little to nothing. And if we don't know about it, how do we harness it, how do we support it? So, my hunch is that I need to look at the different kinds of knowledge claims as a way of thinking about the different kinds of planning that can happen in localities. The interesting picture here is often on the boundary of academic and grey literature and it's about all the little case studies of what's going on all around the world, and trying to pull together all those case studies and learn from them. With conventional methodologies it is difficult to have a rigorous framework for doing that; it's almost detective work, I think.

A lot is written about best practices, in that you have to recontextualise them when you move them to a different space; this is about the knowledge you need about your locality in order to recontextualise well, so that you're not just borrowing things inappropriately. That isn't just about knowing the best practice example, it's also knowing about the context into which you are trying to situate it. So, if you have a training scheme that's a good idea in

an American small town, that helped to build the capacities of lower income communities and got them into various kinds of employment, okay, that seems like a good idea. But if we take it to somewhere like Cambridgeshire, then we need to know about the differences between the localities, about how we may retool that idea for this place.

If you were given an unconditional degrowth research grant allowing you to hire a postdoc for two years, what would be the topical focus of your project?

Yvonne Rydin: What I think I would do is I would get somebody and make sure that they are situated in one or a small number of low-growth areas, but get them really embedded in there. Not to do the sort of fly-in fly-out research, which we very often have to do if we are not working in our own backyard. Instead do a quasi-ethnography with local SMEs and smaller businesses and with smaller NGOs, to get to really know this locality and use that to think about how we could work through changes that could actually be put into effect. This would take into account knowledge that is being created elsewhere, but also the barriers that are in place and the institutional arrangements, as in financial or market structures. What I think I would ideally like to do would be to have that embedded kind of research, the opportunity for which I've not had for a very long amount of time now.

This is very demanding and involves a long-term commitment to communities in order to work with them and alongside them. I think it's easier to do that if you do it in your own backyard. I have colleagues who work with communities within London and it works very well; and I can see you have universities in the States, where there is a long distance to the next large place, so academics automatically work on their own town. We in Europe have been pulled away from that a little bit, and have been encouraged to cross boundaries – till now.

