

DIALOGUES: CITY+CRISIS INITIATIVE

A CONVERSATION WITH GILLIAN BRISTOW ON THE QUEST FOR A JUST AND SUSTAINABLE CITY

This is an edited transcription of an hourly conversation that took place on Tuesday 29 April 2014. To reproduce any parts of this transcript in any form please contact Grigoris Kafkalas at gkafkala@arch.auth.gr.



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Grigoris Kafkalas. Thank you for accepting this invitation to discuss the theme of the quest for a just and sustainable city. Let me start with a first question and we may expand as you wish. There are already more than five years since the outbreak of the financial crisis of 2008. Has the crisis affected cities differently than their respective national economies? Do cities differ in respect to their resilience and/or vulnerability against the impacts of the crisis?

Gillian Bristow. I was going to start by saying that where I am coming from is largely in relation to the research of the ESPON project which is really looking at

the impact of the recent crisis on regions across Europe...so a lot probably of what I am saying will be framed by that research project I suppose...and one of the findings of our research on that project is that metropolitan areas have tended to be more resilient to the crisis...so there does seem to be something about cities and particularly cities of a certain scale that provides some benefits...at the moment we still trying to exactly uncover and understand why that is...we are still doing a little bit more analysisit could be a

number of reasons...one is the normal benefits of agglomeration economies or clustering effects that cities have...I think that probably we also see that a lot of this has to do with changes in economic structure...so the shift towards services tends to benefit cities, I suppose...and urban locations, that seem to be quite strong...and related to that are also the structural changes that seem to benefit skilled workers who tend to agglomerate in cities... so we are seeing a number of positive interrelationships between clustering, urban locations, services, skilled workers...those are initial thoughts as I said probably we need a little bit more analysis to be done...but it certainly seems that there is some strength in cities...

Grigoris Kafkalas. So you are saying that cities are actually in a position to respond better or to be more resilient than the overall economy, despite the fact that cities feel the main impact of the crisis. Perhaps, as you said earlier, cities have structures that help them to respond more effectively.

Gillian Bristow. Exactly. This is certainly the case in the UK. Everyone expected that the most recent economic crisis would probably hit London harder than many other parts of the country because of its dependence upon financial services and yet actually it emerged stronger than ever...so it is an interesting issue of how we expected the geography of the crisis to roll out in the UK and how

the outcome has proved to be quite different.

Grigoris Kafkalas. Cities are considered to be the centres of socio-political evolution for either the consolidation of the established regimes or their overthrow. Does the crisis weaken or strengthen the significance of cities as arenas for the orientation of social change?

Gillian Bristow. This is an interesting question. And again related perhaps to the ESPON project we were asked specifically to look at whether the crisis was a trigger for transformative or radical change in relation to economic development strategies largely on the regional scale...but certainly from the evidence we found quite a mixed picture...this crisis has not created the radical transformative change perhaps that we might have expected it to...There are a lot of examples of perhaps quite small scale initiatives, new social movements with economic and social agendas, we've got things like the transition town movement, we have got community energy schemes. But for the moment, from my perspective, such initiatives seem to be quite small scale...we haven't really seen a very strong trend towards any massive growth in their number and significance really...

Grigoris Kafkalas. In fact there are two points here that need further comment. One is whether cities are in a stronger or weaker position to respond. The other as you suggested concerns the character of the various initiatives. What is the orientation of change? There are different directions perhaps...all those initiatives do

not match up, do not aggregate and even tend to negate each other perhaps...as they don't only move towards progressive but for example also towards more reactionary or xenophobic outcomes for example. What do you think, is there a main direction or we are still in a position that anything goes without clear outcome?

Gillian Bristow. That's a tricky issue. I think certainly development in the energy and environment area are engaging quite a lot of interest and that could be one focal point of change, I also think that some of them are social movements pursuing rather progressive agendas. But such initiatives emerge also as much in rural areas as they do in urban areas. So I do not think that cities are necessarily the source or have exclusive control or influence over this kind of opportunity.

Grigoris Kafkalas. So it seems that we tend to emphasize cities but perhaps there is nothing that in this respect differentiates them from the overall society. Let's now turn to how the interplay of local and global forces forges the profile of cities. Do you think that the forces unleashed by the crisis favour a uniform post-crisis urban condition by eliminating the differences? Do you see any flattening effect here? Alternatively, do cities respond and/or adapt to the crisis on the basis of their own particular profiles?

Gillian Bristow. I think from the research we have done on this ESPON project that we found very strong evidence that agency at the city or subnational level more broadly is hugely important. The decisions made by key actors within cities

and regions are critical factors and there is quite a strong tendency to try to pursue similar developing agendas. There is also a very strong sense in which policy makers are quite keen to ask what we need to do to be resilient; they are looking to find the strategy that gives a blueprint. But by opening the discourse and the dialogue on things like resilience, perhaps there is a gradual appreciation of the importance of tailoring strategies to places and the context and uniqueness of places. Certainly one of the conclusions in this research that there is need for greater appreciation that every place, every city has a unique development, a path dependent trajectory, and we need perhaps to understand that the crisis has not affected everybody the same way and that the impacts are different in different places, and so the strategies should be different accordingly.

Grigoris Kafkalas. This is very important. At a certain scale it might be advisable to have a common response to the crisis but if you change scale, if you go to specific places then the uniform response is not operating very efficiently. Then you need to take into account the specificities of place.

Gillian Bristow. This is quite a challenging message to put across to policy makers.

Grigoris Kafkalas. They might not like it but it is still very important. Now, the achievement of a just and sustainable city seems to be a widely acceptable moral and

political vision. Does this vision remain a priority during the crisis or other issues tend to take its place (i.e. attraction of new investment, competitiveness of the economy, quality of the urban environment, security for citizens, etc.)?

Gillian Bristow. I think again this is a very good question...in this research we were specifically asked to look at whether the crisis led to more sustainable agendas in many regions. That was one of the key questions. Did the crisis trigger a greening of the economy? The evidence is quite mixed ...because initially in many places there was strong sense that there is need for more greening...perhaps because one response to the crisis in many nations across Europe was to develop green new deals and provide and implement fiscal stimulants for low carbon projects. But as we found out in many case studies...as the crisis took hold and turned into austerity and led to public sector spending cuts, a lot of green development projects have been delayed or stopped. There is strong evidence that in many regions priorities became jobs, any jobs, any investment, any businesses whether they are polluting or not... the crisis in a sense meant it was important to prioritize jobs while the greening and the sustainability issues perhaps moved down the agenda a little bit.

Grigoris Kafkalas. So it seems that sustainability becomes irrelevant, at least for some...

Gillian Bristow. Well, it is rather about priorities...they seem to say that it is a nice project but we cannot afford that for the moment because we should tackle the unemployment issue and get people back to work and earning money again. So there is rather a mixed picture.

Grigoris Kafkalas. I see. Though in principle one should think that if sustainability is a valid model for a different way of doing things or for a different society of the future it should be even more relevant during the crisis. But it seems that for many, this crisis is an opportunity in inverted commas, so to speak, to actually continue in doing business as usual.

Gillian Bristow. The crisis maybe forces people to go back to what they were used to or what they are more familiar with or towards more traditional ways than exploring new ways in relation to investment and competitiveness. So perhaps they may tend to revert back towards more comfortable ways and familiar policy tools and approaches in times of crisis.

Grigoris Kafkalas. What could be the vision of a just and sustainable city after the crisis? How urgent and/or feasible is to adopt goals such as the redistribution of income in order to achieve real equality, the promotion of collective against private initiatives, the effort to reach consensus among conflicting interests on the basis of parity of access to jobs and services, etc.? Or perhaps the issue of equality as you said earlier about the greening of the

economy was put aside and we turn towards finding other forms of response?

Gillian Bristow. Certainly from this perspective we have not found a clear vision of what a just and sustainable city really, is and I also think that there is very little evidence that the re-distribution of income is becoming a priority. But what is clearly becoming important however is a very strong emphasis on collective means of organizing initiatives. It seems that local authorities, city administrations and regional governments are perhaps more willing to find ways of working together. There is certainly evidence of this in the UK, especially because of the austerity cuts and budget restrictions, where cities and regions seem very keen to find ways of collaborating and working together. They have, of course, to overcome tricky traditional political boundaries and antagonism because essentially they have to find ways of sharing costs of infrastructure or meeting energy demands by working collaboratively. So I think yes there are some positive signs in that sense but I do not think that income distribution is very high on their agendas.

Grigoris Kafkalas. During crisis the numbers of those in need is increasing and in a sense the need to proceed with some sort of real redistribution increases as well. At the same time that the need becomes greater perhaps our means to act become more restricted. This is a kind of inverse trade off perhaps but as you are saying there are positive signs that we understand the need to collaborate and work collectively.

Gillian Bristow. Yes, particularly at the subnational level with varying degrees of success I suppose, but there is a stimulus as the various local authorities are trying to share resources and skills. This is certainly not easy but perhaps it is happening a little bit, I think.

Grigoris Kafkalas. Is it possible to think of a kind of collaboration between cities or regions as they strive to improve their response or they tend to somehow turn into themselves trying to save whatever they can? Do they have the extra motivation needed to actually increase their collaboration networks?

Gillian Bristow. I think so, because they simply have to find more creative solutions. There are certain signs in the UK that cities are finding new networks that are valuable in exchange of knowledge and resources, as they realize that it is easier to do this at a slightly bigger scale. Quite often local authorities are very small and they are strengthened in doing things at a slightly bigger scale through collaboration than continue trying on their own. Certainly this is not an easy task and the local politics makes it more challenging. But there are certainly positive signs.

Grigoris Kafkalas. And what do you think about the idea of linking the greening of the economy to smart technologies. In the past few years such ideas have gained momentum. The core of this idea is that by increasing the

smartness of the city it becomes more competitive. Do you think that this trend towards smartness is also a victim of the crisis as you said earlier about the greening of the economy?

Gillian Bristow. I think that perhaps priorities have not been changing and also that probably we are finding much more variability. Perhaps if you have cities that are more deprived or are struggling economically then their priorities are quite different and they tend for example to prioritize jobs. Wales is quite a good example because it has a regional government that is committed to sustainable development and yet is also struggling economically. So the government has recently accepted and supported the development of a nuclear power station in the region. That is an example that when you are faced with difficult decisions, sometimes the economy becomes more important than environment. Decisions have to balance different needs in different places and cities, and some become certainly innovative. Bristol, for example is a city with strong emphasis in green transport and green energy and low carbon development, very innovative things are going on, but perhaps this is possible because it has got extra capacities and a stronger economic base so it is more able to do that. We should expect to see more variability.

Grigoris Kafkalas. Is it possible that the crisis provides the opportunities to move

faster towards a just and sustainable city? Is this an issue to be decided hierarchically as a hegemonic project from above or if it is going to be realized then it should be forged through social and political conflicts? Is it possible to move toward sustainability in a more consensual way or it is feasible only through conflict?

Gillian Bristow. It was perhaps expected that this crisis would lead to much more transformative change than it actually has - progress towards just and sustainable cities has been a little bit slower than we expected as a result. It seems that much depends upon the capacities existing at the local city and regional level and those capacities are hugely variable. Where there are good resources and strong leadership at the subnational or city level, there is real imperative and strong desire to develop just and sustainable cities. Without the availability of resources and leadership it is much more difficult to see that happening. Primarily I see this as a bottom up process than it becoming a hegemonic project but it is highly variable because of the different capacities.

Grigoris Kafkalas. Now it seems that there are two different paths towards achieving sustainability and these paths are not necessarily compatible. For some the hegemonic version of achieving sustainability after the crisis is a kind of hijacking of the concept by neoliberalism in its effort to guarantee the survival of the status quo. What are you saying seems to favour the view that the path towards sustainability has to be conquered from below and because of that there is much variability to be expected. Now turning to Greece, the crisis came later and more

violently and the country is still in the maelstrom of its consequences. Some think that Greece was treated as a Guinea pig in relation to the crisis. Do you wish to make any specific comment in relation to Greece?

Gillian Bristow. I think that again what emerged from the ESPON case study by looking at Greece is that the crisis has challenged the local city and regional levels to respond. It seems that the local actors and policy makers have very limited power and capacities to do what they want to do. There is a mismatch and imbalance between what they desire to achieve and what actually can be done due to the inadequate decentralization of political power, financial resources and organizational capacities. That strikes me as a key issue and a much bigger issue is the overall scale of austerity and how you cannot escape the impact that is inevitably going to happen. It can take quite some time before the recovery process is set in motion. The scale of the impact though is something that people outside Greece couldn't easily appreciate.

Grigoris Kafkalas. Sometimes there is an overstating of problems. Nevertheless we could learn from the Greek case, though the lessons are not clear and we are not sure what to do with this kind of lessons. Do you think that judging from the various case studies so far the responses to the crisis tend to be somehow collectively organized and administered by local authorities? As you said earlier it is the lack of capacities that weakens the ability of the Greek society to recover.

Gillian Bristow. There is strong evidence that national responses have been critical. So collective efforts at the national level are hugely important and they shape the context of what can be done or is done at the subnational level. There is strong evidence of that. There are some responses originating at the subnational level but they are framed by the national context because this crisis is so much about public sector debt it became largely a national issue that in principle needs national state to take the lead.

Grigoris Kafkalas. Some argue that the way the crisis was handled was a manner to actually transmit the impact away from those who were its cause and towards other lower and weaker levels. In accordance of what you said about the importance of the national response, this was the transmittance mechanisms brought the impact away from those who created the crisis, namely the financial sector and towards the subnational units such as the different localities and the weaker social groups.

Gillian Bristow. I agree. We can certainly see that in the UK where the crisis led the national government to bailing out the banks and then issuing constrained budgets for regions and localities across the country.

Grigoris Kafkalas. Do you wish to make any other comment or introduce any other issue?

Gillian Bristow. Just that I am really interested to see how the just and

sustainable city vision evolves through the crisis and over time. and what the effects will become in the longer run. It will certainly be interesting to see the outcome in four years time.

Grigoris Kafkalas. Indeed. Our initiative started on the assumption that one of the first victims of the crisis is the vision of a sustainable city. We are trying to set the agenda on this issue and make some sense of the different views and approaches. We will certainly stay in touch and ask your opinion during the next steps of this effort. Thank you very much for this interesting and enjoyable discussion that was quite clear not only conceptually but also technically as we had a very good Skype connection.