Enhancing Urban Autonomy
Towards a new political project for cities

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This is a discussion paper for Friends of the Earth’s Big Ideas Change the World project on the topic ‘How can we get cities driving positive social, environmental and economic change?’ There are two other papers on this topic, one on participation and public education, and one on sharing.

Introduction

By 2050 it is expected that 75% of the world’s people will live in cities, with cities in the developing world growing rapidly in both size and number in the coming decades. Yet modern cities are far more than physical spaces – they are constituted from a complex network of multi-scalar inter-relationships, exchanges of resources, finance, knowledge and power.

In this respect it might seem pointless to argue over the degree of ‘autonomy’ a city might enjoy from national political powers or global economic structures. When we recognise that a city is primarily a node in a wider set of networks and relationships, hierarchical concepts of autonomy, which assume power enhanced at one scale must be power given up at another, appear largely meaningless.

Yet cities remain specific places with specific histories, inhabited by specific people, whose wellbeing is in part a function of the flourishing or otherwise of the city, and the ability of decision makers in local authorities, businesses, charities and community organisations to act collectively to enhance wellbeing. As a parallel paper in this series argues, collective local action and resource sharing has massive potential to build wellbeing without exacerbating environmental degradation and inequality. To engage people in such action...
Enhancing urban autonomy: towards a new political project for cities

requires a degree of autonomy and authority which is rarely clear or present in modern cities, where autonomy is fragmented and effective power\(^1\) often centralised or remote.

Cities are both shaped by – and central forces reshaping – global economy and society. To flourish and to contribute to global flourishing, cities and their people need both greater control over their own destinies, and a strong ethical compass. In moral terms, the concept of autonomy captures both these aspects: individual freedom, and self-control that respects the freedoms of others\(^2\).

In these terms, enhanced autonomy for cities is an essential intervention on the path to wellbeing, sustainability and justice throughout the world. By enhanced autonomy we mean the integration and strengthening of capacities for sustainable and just development of and in our cities that currently exist in the form of ‘fragmented’ autonomy, especially in the economic realm. The templates for autonomy are not predetermined, and it can be enhanced in multiple different sites and forms of political space within the city.

Unpacking autonomy

Autonomy is a complex idea, encompassing ideas of independence and separation, of self-sufficiency and of self-control, and of respect. Politically, it is perhaps the idea of self-determination that has most caught the imagination. In this conceptualisation, autonomy has positive connotations – of a society or community pursuing a common goal with some level of self-determination. But autonomy has also come to be associated with absolute forms of independent rule and containment; of boundaries, strong levels of control, and social conservatism. Such closed form of autonomy sits uncomfortably with our idea of a global world. Yet – understood as a moral state of independence in which respect for others’ independence is integral – autonomy is naturally bounded or constrained in the interests of the social good without such constraints requiring an exercise of hierarchical power. It therefore holds a promise of alternative forms of social organisation and politics that could enable radical transformations.

Cities lie at the heart of this debate; both epitomising autonomy and being central to the flows of global politics, trade, and resources. For some, the city is a “self-enclosed political [territory] within a nested hierarchy of geographical arenas contained within each other like so many Russian dolls” (Brenner et al. 2003: 1). Here, the question of autonomy appears straightforward – how much of what kind of autonomy should be allocated to the city, under what conditions, in order to achieve certain social goals? While there are challenges in terms of the allocation of duties, powers, functions and responsibilities, the central question is how

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\(^1\) Effective power is (like effective demand) in economic terms, power that can actually be realised. This study has shown that in many cities, fragmented autonomy is underused or obstructed in multiple ways, or put another way, that governments, communities, and citizens’ capacities to convert their relevant capabilities into full functioning is constrained.

\(^2\) Here we generally use the term ‘effective’ autonomy to refer to that which provides real freedoms, and ‘meaningful’ autonomy to refer to that which also respects freedoms of others.
these attributes should be distributed across levels of government. Authority and autonomy are distributed in a ‘zero sum’ fashion, so that as one political territory (the city) gains autonomy, this implies a loss of control or determination at another level of political authority.

Yet within the social sciences, there is a growing recognition that to regard political organisation as a ‘nested system’ is to miss the critical ways in which political order and authority have been reconfigured across and within scales, and through new forms of political network (MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999; Bulkeley, 2005). From this perspective, political spaces are relational – that is, they are formed in the relations between different entities operating across multiple sites and scales. In this sense, political space has been described as a series of ‘rhizomatic’, interrelated and interwoven like a root system. As such, cities are symbiotic politically - and economically - with other spaces at other scales. So we should not (necessarily) expect to find autonomy readily circumscribed within particular boundaries or organised in hierarchical terms. In this sense, autonomy is not a fully formed political condition and neither is ‘the city’ a homogenous or contiguous political territory. Instead, ‘the city’ is more appropriately considered as an assemblage of infrastructures, economies, politics, communities, ideas and so on which may be constituted through more or less geographically dispersed processes but which come into relation with one another in particular sites.

Seminal work by Castells (1996) and Sassen (2001) highlights the relational nature of cities, while demonstrating the threats that this can pose to the delivery of wellbeing and sustainability. The emergence of a single ‘global city’ in the densely interconnected spaces of the financial and knowledge industry cores of London, Tokyo, New York, Frankfurt etc, not only relegates other cities to a second division economically, but also exacerbates the inequalities between the elite city cores and the service districts and suburbs that surround them in physical space. The associated development and redevelopment of urban space, with ever more enclosure and privatisation of previously public, or common, spaces, as documented by Harvey (2012) responds directly to the interests of financial capital, thinly shrouded in the notion of ‘competitiveness in the modern knowledge economy’. Such economic relational autonomy is a powerful influence – perhaps the dominant one in many cities - but it is not what we consider meaningful or responsible autonomy.

Autonomy in the city exists in a variety of guises and forms, creating a fragmented or patchwork landscape of differentially powerful fragments of autonomy. By viewing urban autonomy from this starting point, we can avoid any assumption that urban autonomy necessarily means ceding power from the (central) state or that it would automatically entail empowering local communities. Rather, we can examine how and why autonomy matters in debates about urban futures, and to explore the ways in which autonomy is being realised or could be enhanced within the contemporary urban condition. We argue that the route forward is not to provide blanket calls for greater local autonomy, but in identifying and enabling forms of autonomy - and associated responsibility - that better serve social and environmental agendas and enable societies to realise the kinds of aims integral to the 2050 pathways.
This does not exclude possibilities for devolution of political power to localities. Indeed in many countries greater fiscal, administrative and political autonomy at the functional city scale may form a desirable or even necessary part of the transformation of fragmented autonomy into some degree of meaningful and effective autonomy from the vicissitudes of global economic competition and financial markets. But it does suggest – as we shall see in the cases outlined later – that in some important ways meaningful autonomy can neither be granted to, nor foisted upon cities or their components. Practically, it implies that for city leaders, frustrated at constraints on their freedom to implement their visions for change, enhanced autonomy may be found as much through collaboration with communities or businesses within the city, or through networking with other cities as it is to be found in renegotiated relationships with national authorities.

Urban autonomy in historical perspective: identifying elements and enablers

Whilst ideas of autonomy travel easily from site to site and country to country, the specific environment where such autonomy is to be realised plays a key role in determining what it can really achieve. Autonomy is usually considered in terms of financial, political or administrative dimensions. However, there are other issues at stake. For example, forms of learning, and social and institutional capacity influence how autonomy is exercised. Political will and the type of democratic regime in place affect its possibilities for success. Territorial boundaries define its physical extent and guide the nature of the relationship with other ‘autonomous’ units.

Context is critical, and notions of autonomy that have been successful in certain countries at the time of particular political regimes can fail when implemented elsewhere. Autonomy is not only a political idea or set of properties to be implemented, but a practice that emerges from and comes to form part of particular societies. National and regional politics do not just sit in the background; they are the actual arenas where possibilities for local autonomy open or close. The nation state, as a site of struggle where different interests compete, has historically played a primary role in promoting or limiting autonomy. Where urban autonomy emerges, this is often the result of a potent combination of political will and public demand. In turn, autonomy creates new kinds of politics.

The idea of autonomy is central to the historical development of the city. In this section, we consider three different contexts – the UK, South Africa and Brazil - in which debates over autonomy have taken place in recent history. We find that in each case, autonomy is multifaceted and is enabled and inhibited by issues of territory, institutional capacity, and political context. This suggests that seeking to enhance autonomy through one dimension or element at a time – be that financial, political or administrative – are unlikely to be successful and may have other unintended consequences.
UK: the elements of local autonomy as seen from the governance reforms of the 1970s

Over the late 1960s and early 1970s the UK’s local political landscape went through a period of transformation. Following from the extension of local government responsibilities of the post-war period – where local government became the prime vehicle for building the welfare state – local government structures were seen as out-dated and ineffective for the delivery of services. This lead to the commissioning of a series of reports and actions aimed towards the ‘modernization’ of local government, as exemplified by the Redcliffe-Maude Report (1969), the boundary reorganisation implemented in 1972 and the local government system finally put into effect in 1974. Whilst largely unsuccessful and short lived, the debates and local government reforms proposed at the time provide a good example of the multiple dimensions at play within local autonomy. Here we identify six elements:

- **Public participation:** despite an acknowledgement of the value of direct representation at the local level via elected members, “the machinery of local democracy” and its emphasis on the involvement of local members of the public in everyday management was perceived as one of the main obstacles standing on the way of the effective delivery of local government (Cochrane, 1989: 98).

- **Management structure:** the proposed modernization favoured a professionalised and managerial approach over a democratic one, drawing on private sector practices and corporate approaches based on top down management and policy planning, thus reducing citizen involvement. This implied a power shift where the emphasis was placed on officers and bureaucratic structures vs. elected members (Butcher et al., 1990: 25; Cochrane, 1989: 101), and one which reduced the potential for democratic accountability to provide the dimension of responsibility necessary in meaningful autonomy.

- **Financial structure:** the degree of local financial dependence on the centre was presented as a problem, raising the possibility of increasing user charges for the provision of local services, with serious implications for inequality (Dearlove, 1979: 247). Faster growth in local government expenditure was than in the gross national product, was perceived as unsustainable. In 1977 the Labour Government accepted a recommendation from the Committee of Inquiry into Local Government Finance to review of central and local policies so that rents, fees and charges gathered by local government could play a bigger role in financing local services. )

- **Size:** the identification of an ideal population size for the efficient delivery of services was a key concern, favouring the creation of larger units serving a greater population. The objective was the achievement of economies of scale, alongside a critical mass capable of attracting “technically adequate staff and to interest political leaders of a sufficient high calibre” (Cochrane, 1989: 100; Dearlove, 1979: 248). While modern communication technologies might offer a different prospect, at that time, larger physical units risked...
losing their direct connection to communities and localities, undermining the potential engagement of those communities in both the goals and oversight of those services.

- **Boundaries and political control:** the implementation of the previous point resulted in a concern with boundaries and their re-definition, a move inevitably linked to shifting political power and party interests. This ultimately led to the rejection of many of the proposals in line with rural Conservative interests.

- **Scope and functions:** a concern about the scope and functions in the hands of local government is a recurrent theme within debates on local autonomy. The modernization period and subsequent years saw strong promotion of private sector interests in service delivery, under central government guidance (Dearlove, 1979: 249).

Overall, the modernization era emphasised certain aspects of autonomy as part of a call for an improvement in technical efficiency through changes in management structures and decision-making systems (Cochrane, 1989). While it has been argued that the ambitions of the modernizers were greater than the change that actually took effect (Cochrane, 1989: 105; Cochrane, 1993: 45), local government reform should not be seen as an apolitical technical reorganisation, but as a political transformation requiring “asking questions about who rules and for whom” (Dearlove, 1979: 254). Arguments over whether the reforms were an attempt to give power to representatives of the economically powerful at the expense of the working classes in local government (Dearlove, 1979), or not (Cochrane 1989) remain unresolved. Despite this, the case of the UK suggests that questions about rule and power should be an important consideration in the search for autonomy, and that formal devolution of powers is likely to be politically contested as well as practically constrained within broader economic imperatives.

**South Africa: opportunities and challenges for Local Agenda 21 in Durban**

1994 marked the beginning of a post-apartheid era for South Africa. Faced with the need to rapidly democratise society and reinvent government, South Africa embraced pre-existing international frameworks as potential guidelines for future action (Sowman, 2002). In this context, Local Agenda 21 (LA21) became more than a tool for the promotion of local autonomy towards environmental action: it was seen as a possibility to incorporate greater local participation towards the identification of priorities towards the development of strategies and projects (Rossouw and Wiseman, 2004). In 1994, Durban was the first South African city to start working on the LA21 program. Whilst largely successful in administrative terms, the implementation of LA21 in Durban faced significant challenges, many of them related to the transformations occurring during the post-apartheid years. These political transformations provided a window of opportunity for the adoption of new local management concepts and practices such as those embodied in LA21. Yet the continuous change in governmental structures characteristic of this period eroded the stability required for the implementation of the program (Roberts and Diederichs, 2002).
The primary aim of the Local Agenda 21 program in Durban was the development of an environmental management system (EMS) capable of integrating social and ecological dimensions into planning and development. The municipality set out to do this by preparing environmental baselines that filled pre-existing information gaps, and, based on this, formulating environmental policies and action plans. The success of Durban’s experience in implementing LA21 is largely due to the promotion of a social and political agenda above and beyond an environmental agenda, where community empowerment, health and environmental quality were key drivers in response to concerns about jobs and social service provision (O’Riordan, 1998). However, rolling out LA21 in Durban was a learning process marked by challenges (Roberts and Diederichs, 2002), some of which are:

- **Limited political will and support**: LA21 was largely seen as a ‘green’ and foreign agenda concerned primarily with environmental issues. In South Africa overall, given its history of environmental concerns marked by exclusionary strategies for ecosystem conservation developed during the apartheid period, environmental policy issues were often seen “as tools for racially based oppression” (Rossouw and Wiseman, 2004: 131).

- **Limited resources and capacity mismatch**: resource limitations were both human and financial, impacting the ability of the program to build its required broad consensus. Capacity building took the shape of environmental education initiatives at different levels, which helped deliver public engagement and support, while also broadening the range of political agendas to include those of domestic communities and people of colour.

- **Limited financial autonomy**: dependency on external donor funding limited the capacity of the municipality to direct investments towards local priorities over those of the funders.

- **Changes in the city’s territorial configuration**: the transition to democracy triggered various changes in the administrative boundaries of the city. Durban went from 300 square kilometres before 1996 to 2,297 post-2000. As 60% of the city’s area became peri-urban and rural, the LA21 process needed to adjust its operations and expectations to a more functional understanding of the urban area.

The challenges experienced highlight the tensions resulting from the deployment of local autonomy initiatives under limited conditions for their realization. The experience of South African cities in rolling out LA21 and local environmental governance over the 1990s and early 2000s was characterized by overlapping competences and fragmented environmental functions within and across different scales of government (Sowman and Brown, 2006; Rossouw and Wiseman, 2004). South Africa embraced the principles of LA21 via local environmental programs, but with a marked absence of “mechanisms for translating these policies into practice” (Sowman, 2002: 185). Despite efforts to the contrary, local environmental issues have been incorporated within local and national hierarchical structures primarily in ways that give strategic concerns precedence over local (Sowman, 2002).
A broader critical analysis of the LA21 process points to the risks and limitations associated with the institutionalization of the local as “the key scale for environmental action” (Lawhon and Patel, 2013: 1). This implies questioning the now common LA21 principle of ‘thinking globally, acting locally’\(^3\). It demands that we ask what and whose concerns are highlighted and obscured as ‘the local’ becomes the primary space for developing environmental solutions of global reach, and how such emphasis responds to pressing questions on international responsibility and ethics (Lawhon and Patel, 2013). Viewing the local as the privileged site for environmental solutions often overlooks conflicting interests operating at regional, national and international levels. It also fails to account for the wider organizational and political contexts within which such local agendas are necessarily adopted and developed (Marvin and Guy, 1997).

In this context, sustainability is somehow to be achieved in tandem with the development of market economies and global competitiveness, despite unanswered questions regarding the compatibility of these two aims. In reality, local environmental initiatives constantly find themselves at odds with the mandates of trade agreements and policy mechanisms operating at national and global levels (Gibbs, 1999). Just like LA21 proved to be a political opportunity in the context of South Africa’s democratization process, its adoption in the UK was seen by local government as opportunity to “re-invent itself around a new theme in an era when local government has lost powers and control over many aspects of local affairs” (Marvin and Guy, 1997: 315). This exemplifies the extent to which the development of autonomy in the city via tools such as LA21 needs to “make the necessary connections to regulatory processes operating at a variety of spatial scales” (Gibbs and Jonas, 2000: 2999).

The limited results of LA21 in cities across the world are as related to the type of challenges and limitations experienced by Durban, as much as to the unchallenged “acceptance of the merits of the local framing [and] the evasion of questions that this framing silences, particularly questions of responsibility and justice at various scales” (Lawhon and Patel, 2013: 1).

However, this analysis does not so much dismiss arguments in favour of a local dimension to sustainable development, as highlight a major obstacle to its likely effectiveness. Such experiences suggest that LA21 initiatives establish neither local freedom, nor responsibility. The potential benefits of local environmental and social initiatives for experimentation and innovation, and for public involvement remain unrealised. The implications are twofold. First, interventions to establish autonomy in single dimensions (such as environmental practice) are doomed to fail – cities need autonomy to negotiate new, less uniform and less constrained relationships with the global economy, rather than greater autonomy to try to be competitive within it as it is currently constituted. Second proper attention to the “necessary connections … at various spatial scales” reveals that ‘local autonomy’ as conventionally seen is largely without meaning. Instead we need to connect power and accountability in multiple dimensions such that the city – constituted by its unique place in these relationships – can become a focal point for the development of livelihoods and lifestyles that deliver and promote wellbeing for all.

Brazil: the political framing of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre

Some of the most promising experiments with urban autonomy have taken place in Brazil. With the collapse of the military dictatorship and the growth and eventual success of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT, the Workers Party) in national elections, came decentralisation of power to local levels. The key urban success area to date for the PT has been in participatory budgeting, especially in Porto Alegre where there has been mass participation, elements of redistribution, and a balanced budget. Citizens decide and deliberate upon a variety of municipal policies, the cornerstone of which is the much-publicized Orçamento Participativo (Participatory Budget), a neighbourhood-based set of deliberative forums on the city’s budget priorities. There is much to be learned about the potential of urban autonomy from this success story. Here we identify five characteristics supporting the success of this initiative (Baiocchi, 2001; Sintomer et al., 2008):

- **Clear procedures for organisation, representation and participation:** participatory budgeting is coordinated by a strict and clear set of procedures for organisation, representation and participation.

- **Engagement of both individual and collective actors:** participation is two-tiered, involving individuals and community organisations.

- **Provision of spaces for debate, information distribution and activism:** the participatory forums function as a space for local demands and problems to be aired and for information to be divulged about the functioning of government, and as a regular meeting place for activists.

- **Foster learning by operating at analytical levels:** such forums also provide space for people to learn. For example, it has been argued that the key emphasis of local meetings is not in making decisions about budgets, but in learning about the technical criteria involved in budgeting.

- **Combine different modes of democracy:** the participatory budgeting process is a combination of participatory democracy (regular regional debates and learning initiatives) and representative democracy (e.g. in the Municipal Council of the Budget).

Evidence suggests that once people become involved in participatory budgeting, they are more likely to take part in participatory forums in other sectors, including education, health, infrastructure services and sports facilities, amongst others (Baiocchi, 2001; Abers, 2000). The process has resulted in “a reversal of priorities: primary health care was set up in the living areas of the poor, the number of schools and nursery schools was extended, and in the meantime the streets were asphalted and most of the households have access to water supply and waste water systems… [the revised budgeting formula ensures] that districts with
a deficient infrastructure receive more funds than areas with a high quality of life” (Sintomer et al., 2008: 166-167). However, none of this means, of course, that the views of the poor and the better-off register equally, and there is no reason to believe that participatory forums somehow undo existing inequalities. The success of urban participatory forums in Porto Alegre is, to be sure, partly a function of the city’s relative wealth compared to other cities in Brazil. Yet the experience of Porto Alegre also combines a newly elected workers party committed to people-oriented development and an active and diverse grassroots movement determined to involve ordinary people in the post-dictatorship planning of the city. It suggests that successful autonomy in urban governance requires political will, social demand, an innovative idea, and a sense of genuine participation, and emerges from a process of negotiation between the state and society.

**Realising autonomy: learning from urban realities**

The history of urban politics has been shaped by the need to determine its autonomy in relation to other levels of the state. We argue that rather than being entirely subsumed by other levels of the state, or the global economy, the city is rich with possibilities for greater autonomy. At any given moment, it contains a multiplicity of sites where different forms of autonomy can be realised. Everyday life is made, in large part, through activities that are locally or self-organised. Communities and municipalities work to develop and deploy different forms of autonomy and self-determination, from the organisation of social services to efforts to address environmental challenges. The extent and limitations of urban autonomy are subject to continual renegotiation between urban authorities, nation-states, international agencies and economically powerful actors, creating new possibilities for greater autonomy. Yet not all forms of autonomy are the same. Some are fleeting, others embedded, some disempowering and others a force for change. Here we argue for the need to recognise four alternative forms of urban autonomy that could help provide the architecture for building alternative social and environmental futures:

1. **Distributed autonomy**: purposefully designed as a form of political power sharing, it can enable alternative forms of political expressions and action; it is sometimes managed hierarchically

2. **Networked autonomy**: based on the functioning of autonomous units within the city, such as social movements, working in tandem and linking ideas together.

3. **Fragmented autonomy**: based on the presence of autonomous units and processes, but operating in a chaotic and fragmented way, and where objectives and processes are not joined up.

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4 A parallel paper in this series is addressing participation and popular education in more depth.
4. **Coerced or ‘enclave’ autonomy**: a top-down governmental autonomy with strong elements of hierarchical management.

Cities normally experience elements of each of these four forms of autonomy. By focusing on four case studies (London, Mumbai, Delhi and the current localism initiatives promoted by the UK government), this section explores how these different understandings of autonomy are currently being played out in different kinds of urban contexts. From this starting point, we examine the challenges and opportunities for enhancing meaningful and effective autonomy in the contemporary city, what autonomy has been able to achieve, and how issues of responsibilities have been addressed in such attempts to fashion autonomy.

**London: creating distributed autonomy from a space of partial autonomy?**

London, like many metropolitan areas, has a complex governance structure. Having been abolished in 1986, in 2000 a metropolitan wide authority, the Greater London Authority (GLA), was reinstated alongside 33 borough councils responsible for particular districts in the city. The GLA combines elements of administrative autonomy in relation to planning, political autonomy in the form of a Mayor and an elected body with decision-making powers, and a small degree of financial autonomy achieved through an additional ‘council tax' payment by London residents. This combination of partial administrative, political and financial autonomy has been critical in the development of an urban sustainability agenda, particularly in terms of transport, energy and climate change. Examples of this are the introduction of the ‘congestion charge’ (2003), investment in alternative modes of transportation, the development of one of the first urban climate adaptation plans, a long term commitment to reducing GHG emissions by 60% by 2050, and to the policy goal of 25% of London’s energy needs being met by decentralised generation by 2025 (Bulkeley and Schroeder, 2008; 2012).

A variety of state and non-state actors have played a crucial role in enabling the GLA to develop and realise some degree of effective autonomy in the climate change domain. There is no doubt that the independence of the Mayor of London, Ken Livingston, and his ability to enact policies within the transport and policy domains that both used the degree of regulatory autonomy granted to his office and which fostered new financial autonomy in the form of the congestion tax were central. At the same time, the actions of the Mayor and the GLA take inspiration and learning from the pioneering work of several London borough councils, and rely on the alignment of private sector and not-for-profit interests with this agenda. In addition, the engagement of communities and local organisations has been critical both to the development of London’s environmental programmes and their achievements. Examples of how the GLA has taken advantage of this distributed autonomy to advance an environmental agenda are:

- Many of the GLA’s sustainable energy initiatives draw on the earlier work of the London Borough of Sutton and its ‘Merton Rule’, a planning provision which requires new urban
developments to incorporate on-site renewable energy generation to meet 20% of its energy requirements.

- Organisations such as London First, the City of London Corporation, and the Climate Group have been closely involved in the development of the notion of a ‘low carbon transition’ for London (Bulkeley and Schroeder, 2012; see also Thornley et al., 2005).

- In Brixton, the Brixton Transition Town movement (BTT) has been a critical partner in the delivery of the city’s Low Carbon Zone established by the GLA. BTT operates locally as a community interest company raising awareness on climate change and peak oil issues, promoting a change in behaviours and engaging the community in a low-energy future.

All of these actors draw on their own forms of autonomy for their work, highlighting the links between distributed and networked autonomy in the city. BTT, for example, experiments with innovative forms of community management, including local currencies, participative design and democratic resource allocation. As a community-based organisation, its autonomy is not clearly demarcated by territory but rather is fluid and continually renegotiated. As a community-based organisation and social movement BTT enjoys some autonomy from mainstream political culture, operating on ‘direct democracy’ rather than representative democracy principles. From an administrative perspective, it selects and runs its own projects, though these are often done in partnership with other community groups and local government. Financially, they have established a successful local currency, the Brixton Pound, which has fostered a new local economic space albeit one that is limited in extent and in comparison to wider financial flows in the area. Finally, BTT has moved towards infrastructure autonomy by establishing a ‘solar power station’ as a means of securing energy and providing a source of revenue for specific communities and places in the city.

Such examples illustrate how relative economic autonomy is also a relational and negotiated process. City economies cannot escape engagement with the global economy – even if that were entirely desirable from a human development perspective. But the examples here hint too at the possibility that at the urban scale - novel economic models can be initiated which engage with and promote reform of global economies so as to enable the economic participation of local communities without enhancing inequality and in such a way as to respect their specific development needs. In the face of the powers of multinational corporations, institutions and governments supporting neo-liberal economic relations, it seems plausible that such experimentation will be facilitated by the enhanced autonomy we argue for elsewhere in this paper.

The case of London also illustrates how different degrees of partial autonomy can be combined to leverage significant levels of response to some of the key sustainability and social justice issues facing cities. In London, autonomy is far from coherent or complete, and for both government bodies and community organisations remains limited by a lack of financial independence and continually under negotiation. However, the case also shows us that autonomy does not arise purely from legal, institutional, or financial grounds. Rather,

5 http://www.transitiontownbrixton.org/about-ttb/our-aims-and-structure/ (accessed on 14 April 2013)
this case-study points to the importance of a distributed form of autonomy, garnered at the intersections of multiple organisations. Instead of being conferred on institutions or organisations, autonomy is *generated* through the relation between them. Recognising autonomy in this way means that we need to also acknowledge that as a political project autonomy is usually not a means to achieve separation, but is rather an attempt to move towards self-determination or the possibility of engaging other actors on their own terms to work towards common goals.

To strengthen and knit together such distributed autonomy will take a mix of actions, in some respects inevitably specific. In each state, and potentially each city, different bodies will need different new powers and particularly new capacities. To focus on enhanced fiscal, political and administrative powers for city authorities such as London misses the importance of other capacities and other actors. The examples from London and other cities suggest that NGOs, community organisations, and city authorities all need enhanced capacities to collaborate in creating new political spaces as well as greater financial autonomy from the centre.

**Mumbai: building networked autonomy from forced autonomy?**

Informal neighbourhoods in the urban global South present a different form of autonomy, as residents themselves are often forced to weave together a range of practices and networks in order to make urban life possible. This creates a condition of *forced autonomy*, where a disconnection from some of the city’s networks occurs not by will or desire but rather in the context of exclusion. Arguably such autonomy is not only forced, but false. Without the capacities to act, freedom for such bodies is no more real than freedom without capabilities is for individual people. Yet, sometimes these autonomously organised practices can form templates for the emergence of more formal organisation of different sorts, from social activism and resistance to incorporation (not necessarily co-option) within government programmes. For instance, in Pune, near Mumbai, wastepickers have been organised by the municipality and wastepicking unions into improved working conditions, effectively taking a set of informal and self-organised livelihoods practices and bringing them into more formal, safer working conditions (WIEGO, 2012). In other instances, the incremental processes through which residents organise everyday life can provide a platform for social activism, such as in the case of Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI). The learning processes, knowledge and partnerships that emerge from these informal practices can give rise to a form of networked autonomy in the city.

Starting through organising ‘pavement dwellers’ on the streets of central Mumbai in the early 1980s, SDI has grown into a global movement operating in over 20 countries. The premise of the movement is to take the autonomous practices through which people organise everyday life – such as residents’ knowledge attained through incrementally building houses and infrastructures of sanitation and water – and use that knowledge to negotiate with municipal and state authorities. For example, a key strategy in SDI’s work is to build full-size model houses and public toilets and put these on display to government officials. By doing so, the aim – sometimes successful, often not – is to draw officials into discussions that lead
to land and resource being provided to the poor so that they can build their own developments (Mcfarlane, 2011). In this process, the movement shifts the autonomous work of informal urban residents from incrementalism to a ‘radical incrementalism’ (Pieterse, 2008), where ordinary practices become a template for social change and people’s empowerment.

Given SDI’s global reach, the movement has become an example of networked autonomy. The local members of SDI regularly meet to exchange information and ideas on organising. In such way, they produce an informal peer learning network that encourages other groups to use strategies like self-built house modelling to negotiate with their local authorities. House modelling is one of a set of central ideas that circulate in the movement, producing a fine balance between the ideas that come from SDI leaders at national and international levels and the autonomy of the local SDI member groups interested in working out their own priorities. This is a tension that does not always work successfully, and some groups – notably in South Africa – have felt their own priorities were being marginalised by those of the global network. SDI’s story therefore provides two lessons for thinking about urban autonomy; first, the potential of using people’s existing practices to build more formal autonomous organisations; and second, the difficult balance of linking autonomous groups through larger networks, and the risk that the larger network might erode that local autonomy through commitment to particular agendas, ideas and directions.

This is not to argue that autonomy should be imposed or forced upon groups or localities, but to illustrate how capacities can be built even amongst such groups to convert forced autonomy into something more effective and meaningful.

**Delhi: fragmented autonomy out of neighbourhood autonomy?**

Our analysis of autonomy in Delhi explores a different element: the role of neighbourhood associations and the ‘new middle classes’ of the global South in the make-up of a fragmented autonomous city. The emphasis here is on the political risks associated with an increase in neighbourhood autonomy –and influence– in a city characterised by the emergence of marked class identities (Harriss, 2006). Since 2000 the Delhi government has implemented the Bhagidari program, which seeks to institutionalise citizen participation through a collaborative form of government aimed at involving the public in problem solving activities and the management of public assets. The main focus of the program is the city’s Resident Welfare Associations, or RWAs, essentially neighbourhood management committees in the city’s formally planned neighbourhoods, where members pay regular charges towards security and the maintenance of common resources (Chakrabarti, 2007). The program has resulted in improved urban services in those areas where it has been implemented, with RWAs actively involved in services such as waste management, neighbourhood security, and the maintenance of parks, street lighting and roads (Kundu, 2009). “Most of the activities of the Delhi government are now conducted under the rubric of Bhagidari” (Chakrabarti, 2007: 98). Through umbrella organizations, RWAs have become a powerful force in the city, as exemplified by their successful opposition to increases in
electricity prices. However, the Bhagidari program has been criticized for having an exclusionary character and for creating urban fragmentation, as a result of its focus on elite and middle class neighbourhoods associated to formal land tenure (property) modes, and its exclusion of informal neighbourhoods where inhabitants have no tenure rights. The exclusionary and fragmented character of this form of autonomy rests on:

- **The ambiguity of government interventions in informal settlements:** whilst government agencies continue to provide some basic services in slums, such as water, street lighting and pavement, they “avoid negotiations that may result in the provision of land titles” (Chakrabarti, 2007: 99). In such cities land reform is likely to be a necessary condition for effective autonomy.

- **The creation of parallel systems of governance:** whilst RWAs, through the Bhagidari program, have a relatively direct access to city administrators, low income dwellers rely on electoral politics and local political representatives for influencing the delivery of local services. The RWASs have become an effective mode of local representation, albeit accessible only to specific sectors of society (Ghertner, 2011: 526). The result has been a reduction in the influence of locally elected representatives and an increase in the power of middle and upper classes in determining the priorities of the city, moving away from a pro-poor agenda (Baud and Nainan, 2008: 498).

- **The emergence of class identities as an active driver for urban politics:** in a context of historic religious and caste identities – alongside their associated exclusions – and recent economic transformations that have failed to incorporate the needs of the poor, the middle classes are emerging as a strong political actor driving urban agendas (Fernandes and Heller, 2006).

The case of Delhi highlights the extent to which neighbourhood autonomy is charged with conflicting local politics and identities, and the tensions and contradictions associated with increases in autonomy for certain groups at the expense of others. In this case, “programs designed to increase citizen–government partnership can have the surprising effect of making this space shallower and narrower, reducing the avenues of political participation open to the poor” (Ghertner, 2011: 526). Proposals outlined in the two companion papers on this topic – building capacities for participation, and investing in shared urban resources – are likely to help challenge such exclusionary forms of local autonomy, but the design of interventions to support urban autonomy must also be carefully scrutinised to help prevent such outcomes.

**Coalition localism in the UK: enclave autonomy?**

Shortly after entering power in 2010, the UK’s Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government asserted the significance of localism as ‘laying the foundations’ for its vision of a Big Society. Coalition localism was presented as a counterweight to decades of central
government control, and Prime Minister David Cameron envisaged this process being enabled through a ‘catalyzing state’ designed to ‘unleash community engagement’. In his view, this move would enable a crucial role for voluntary agencies, social entrepreneurs and community activists to – at a time of austere public spending cuts – combine effective public service reform with active citizenship (Cameron, 2010). In 2011 the government introduced the Localism Bill, arguably designed to transform central-local relations and ‘strengthen local democracy’ by devolving more power and freedom to councils and neighbourhoods while also revolutionizing the planning system in favour of local communities (Townsend, 2010). However, coalition localism can also be interpreted as an expression of top-down governmental hierarchy that, in the context of austere public spending cuts, forces the creation of enclaves where freedom to act is constrained not by a lack of power but a lack of resources, with increasing levels of responsibility under financial constraint. The localism legislation heralds potentially far-reaching changes in the relationship between central government, local government, communities and individuals and a reconfiguration of the geographies of governmental autonomy, welfare and citizenship across Britain.

The Localism Act (HM Government, 2011) heralded several notable changes in policy and planning. Some of these are (CLG, 2010):

- “New freedoms and flexibility for local government”, including the ‘general power of competence’ to undertake any activities that do not contravene law.

- “New rights and powers for communities”, particularly the right for community associations to ‘challenge’ local authorities and ‘buy’ and assume control over and delivery of local services such as libraries and sports centres.

- Reform of the planning system, including the abolition of Regional Development Agencies and associated Regional Strategies, and the encouragement of Neighbourhood Plans designed to offer local communities ‘genuine opportunities’ to influence the future of their places, enabling a community’s right to build as well as deciding where new houses and commercial ventures are to be located.

- “Reforms to ensure that decisions about housing are taken locally”, whereby social landlords are ‘freed up’ to offer flexible (as opposed to ‘lifetime’) tenures and local authorities are given greater freedom to set their own policies on who qualifies for social housing (HM Government, 2011).

This localism approach, through the introduction of Neighbourhood Plans amid a zealous fiscal austerity in local government and state finances, might be viewed to operate as a mode of coerced, and strictly geographically limited autonomy. Such policy measures actively hamper the development of networked and distributed autonomy with mutual respect between different actors at different scales. Instead, such coerced autonomy can be used to support the replacement of a state-supported menu of community-oriented initiatives
by one more markedly invoking (neo-) liberalizing ‘freedoms’ for individuals and communities to design and implement their own local ventures (Rose 1999), with all the widening social inequalities such a transition risks. It marks a moment where “civil society actors begin increasingly to inherit public policy-making and service delivery functions in the past exercised largely by government” (Deas, 2012: 1). While this could in principle offer some scope for local democracy, it may also become a smokescreen for government to off-load responsibilities onto communities (Purcell, 2006), without the financial or other capacities needed to deliver them fairly.

In the UK, the renewed interest in localism calls for important questions to be asked, such as how is this process is going to materialise; what exactly is the ‘community’ which is being empowered; or whether adequate resources will be available to maintain or extend services. Such coerced autonomy could compromise nation-wide scope for service delivery and social citizenship, and perhaps even see services and major elements of the built environment privatized in favour of powerful economic and corporate interests (Featherstone et al., 2012; Painter and MacLeod, 2011).

These brief examples from both the UK and India show that autonomy cannot be forced, nor thoughtlessly devolved onto already unequal communities without risking the exclusion of new groups from city spaces and city economies. Distributed autonomy therefore cannot function without enhanced participation for all in shaping the future of our cities. This is perhaps the most fundamental constraint required on greater urban autonomy, and one considered in more depth in a companion piece to this paper.

Renewing autonomy?

Questions of autonomy are central to the question of the city – its past and our future. Yet autonomy is neither a one-dimensional property of the organisation of the state (in political, administrative or financial terms) nor an attribute that can be readily conferred on a particular territory or form of society; rather, autonomy is a multi-faceted political project, achieved relationally.

Autonomy is central to the contemporary dynamics of the city – rather than being devoid of autonomy, we argue that cities contain multiple possibilities for autonomy. Four different forms of autonomy characterise contemporary urban conditions –fragmented, coerced (or enclave), distributed and networked. Cities may experience one or more of these forms of autonomy at any one time. Yet they are very different in the extent to which they support the social and environmental outcomes sought from enhanced, effective and meaningful autonomy. Interventions are required that can transform fragmented and coerced autonomy into distributed and networked forms in order to deliver enhanced social and environmental capacity on the ground. This requires both weaving together existing forms of authority, power and capabilities in cities, and enhancing the political and financial power of urban communities and municipalities. History suggests that the simple devolution of power to enhance autonomy is rare, and often unsuccessful. Rather, autonomy is generated through
opening up debate about what it is that the city can achieve and bringing together of different capacities towards these ends.

Forms of ‘forced autonomy’ are common in many cities; and although these can provide the basis for new forms of social organisation and networked autonomy that might provide empowerment across different urban contexts; they also risk new forms of social exclusion. Challenging these – and the interests such inequalities serve - is a critical task for a new political project of enhanced autonomy. This is all the more important as autonomy can be a means through which existing inequalities are maintained (fragmented autonomy) or where new forms of hierarchical control are imposed on communities who have little capacity to respond to the challenges they face (coerced autonomy); this reminds us that autonomy is not necessarily progressive, and that it matters a great deal who gets to participate in the political project and who is excluded.

Distributed autonomy can be seen as a form of sharing (a theme considered in greater depth in another companion piece), one which revives the shared and potentially inclusive political space of the ‘agora’ or the ‘polis’ for a new age with new technologies in which collective activity and collective (yet distributed) authority is enabled. In this reading, distributed autonomy is an emanation of the shared city – one that exists only at the intersection of cyber space and urban space. Further, by definition, autonomy combines aspects of independence and self-government, with those of self-control and mutual respect for others. Such autonomy does not preclude negotiation, dialogue and even the sharing of powers, but is a precondition for some meaningful equality in such processes. Autonomy is then not best understood as political or fiscal freedom, but as that degree of self-reliance necessary if dignity rather than dependence is to underpin interaction. A necessary level of financial autonomy, such as that typically found in Scandinavian cities, or the provision of local services, the ownership of local assets, or community engagement may be an essential foundation for self-reliance. Only with such an understanding of autonomy can we hope to achieve the right mix of powers and capacities distributed across (rather than between) the various levels of governance involved in flourishing cities.

Distributed autonomy can provide a means through which to generate new spaces for politics in which environmental and social justice goals can be pursued; but raise challenges of co-ordination, co-option and the remaining presence of hierarchy – in London, new forms of autonomy are being generated at the intersections of the partial distributed autonomy and social networks present in the city, which could provide a means through which to leverage new spaces for politics in the city. It is perhaps easy to see how cities such as London – already a part of a global elite – might share wealth and wellbeing more widely if guided by such distributed autonomy, but the challenges facing declining industrial conurbations and growing cities in developing countries are very different. How can distributed autonomy provide – if not ‘autonomy from’ then ‘insulation against’ – the negative impacts of global competition? For example do powers and finance to support and deliver services mean that cities can act as counter-cyclical investors? Could powers to set fair rents, or to implement land-value taxation temper the exclusionary effects of land development and speculation? Might there be opportunities for developing alternative forms of service provision or collective
purchasing at the municipal level that enable local communities to develop degrees of self-
determination about how economies are structured and controlled?

Moreover, distributed autonomy does not stand alone as the only intervention needed in the
future of our cities, rather as a critical contribution - as long as we accept that cities are not
tightly bounded political territories, but functional entities bound together with their suburbs
and hinterlands, and networked with one another across national boundaries. The examples
in this paper suggest that effective distributed autonomy cannot be achieved through
coercion, but this does not preclude efforts to enable and incentivise it through careful policy
design. Nor perhaps can genuine autonomy even be simply ‘granted’ – it must be asserted
and negotiated by those who would wield it with responsibility. So, for example greater fiscal
autonomy for city authorities might be linked with systems of tax sharing between the
authorities making up a functional urban area. Similarly weaker constraints on financial
budgets might be linked with new formal constraints on carbon budgets. The emergence of
community-based energy production could be linked to obligations to contribute to municipal
wide targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and to providing affordable energy
services. Enhanced self-determination over environmental quality, security and liveability in
some areas of the city would need to be inclusive of all urban dwellers, formal and informal,
who use such spaces and to respect their multiple needs rather than serving merely as a
means for urban elites to capture urban arenas for their own ends.

In practice, the pursuit of autonomy – however conceived – will remain shaped by financial
and institutional capacity, contestation of the scope, function and boundaries of autonomy,
and the nature of public participation. Inevitably autonomy, as a political project, must involve
significant challenges of addressing social and environmental justice, both internally and in
relation to wider global concerns.

But these challenges must be faced.

We know that political and fiscal centralisation in nation states in an increasingly globalised
world economy does not offer secure footings for sustainable and just development in all
cities. But our research shows that a simplistic ‘devolution’ of political and financial powers
would most likely be equally ineffective. This paper has attempted to begin debate on how
supporting new forms of enhanced and interlinked autonomy in cities all over the world could
be a key opportunity to release the potential for urban life to be a solution to, rather than
adding to, the environmental, economic and social challenges of the coming decades.

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Enhancing urban autonomy: towards a new political project for cities


