

An introduction to “Liveability” as a guide for rural development policy

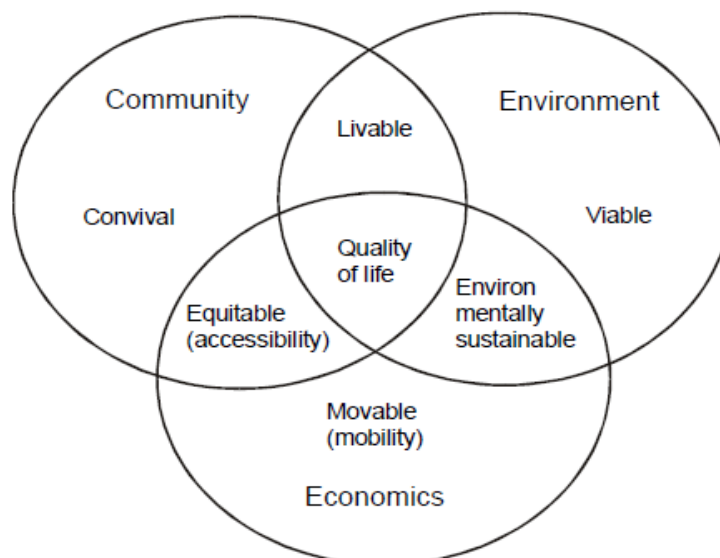
Dr Gary Bosworth, University of Lincoln

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Introduction

With some concerns over the merits of “sustainable development” principles within local planning, the Dutch concept of Liveability may offer an appealing alternative. Liveability is defined as “the degree to which the living environment fits the requirements and desires of the individual” (Leidemeijer, et al., 2008). This might include a range of factors, particularly, housing, work, public services, other facilities, leisure, scenery and the natural environment.

In essence, Liveability refers to the **quality of place**. The environment or place is the object of study, perceived from the human perspective. By contrast, Quality of Life relates to the effect of the environment on the quality of people’s life and thus people are the object of study. The different aspects of community, environment and economy are usefully summarized by Shafer et al. (2000) in the diagram below.



Applying “liveability”

Events in the living environment impact subjective liveability (e.g. demolition of houses, closure of facilities and services). One key concern in the rural context is the availability and accessibility of facilities and services. If a local area loses a service, how will the impact translate through the community? The diagram below illustrates how a major change will influence a community in its response and this could be helpful for thinking about the future of many rural communities. One might even apply it to a threat of change or a threat of “no change” which is a real concern for some villages that are currently deemed unsustainable for new development. Here, once residents are aware of the reality that no new developments will be permitted, they may realise that this will limit their quality of live in older age, reduce opportunities for the younger generation to stay in the village and lead to out-migration as a logical response.

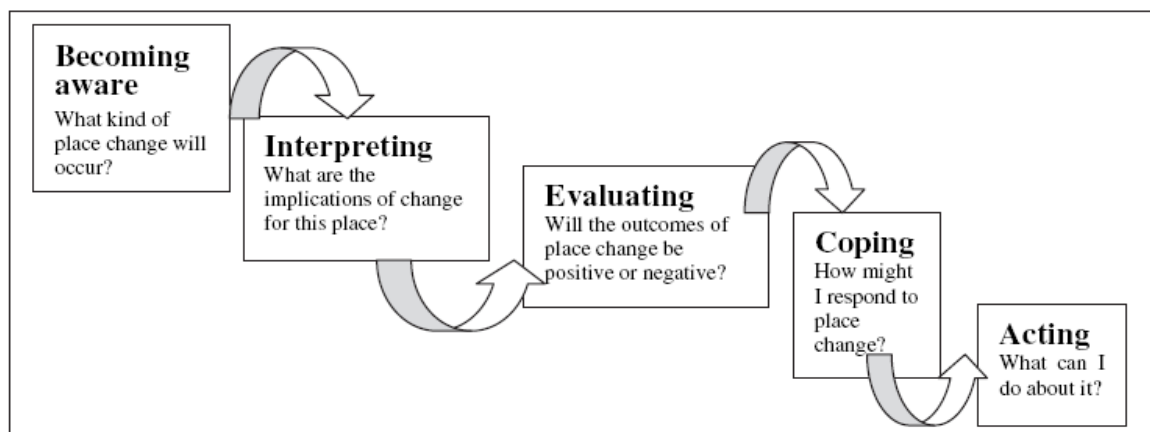


Fig. 1. Stages of psychological response over time to place change (Devine-Wright, 2009).

While Sustainable Development rules place emphasis on the environment, with targets based around carbon-neutral, low impact development and reducing reliance on private transport, the liveability approach focuses on people and communities. Given that fewer people today live and work in the same settlement, and that even where public transport exists, preferences are towards the flexibility and independence of the private car, one might argue that the sustainable development criteria are not suited to more remote rural areas. Furthermore, if sustainable development rules preclude development, the resultant “unsustainable” community will surely generate increased demands for services to be delivered out to these areas as their population ages. The scarcity of new homes will also see the housing market favouring a certain type of incomer seeking to discover a “rural idyll” but who commutes to work elsewhere. Is this a “liveable” community for today’s residents? Will this create a liveable community for future residents in an increasingly connected world? These appear to be more pertinent questions for rural development.

Given the heightened mobility of rural populations I would argue that it must be implicit within this definition that individuals are to some degree embedded with their local areas. It would be a logical fallacy to describe a rural place as 'liveable' solely on the basis that individuals had no requirements or desires associated with their place of residence. If all services and activities took place outside of that place, it would lose its identity as a distinct place. This is reinforced by recent studies of rural liveability identifying local cultural identities, space for community activities and local service provision among the strongest themes (Haartsen, 2015).

A key question therefore concerns the extent to which components of liveability need to exist locally. For some individuals, a good road out of a place, broadband and a nice house might be most desirable but, based on a number of social, environmental and equality-related dimensions at the community level, analysis of liveability might yield different conclusions. This approach challenges us to look to the future and think about the changing values (moral as well as capital) of rural societies where ageing, gentrification, technology, individualisation and consumerism are all drivers of social and economic change.

References

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