Reconsidering place branding: 'connecting the dots' between placemaking, policy making and sustainable development

Laura Reynolds, Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University

Abstract

This article sets out developments in the place branding literature, detailing its potential to support sustainable development when considered as a process that reflects and supports the place and its people, policies and practices. To achieve these aims, it is suggested that a greater unison of place branding and placemaking needs to occur, supporting the ongoing involvement of people in the shared (re)invention of lived-in places. Both of which benefit from collaborations and partnerships with stakeholders, helping to (re)create and (re)present the places in which they live, work, visit, and invest in. Building on these assumptions, this article looks at how placemaking and place branding are interwoven into the Well-being of the Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which provides the legislative and policy backing to enact substantive change and support sustainable development in Wales. Based on reflections of the Act and the Future Generation Report (2020) this paper proposes that policy making can help to bring together placemaking and place branding, and when all three components are pursued collectively and in unison they can bring about substantive economic, social, cultural and environment benefits.

Introduction

Wales provides a unique lens through which to reflect on recent developments in place branding and placemaking literatures. In particular, this article draws on the Well-being of the Future Generations Act (Wales) Act 2015, questioning the extent to which the legislation can provide the missing piece in drawing together the place, its associated identity and a pursuit of greater stakeholder collaboration. The Act provides a framework for supporting Wales' future generations and a roadmap for sustainable development, as well as presenting an underlying identity for Wales that was (re)devised through ongoing engagement with local stakeholders. Therefore, this article addresses whether this Act, and its accompanying policy development, provides a bridge between place branding's aim of supporting sustainable development and its enactment in practice. The remainder of the article is as follows: First, the evolution of the place branding and placemaking literature is briefly outlined before assessing the extent to which these activities can be used to support sustainable development. Second, detailed reflections on the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 are outlined, focusing on themes pertaining to Wales' ecology, culture, global and local image, stakeholder collaboration and placemaking. Third, some potential challenges and hurdles are considered. Finally, the themes are drawn together, and conclusions are drawn.

Can place branding support sustainable development?

The drawing together of the place and its stakeholders when recognising and cultivating an identity can bring with it political, social and physical outcomes for places (Cleave et al. 2017). Traditionally, these outcomes were considered in a similar way to marketing and communications aims with place branding being used to attempt to provide a point of differentiation to either support business growth and investment (Gertner, 2007) or to highlight the culture, tourism and quality of life indicators when positioning the place as attractive to live, work or to visit (Cleave et al. 2017). More recently, place branding has been charged with more ambitious pursuits, including helping to support and cultivate regional socio-economic benefits and even the fostering of sustainable development (Andersson, 2016; Cleave et al., 2017; Gustavsson and Elander, 2012; Maheshwari et al. 2011). This paper suggests that the overlapping of place branding and its counterpart of placemaking extends these possibilities, providing an opportunity for people, practices and policies to enact real and substantive change to their localities. Here place branding is not only the imagined associations and images, but also the lived reality of those involved. Normatively, this could mean that strengthening these intertwined processes can provide both a point of unison among competing voices, but also support ecological, economic, social and cultural sustainability for places.

Sustainable development is oft-cited as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations General Assembly, 1987, p. 43). Others have advanced the definition and its principles to include an integration of economic, environmental and social concerns into decision making to ensure long term protection of the economy and the environment (Cerin, 2006). Alongside the need to consider social, economic and environmental considerations is the rising importance of culture, positioned as a priority

area as well as a mechanism for supporting sustainable development (Bandarin et al. 2011). In 2015, General Assembly of the United Nations adopted a 2030 agenda on sustainable development, designed around 17 sustainable development goals, which include reducing inequalities, developing sustainable cities and communities, taking climate action and pursuing partnerships to achieve the goals (United Nations, 2018). Drawing these tenets together, this article considers approaches to sustainable development as those that are positioned as protecting the long-term environmental, economic, societal and cultural components of a place for the betterment of its people.

Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015[1]

Wales is the first country to legislate for the protection of its future generations wellbeing as well as to provide legal and policy groundings for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Future Generation Commissioner for Wales, 2020). The Well-being of the Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (FGA hereafter) provides these landmark and courageous steps, providing the legislative footing to enact long-term and substantive change to the way public services design and deliver their policies. Summarised by the Future Generation Commissioner (2020, p.36), Sophie Howe, the FGA "looks to ensure people have the economic, social, environmental and cultural conditions around them to be well." Based on this underlying assumption are seven interconnected well-being objectives. For the purpose of the Act well-being is defined as:

"The state of our population, society and our environment across Wales overall. It looks to ensure that people have the economic, social, environmental and cultural conditions around them to be well" (Future Generations Report, 2020, p.36)

These are reflected across the seven well-being aims, namely: (1) *A Prosperous Wales* (2) *A Resilient Wales* (3) *A Healthier Wales* (4) *A More Equal Wales* (5) *A Wales of Cohesive*

Communities (6) *A Wales of Vibrant Culture and Thriving Welsh Language* (7) *A Globally Responsible* Wales. The FGA sets targets and recommendations for each, aiming to achieve the goals by 2050. Acclaim was given to these developments by the United Nations Head of Sustainable Development when giving a speech about the FGA, stating "what Wales is doing today, we hope the world will do tomorrow, action more than words is the hope for our generations future" (Seth, cited in Public Health Wales, 2016).

Together, these aims provide a roadmap for Wales in terms of its support for its citizens, development of its communities, protection of its environment, resilience of its economy, shelter of its culture, heritage and language, as well a setting out an identity within Wales and an image across the world. As such, the FGA may provide a secondary outcome for Wales, helping to support a brand identity that differentiates Wales from other nations, while also benefiting its citizens, ecology, culture, economy and society through its groundings in policy and placemaking.

Ecology and the natural environment

Protecting the ecology against environmental degradation and providing relief in the fight against climate change is fundamental throughout the Act. The 'Resilient Wales' well-being aim brings these concerns to the forefront, looking for ways to maintain and enhance the natural environment, utilise the natural and green spaces, develop knowledge on nature, ensure the provision of clean air and water for wildlife and people, as well as ensuring natural resources are used responsibly. Each well-being aim includes recommendations for Welsh Government as well as recommendations for other public bodies. Key to these are a need to look beyond short-term thinking and instead look for longer-term programmes of funding that will help to restore and protect the natural environment.

Connected to these goals is a move towards renewable energies, since "Wales has an opportunity to make renewable energy a part

of its identity" (Future Generation Commissioner for Wales, 2020, p.179). As outlined above, taking a strong stance on environmental commitments and imprinting them in the place's identity can bring about substantive action, especially when backed by practice and policy (Maheshwari et al. 2011). Significant to the developments in Wales is engagement with actors in places to pinpoint problems and co-create shared solutions. Therefore, legislating the importance of renewable energies, exists alongside more grassroots and bottom-up approaches, recognising the wider need to involve people in the places in which they live and work.

Cultural and Natural Heritage

Wales' vibrant culture encompasses its arts, archives, heritage, language, literature, libraries, museums, religion, play, sport, recreational activities and creative industries, accumulating to form "part of the DNA of Wales" (Future Generations Report, 2020, p.343). A sense of pride and self-identity are aligned to these tangible and intangible assets that are noted to be "unique standing out for the rest of the world" (Future Generations Report, 2020, p.344). Again, parallels can be identified between protecting the place, its people and its identity and celebrating the place as an attractive place to live, work, visit and invest in. In the tourism literature, a place's heritage and culture have a longstanding role in attracting visitors, but must balance these pursuits in a sustainable way (Garrod and Fyall, 2000). Wales is no exception, with 61% of overseas visitors referencing the historical sites as the main reason for visiting Wales (Welsh Government, 2016). Examples of the successful international promotion of Welsh culture are set out, they include presentations of arts and culture at international festivals, as well as showcasing festivals undertaken at home to an international audience. Famous examples include Eisteddfod Llangollen, Green Man and Hay Festival. As the report details, these events have "put Wales on the global cultural map" (Future Generations Report, 2020, p.364).

Nonetheless, the importance extends beyond reputational gains, since protecting the culture also aligns to sustainable development (Maheshwari et al. 2011), creating the dual impact of heightened protection alongside perceived attractiveness. For example, the impacts are set out far beyond a marketing appeal in FGA and include a potential to boost regeneration, a catalyst for change, a fundamental part of the communities and a way to improve and support placemaking (Future Generations Report, 2020). Moreover, the focus is also inward looking, addressing the needs and benefits for Wales' citizens, looking for ways to ensure everyone has the opportunity to access the assets, connecting culture with the need for better transport, digital alternatives and encouraging communities to come together to share stories and lived experiences, boosting the shared intangible heritage in Wales.

Importantly, there is recognition that any changes need to be undertaken collaboratively, involving local culture practitioners and organisers in decision making and establishing longer term partnerships. Moreover, the Future Generations Report (2020) details case in points of partnerships in operation across Wales, many of which are led by the communities themselves. Furthermore, people's perceptions are included in the report, using different forms of stakeholder engagement to evaluate what is important alongside what barriers remain pertinent. From the perceptions, a disjuncture between claims of equal access and the practice of inclusion remain. As one participant noted: "the reality of accessing cultural and language services do not match the policy ambitions" (Future Generations Report, 2020, p.352). Similar concerns also include "there is unequal access to culture and cultural education" and "cutbacks and austerity are seriously affecting culture" (Future Generations Report, 2020, p.352). The Act and its subsequent report recognise the time horizon needed to see change, seeing the challenges and solutions as long-term exercises. However, the more recent report suggests that overcoming societal challenges remain pertinent.

A swathe of partnerships are also noted, which again shows a move towards a more collaborative approach to shaping the place and its presentation. The partnerships detailed are with key actors in the culture and natural heritage arena, including Natural Resource Wales and National Park authorities. Nonetheless, a noteworthy inclusion is the use of small-scale, often grassroots initiatives, as case in points to demonstrate that the policy making is not merely coming from above but been driven by activities from the communities themselves. However, among many of these initiatives the Welsh Government remains the main actor, helping to shape the smaller scale activities as well as pursuing the well-being aim with an accompanying Welcome to Wales: Priorities for the visitor economy action plan (Welsh Government, 2020).

Thinking global and local

The link between the global and local is found across the Act. Most overtly, the Globally Responsible Wales well-being aim that outlines the need to ensure actions related to the Act also make a contribution to global well-being. Therefore, the FGA is protecting against the global and the local, covering a wide breadth of areas from a global solution to climate change and using natural resources sustainably to ensuring that Wales is fair and safe for all. In addition, throughout the Future Generations Report (2020) exemplar activities from within Wales but also from across the world are outlined as sources of inspiration and an example of how Wales is, and can continue to, achieve its ambitions. In doing so, there is a comparative element, setting up where Wales is, and would like to be, on the world stage. These international activities are not only large-scale and state led, but often grassroots social movements pursuing change in society. For example, Hip Hop Caucus is used as a case in point in the Future Generations Report (2020), which is a social movement that uses hip hop to engage underrepresented groups and to look for

collaborative approaches to strengthen democracy and protect against climate change. As such, beyond the direct legislative strategy, the Act alongside its aligned policies and practices present "an opportunity to promote Wales to the world" (Future Generations Report, 2020, p.410). Key to these developments is the connection with the local and the global, where the local can bring benefits for global sustainable development, while also benefiting showcasing Wales as an exemplar to the world.

Engaging on place and placemaking

Another theme recurrent across the Act is that of placemaking, with its overarching importance being recognised by its inclusion as one of the 48 recommendations in the more recent review (Future Generations Report, 2020). Central to the placemaking recommendations is the benefit of "people co-designing the places they live, work and spend their time" (Future Generations Report, 2020, p.442). The ways in which placemaking are detailed include planning for green spaces, helping to reduce inequalities through planning, encouraging time and resources to be invested into planning services and placemaking, greater calls for collaboration and a need to reconnect people with planning. The 2020 Report recognises that places belong to everyone and there is a need to evaluate and incorporate specific groups. Therefore, placemaking is linked to supporting the environment, encouraging people to design and deliver interventions that allow sustainable access and use of Wales' natural resources and spaces.

However, the placemaking recommendations reviewed in this article retain strong links to planning and local development plans. While planning remains central to placemaking (Friedman, 2010), the literature details more creative forms of placemaking that enable people to immerse themselves in places through creative arts, storytelling and social movements (Gilmore, 2013; Richards, 2020). There are signs that these alternative platforms are gaining importance, however, it remains fundamental that the unique character and identity of the place is being captured in the current placemaking activities. As the Design Commissioner for Wales and the Welsh Government noted (cited in Future Generations Report, 2020, p.451), places should avoid "placelessness where the built environment lacks character, a distinctive identity and a collective sense of ownership". Once again, parallels are drawn to recent calls in the place branding and placemaking literatures that advocates for places to build and share narratives that reflect the place, its people and its values (Aitken and Campelo, 2011; Friedman, 2010; Pierce et al. 2011).

Collaboration, partnerships and co-creation

Throughout the wellbeing aims sustainable development and stakeholder wellbeing are central, alongside a reiteration of the importance of collaborating with people to develop shared solutions to the existing hurdles prevalent in Wales. This links to a further theme pinpointed throughout the Act and its supplementary policy documentation, that of collaboration, co-creation and ultimately an aim to adopt a partnership model. While the legislative framework provides a public service led solution to placemaking and policy development, it looks for ways to involve and co-create actions with its citizens, businesses, visitor attractions and so forth. The importance of working with, and not simply for, stakeholders, connects to the 'Partnerships for the goals' United Nation's sustainable development goal (United Nations, 2018). The goal calls for inclusive partnerships at a global, regional, national and local level to develop "shared goals placing people and the planet at the centre" (United Nations, 2020). Throughout the reflection of the Act and its most recent report, there are demonstrations of the partnership approach being enacted, however, as with ensuring the success and equity of any partnership there remains a number of challenges.

Challenges and Hurdles

Structural hurdles and aligned governance challenges create a number of barriers for the FGA's success. The inherited structural

problems in Wales are noted as a persistent hurdle that may hinder the fulfilment of its sustainable development objectives (Future Generation Commissioner for Wales, 2020). For example, Wales continues to experience high levels of poverty and spatial inequalities, with three of the top ten most unequal local authorities in the United Kingdom being located in Wales (Welsh Government, 2017). Moreover, nearly one in four people in Wales are considered as living in poverty (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2020), and as many as one in three children (Save the Children, 2012). Overcoming these hurdles is made more difficult with the ongoing challenges surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic.

Governance styles are also embedded into the culture of the public services, making changing entrenched mindsets and longstanding practices difficult, with their own internal tensions. Similarly, the success relies on trust and ongoing engagement, but as we have seen elsewhere in the literature, engagement can be selective (Boisen et al. 2011; Henninger et al. 2016) and can allow for replications of power relations in society (Cleave et al. 2017). In place branding, concern over these existing structures and relationships were central in the call for more participatory, holistic and inclusive approaches (Kavaratzis, 2012). Aligned to these challenges is the continuation of top-down approaches to partnership, engagement and policy making existing alongside more open and inclusive practices. While top-down action plans by public service bodies can provide direction, support and legitimacy for action, it remains crucial to involve local stakeholders and look to what other activities are occurring 'on the ground'. Furthermore, placemaking and place branding literature suggests that there are barriers for certain groups to input into high level policy direction, whether through stakeholder engagement or direct policy making (Boisen et al. 2011). While some stakeholders have an active role, others can be excluded entirely (Henninger et al. 2016). There's also a recognition that the legislative framework only goes so far, "Wales now needs to demonstrate how this world leading legal framework is driving profound and real change on the ground" (Future Generations Report, 2020, p.36). Enacting change can be difficult because of the political environment in which the Act is implemented into policy. Yet, throughout the Act and its report there is a push to look beyond the current election result and plan for a future regardless of the leadership and their political position.

Conclusions

While the FGA was not designed to be a place branding exercise, this article sets out ways in which it provides a (perhaps unintended) place brand identity for Wales. The literature on place branding has called for a move beyond marketing gimmicks linked to logos, slogans, poised imagery that are crafted to gain the attention of a predefined audience. Instead, place branding should be considered as a complex and holistic process that draws on the place itself as well as people's associations (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015), to bring about meaningful change to practice and policy (Cleave et al. 2017). As such, this article evaluates the FGA as something far more consequential than a marketing tool, since the Act and its subsequent policy developments and recommendations provides a roadmap and legislative backing for substantive change, designed collaboratively with the place's stakeholders and existing alongside complementary grassroots and bottom-up activities. The Act therefore demonstrates the potential for an interconnection between policy making, placemaking and place branding, which when pursued collectively and in unison can bring about substantive benefits.

While there are many positives, a number of hurdles remain. However, challenges are often easier to pinpoint than solutions and there is much to applaud about the approach to partnerships and collaborations that remains focal to the Act and its delivery. Building on this, there could be some further attempts to locate and include underrepresented groups, for example, using

sector-specific and local gatekeepers. Moreover, it is important to recognise the multiple voices between all the different groups across the city, therefore focusing on the perceptions of citizens alongside other place-based actors such as the business community, visitor economy, higher education institutions, third-sector and grassroot organisations, can help strengthen the collaborative component of the outcomes.

To do so, more focus could also be placed on the forms of engagement that are being employed by local, regional and national actors and how open they are to wider participation and inclusivity. Examples might include more creative forms of placemaking and place branding, as well as providing resources for the regional actors to enact change alongside existing engagement discussions and information collation.

Endnote

1. Well-being of the Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 came into law on 1st April 2016 in Wales. See: https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-06/easy-read-a-guide-to-the-wellbeing-of-future-generations-act.pdf

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