Sustainability – What is it?

Key questions addressed by this section:

Note: Much of the text in this section is taken from Volumes 1 and 3 of *A National Review of Environmental Education*[1]. These were both key texts for this project. See the Essential Readings list in Section 1 Introduction.

It is curious to note that while we have difficulty envisioning a sustainable world, we have no difficulty detailing what is unsustainable in our societies. We can rapidly create a laundry list of problems – inefficient use of energy, lack of water conservation, pollution, abuses of human rights, overuse of personal transportation, consumerism, etc. However we should not chide ourselves because we do not have a clearer definition of sustainability: many truly great concepts of the human world such as democracy and justice are hard to define and have multiple expressions in cultures around the world.

Hopkins and McKeown, ESD Toolkit (2002)

What is the purpose of this section?

To introduce:

- the key terms, concepts and principles underpinning sustainability
- sustainability within Australia
- sustainability as a learning process.

What is sustainability?

Sustainability can be thought of as the goal of 'sustainable development', a journey and destination that is to be negotiated. Sustainability is open to different interpretations and takes on different meanings not only between different interest groups within societies but also between different societies. Sustainability seeks an improved quality of life and embraces equality for all, and for this reason a key aim of sustainability is to enable multi-stakeholder groups to define their vision of sustainability and to work towards it.

United Nations documents refer to key sustainability concepts as intergenerational equity, ecological sustainability and fair distribution of wealth, community participation and access to resources. Many of these can be associated with quality of life or well being. Underpinning them is a strong premise that both society and economy are dependent on a healthy environment that provides ecosystem services.

> *Sustainability is about Quality of Life issues:*
>
> - intergenerational equity
> - ecological sustainability
> - fair distribution of wealth
> - equity and justice
> - equal access to resources

There are also discussions on what 'sustainability', 'sustainable development' or related terms really mean and whether they are indeed different. Some people, particularly from economically developed nations, prefer to use the term 'sustainability' rather than 'sustainable development', others opt for 'sustainable futures', 'sustainable living' or 'sustainable communities'. Interestingly the focus of many of these terms is 'quality of life' and the process of achieving sustainability is widely understood as one of defining and seeking a better quality of life for all.

No country is sustainable or comes close to it. There is no proven recipe for success. The international community has come to recognise that achieving sustainability is essentially an ongoing learning process that actively involves multiple stakeholders in change across every aspect of society. UNESCO released a document at the World Summit for Sustainable Development entitled *From Rio to Johannesburg: Lessons Learnt from a Decade of Commitment*[2] which acknowledges that achieving sustainability is indeed a process of learning which

> *Sustainability* is …
>
> an ongoing learning process that actively involves stakeholders in creating their vision, taking action and reviewing changes.

helps us grow in understanding sustainability, human motivations and visions and thus how to progress towards sustainability.

The learning approaches such as mentoring, facilitation, participative inquiry, action learning and action research are ways of exploring the sustainability agenda. These approaches enable people to reflect on their experiences, learn how to make change and move forward.

What is sustainability in the Australian context?

> **Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) is …**
>
> *'using, conserving and enhancing the community's resources so that ecological processes, on which life depends, are maintained, and the total quality of life, now and in the future, can be increased'.*
> National Strategy for ESD, Australia

The principal and overarching strategy for sustainability within Australia is the National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development (NSESD)[3] which seeks to address sustainable development issues from a distinctly Australian perspective. The Strategy sets out the broad strategic and policy framework under which governments are expected to cooperatively make decisions and take actions to pursue ESD in Australia. It recognises as a core goal 'development that improves the total quality of life, both now and in the future, in a way that maintains the ecological processes on which life depends'. It has been argued that the use of the term 'ecological' and the ESD definition within the strategy has focused the sustainability agenda within Australia more towards environmental sustainability, putting less emphasis on social sustainability[4].

? **A note on jargon: Although ESD in Australia refers to Ecologically Sustainable Development, within the international community you will see ESD as meaning Education for Sustainable Development. To avoid confusion, we use Education for Sustainability (EfS).**

Some states have developed their own strategies. The best example is 'Hope for the Future; The Western Australia State Sustainability Strategy'[5]. It defines sustainability as '*meeting the needs of current and future generations through integrating environmental protection, social advancement and economic prosperity*'. The strategy is identified as a work in progress and as part of the journey to sustainability, not the destination. Several partnerships were established to develop the strategy, the most significant being the State-Local Government Roundtable which explored ways for state and local governments to work together to progress sustainability.

In 1995 Victoria also released its *Environmental Sustainability Framework*[6], however this document appears to focus narrowly on environmental issues and does not discuss the wider global and social implications surrounding sustainability.

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A view of sustainability

Sustainability relates to ways of thinking about the world, and forms of social and personal practice that lead to:

- ethical, empowered and personally fulfilled individuals

- communities built on collaborative engagement, tolerance and equity

- social systems and institutions that are participatory, transparent and just

- environmental practices that value and sustain biodiversity and life-supporting ecological processes.

Hill et al. 2003

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What is sustainability in the local government context?

At a local level much work towards sustainability has been done through Local Agenda 21 programs; however, in recent years the emphasis has shifted more to reflect the current funding priorities of the national government, especially in natural resource management and water policy[7]. In 1992 the Rio Summit published Agenda 21, which in Chapter 28[8], *Local Authorities' initiatives in support of Agenda 21*, highlighted that 'as the level of governance closest to the people, they (local government) play a vital role in educating, mobilising and responding to the public to promote sustainable development'.

See www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/agenda21/english/agenda21toc.htm for the full text of Agenda 21.

In the context of local government, sustainability needs to be the key objective of strategic planning and should be integrated within all decision-making processes. The NSW Local Government Amendment (Ecologically Sustainable Development) Act 1997 presents a legal requirement for Councils to adopt ESD within their strategic planning. Local Agenda 21 can be used as a tool for generating or reviewing strategic plans using a sustainability focus.

Many councils have opted to use the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach to assess their progress and to publicly report on progress towards sustainability[9]. The TBL performance indicators can be used to govern decision-making processes (see the reading list for more information on TBL, including the Centre for Public Agency Sustainability Reporting website and the TBL toolkit). Other sustainability initiatives include community indicator-type projects and innovative eco-accounting projects[10].

Many of these approaches, however, do not address the integration of sustainability at the strategic level. There is still a sense that local government can somehow be 'doing sustainability' whilst continuing within their existing structures. There is a perception that sustainability (or ESD) is an 'issue' that can be addressed and that can be located within a particular department, normally environmental services.[11] This fails to address the need for sustainability to be a cross-cutting, strategic initiative. It appears that many local governments are still not addressing the issues of organisational change that may be required to make changes towards

sustainability. A shift in institutional thinking is required to create cultures that support sustainability over the long term.[12]

Read more about local government's role in sustainability in the section 'Local Agenda 21' of this Handbook.

Some identified barriers to the integration of sustainability in local council

Communication of ESD
- confusion as to what ESD really means
- lack of ownership by Councils of ESD
- communication overload
- perception of the 'environment' as a fringe issue
- perception of economics and environment being diametrically opposed
- perception that ESD integration means re-structuring – and the poor history of re-structuring as a change mechanism

Council internal structures and processes
- the budgetary bidding process was a barrier to more strategic planning of Council initiatives
- absence of data regarding the cumulative impacts of operational activities
- problem of different divisions in an organisation competing with one another for resources etc rather than see them as part of greater whole
- lack of funding for ESD projects and larger integration frameworks
- ad hoc approach; lack of strategic framework
- too much focus on restructuring as the solution to ESD
- inconsistencies within Council policies

Political and community issues
- political imperatives: pro-development, jobs at any cost
- agenda dominated by economic rationalism
- short-term thinking
- Councillors' reluctance to consult with the community
- lack of support from elected representatives, as they perceive better public response from short term projects

- Council's lack of commitment
- lack of a strong push from the community

Staff and management issues
- high staff turnover
- change fatigue
- lack of skills and ability to promote existing ESD initiatives
- loss of corporate knowledge
- internal politics
- hesitation and resistance by staff to change
- lack of communication across divisions
- older management unwilling to deal with new environmental issues
- preconceptions of ESD by Councillors and staff
- the problem of 'group think' (the tendency of subgroups to think in one fixed way)
- difficulty of maintaining interest in the process
- short-term contract employment of senior managers
- unwillingness of non-environment staff to embrace ESD issues
- problem of isolation and individualism – need to more actively sell the benefits and power of the collaborative process.

External difficulties
- difficulties of regional collaboration
- Land & Environment Court approval of inappropriate developments
- inadequate and unclear planning instruments
- conflicts in legislation, for example Integrated Assessments Act inadequate guidelines and information
- lack of an air and water catchment approach to planning and development

From Institute for Sustainable Futures (1999) *Action Research Project: Policy Integration, Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) and Local Agenda 21 – Councils in NSW*

Where can I find out more about sustainability?

Government departments

ACT Office of Sustainability
www.sustainability.act.gov.au/

Federal Government Department of
Environment, Water, Heritage and the
Arts on ESD (Ecologically Sustainable
Development) at
/www.deh.gov.au/esd/index.html

Northern Territory Government
www.nt.gov.au/

NSW Government Department of
Environment and Conservation (DEC)
www.dec.nsw.gov.au

Queensland Government Environment
Protection Authority (EPA)
www.epa.qld.gov.au/

SA Government Department for
Environment and Heritage: Office of
Sustainability
www.environment.sa.gov.au/sustainab
ility/index.html

Tasmanian Government Department
of Tourism, Arts and the Environment
www.dtae.tas.gov.au/

Victorian Government Department of
Sustainability and Environment (DSE)
www.dse.vic.gov.au

WA Government Department of the
Environment and Conservation
www.dec.wa.gov.au/

WA Government Sustainability Policy
Unit
www.sustainability.dpc.wa.gov.au/
Contains the WA Sustainability
Strategy 'Hope for the Future' as well
as progress reports on the strategy,
agency sustainability action plans and
case studies that were developed to
inform the strategy.

General

ARIES EfS portal at
www.aries.mq.edu.au/portal/index.htm

Caring for the Earth: A Strategy for
Sustainable Living
http://coombs.anu.edu.au/%7Evern/ca
ring/caring.html

Environs Australia
www.environs.org.au/
Environs is a network of members
interested in promoting sustainable
development through local action,
primarily in the local government
sector.

Forum for the Future – Directory of
Sustainability in Practice
www.forumdirectory.org.uk/index.html
The Forum Directory has been
developed to fulfill the role of a 'first-
stop shop' information resource on
sustainability projects.

The Gould Group
www.gould.org.au/
Gould Group is an independent non-
profit organisation dedicated to
environmental education and training
in sustainability. This includes
conducting environmental education
and sustainability programs and
projects for schools, businesses and
the community.

ICLEI Local Governments for
Sustainability
www.iclei.org/
ICLEI—Local Governments for
Sustainability is an international
association of local governments and
national and regional local government
organisations that have made a
commitment to sustainable
development.

Institute for Sustainable Futures,
University of Technology, Sydney
*Action Research Project: Policy
Integration, Ecologically Sustainable
Development (ESD) and Local Agenda
21 – Councils in NSW*
www.isf.uts.edu.au/whatwedo/proj_IC
S.html
The ISF at UTS work with industry,
government and the community to
develop sustainable futures through
project based research. The site

contains relevant information pertaining to local government and sustainability.

International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)
www.iied.org/aboutiied/index.html
An international policy research institute and non governmental body working for more sustainable and equitable global development.

International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)
www.iisd.org
The International Institute for Sustainable Development contributes to sustainable development by advancing policy recommendations on international trade and investment, economic policy, climate change, measurement and assessment, and natural resources management.

Murdoch University, Institute for Sustainability and Technology Policy
www.sustainability.murdoch.edu.au/
Case studies in Sustainability.

New Economics Foundation
www.neweconomics.org/index.htm
NEF is a not-for-profit organisation based in the UK, which aims to 'build a just and sustainable economy with ideas and actions that put people and the environment first'. NEF has completed extensive work on involving local communities in assessing the sustainability of their community.

Sustainable Communities Network
www.sustainable.org
This web-based network contains links to sustainability projects throughout the USA.

Sustainable Development – The UK Governments Approach: Delivering Sustainable Development Together
www.sustainable-development.gov.uk/index.htm
This website provides information sustainable development in government and delivering sustainable development at all levels.

Tilbury, D. and Cooke, K. (2005) *A National Review of Environmental Education and its Contribution to Sustainability in Australia: Frameworks for Sustainability*. Canberra: Australian Government Department of the Environment and Heritage and Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability Available for download at
www.aries.mq.edu.au

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs – Division for Sustainable Development
www.un.org/esa/sustdev/csd/review.htm
The Division for Sustainable Development provides leadership and is an authoritative source of expertise within the United Nations system on sustainable development. This website provides information on key international sustainable development meetings and milestones.

UK Government - Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs – Sustainable Development
www.defra.gov.uk/environment/sustainable/index.htm
This website provides information on the guiding principles of sustainable development and UK priorities. Contains links to the UK's Sustainable Development Strategy, the Sustainable Development Action Plan and Community Action 2020.

UN HABITAT-The Sustainable Cities Program (SCP)
www.unchs.org/programmes/sustainablecities/
The SCP is focused on building capacities in urban environmental planning and management. The programme is founded on broad-based cross-sectoral and stakeholder participatory approaches and contributes to promoting urban environmental governance processes, as a basis for achieving sustainable urban growth and development. The website includes tools for the SCP and case studies from the SCP.

VOX Bandicoot
www.voxbandicoot.com.au/home.htm
VOX Bandicoot run innovative
sustainability programs including the
renown Sustainability Streets program.
Other work includes Eco Theatre
events and workplace sustainability
training programs.

WWF UK Mainstreaming Sustainability
Resource Pack
www.wwflearning.org.uk/localmatters/
download-centre/ms-resources/
This resource looks at ways of
mainstreaming sustainability including
workshop resources in integration of
sustainability in the community
planning process, route maps for
developing local strategic partnerships
and case studies. Although much of
the jargon refers to UK policy
instruments (e.g. Community
Strategies) there is much of interest
from a strategic perspective.

Ecological footprinting
EPA Victoria
http://www.epa.vic.gov.au/Eco-
footprint/
Lots of information on the ideas
surrounding Ecological Footprinting.

Evaluation/sustainability reporting
The Centre for Public Agency
Sustainability Reporting
www.publicagencyreporting.org
The Centre was launched in March
2005 and its mission is to improve the
sustainability performance of public
agencies through the practice of
reporting. The Centre is a not-for-profit
entity, which seeks to build capacity in
public agencies to undertake
sustainability reporting and to
facilitate the development of best
practice in sustainability reporting by
public agencies.

Triple bottom line
Triple Bottom Line Toolkit
www6.iclei.org/anz/tbl/

Toolkit developed by ICLEI and The
city of Melbourne. It contains tools and
case studies on TBL and includes a
report on Triple Bottom Line Best
Practice in Local Government
prepared for Gosford City Council.

References

[1] Tilbury, D. and Cooke, K. (2005) *A National Review of Environmental Education and its Contribution to Sustainability in Australia: Frameworks for Sustainability*. Canberra: Australian Government Department of the Environment and Heritage and Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability

[2] UNESCO (2002) *Education for Sustainable Development, From Rio to Johannesburg: Lessons Learnt from a Decade of Commitment*, Paris: UNESCO http://portal.unesco.org/en/file_download.php/b53b49866e68498f047d88a843cf9aaflessons_learnt.doc [Accessed 2 July 2006]

[3] Department of the Environment and Heritage *Ecologically Sustainable Development* website www.deh.gov.au/esd/index.html [Accessed 5 May 2006]

[4] Neil H, Sansom G, Porter J and Wensing E (2002) *Australian Local Sustainability Initiative: An Achievement Recognition Matrix Volume 2 Literature Review p7* Environment Australia www.deh.gov.au/esd/la21/framework/pubs/framework-part2.pdf [Accessed 6 July 2006]

[5] Government of Western Australia (2003) *Hope for the future: The Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy*, Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Perth.

[6] Government of Victoria (2005) *Our Environment, Our Future: Victoria's Environmental Sustainability Framework*. Melbourne: Department of Sustainability and Environment

[7] Local Environs Newsletter April 2005

[8] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Division for Sustainable Development www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/agenda21/english/agenda21toc.htm [Accessed 5 May 2006]

[9] Malouf M 2002 *Sustainability in Local Government*

www.leadershipvictoria.org/articles/article_malouf2002.htm

[10] Keating T The greening of Local Government in Australian CPA magazine www.cpaaustralia.com.au/cps/rde/xchg/SID-3F57FEDF-9037D2DF/cpa/hs.xsl/724_3073_ENA_HTML.htm [Accessed 5 July 2006]

[11] Institute for Sustainable Futures (1999) *Action Research Project: Policy Integration, Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) and Local Agenda 21 – Councils in NSW* www.isf.uts.edu.au/whatwedo/ARP.pdf

[12] Salan R (2002) *Why LA21 professionals are a rare and endangered species* Paper presented at the "Sustaining our Communities" International Local Agenda 21 Conference 2002 www.adelaide.sa.gov.au/soc/