

**Partridge, Emma (2005) 'Social sustainability': a useful theoretical framework?**

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**Abstract**

Until recently, the sustainability debate was largely confined to environmental circles, and the social dimensions of sustainability were relatively neglected. This paper considers the concept of 'social sustainability' with a view to assessing a) its value as a theoretical framework with implications for policy and politics, and b) the potential contribution that social and political theorists might make to the field of sustainability by exploring and further developing the concept of 'social sustainability'.

Sustainability as a concept is achieving wide 'purchase' in many fields, from business to government through to activist circles. The paper considers the emergence of the sustainability discourse generally, and recent attempts to define the social dimensions of the concept in particular. Social sustainability is the least developed of the oft-cited 'three dimensions' of sustainability (environmental, economic and social) and the relative lack of understanding of the social dimension provides an opportunity for social and political theorists to contribute to defining and refining the term. Social and political scientists are now beginning to explore the relevance and potential for theories of 'sustainability' in their fields, particularly if the social dimension can be further developed and promoted. The paper suggests that there is great scope to harness some of the currency and 'clout' of sustainability discourse in order to progress issues of social justice and equity by using it as a tool for framing progressive social policies – policies that, in a conservative political climate, may otherwise not be easy to advance.

**Introduction**

Sustainability currently seems to be everywhere. It has achieved wide 'purchase' in many fields, from environmental and social justice activism, to government and the corporate sector. Everyone it seems is making some claim to sustainability. This paper explores the concept of sustainability, particularly with regard to the social content and potential of this currently popular concept, and the relevance of sustainability as a theoretical framework for social scientists.

In the first part of the paper I trace the emergence of the concept of sustainability and consider the ongoing contestation over its meaning. I then consider the underdeveloped social dimension of sustainability, and outline the emerging consensus about the dimensions of social sustainability. I then go on to consider the potential usefulness of the theoretical framework of sustainability for the social sciences. I argue that the usefulness of sustainability as a concept lies in its integrating capability. Consequently, I suggest that there is both a need to recognise the important role for social scientists to play in contributing to a debate previously dominated by the natural sciences, and a need for social science to pay greater attention to the challenges represented by the sustainability agenda.

The paper is not intended to provide definitive answers about what ‘social sustainability is’ but rather to suggest that the relationship between sustainability and social questions is underexplored. Or more accurately, it asserts that sustainability *is* itself a social question. It is intended to stimulate further discussion, particularly within the social sciences about the contribution that this field can make towards the development of a more informed conceptual framework for social sustainability. It seeks to highlight the potential that exists for greater exploration of the relationships between sustainability debates and social and political theory.

By way of contextualising this paper, a word about ‘social capital’ is necessary before I continue. It is common to find the term social capital used interchangeably with social sustainability, or to see ‘levels’ or ‘types’ or ‘stocks’ of social capital cited as an ‘indicator’ of social sustainability. However, there is a need to disentangle these two terms. Koning (2001:13) cautions against using the terms interchangeably. She particularly questions the assumption that indicators of social capital equate to indicators of social sustainability, suggesting that the very fact that social capital can have both positive and negative consequences should be reason for caution. The Western Australian Council of Social Service (2003) also caution against conflating social sustainability with social capital, arguing that ‘social capital provides only a partial conceptualisation of social sustainability’. WACOSS suggests that social capital tends to focus on processes, whereas social sustainability requires a broader focus on both process and outcomes.<sup>1</sup> This paper does not enter the debate about ‘social capital’. It presumes that the two terms are not interchangeable, and seeks to explore ideas of social sustainability separately from questions and debates about social capital.

### **The emergence of sustainability and contestations over meaning**

It is almost a commonplace in the literature on sustainability to deplore the vague or ill-defined character of this concept. The only consensus on sustainability appears to be that there is no shared understanding. (Becker et al 1999:4)

Before considering the relevance of sustainability as a theoretical framework for social scientists, or the social dimensions of sustainability, I want to briefly trace the emergence of the idea of sustainability itself. For while ‘social sustainability’ is something of a new term, ‘sustainability’, and ‘sustainable development’ have been much debated in recent decades.

The common starting point for any discussion of sustainability is the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development (UNCED) report, *Our Common Future* (1987), often referred to as ‘the Brundtland report’. The report contains the following oft-cited definition of sustainable development: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. This definition has been highly influential.

The idea of sustainability however, preceded the UNCED report. Its origins lie in the environmental movement, where it referred to ecological sustainability – the sustainability of the planet, its systems, biodiversity and natural resources. In this context the term was employed to

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<sup>1</sup> WACOSS do argue that at least those authors who distinguish between different forms of social capital (eg. Stone’s distinction between bonding, bridging and linking capital) do connect the concept with the notion of equity, by drawing attention to the differential access individuals have to different forms of social capital and therefore the different outcomes in terms of resources and opportunities (WACOSS, 2003).

draw attention to the environmental damage being wrought by certain kinds of human activity – to the *unsustainability* of a focus solely on economic growth. However, there is an inherent tension between this meaning and the pro-growth perspective seemingly inherent in the term ‘sustainable development’. Where a serious consideration of ecological sustainability contains a challenge to the possibility (or at least the scale or type) of continued economic growth and development, the substitution of the term *sustainable development* has been criticised as presupposing continued growth. McManus (1996:51) for example, argues that the framing of the debate by the Brundtland Commission and the subsequent UNCED Rio Conference in 1992 is one that presumes continued and increased growth, and that this is a result of the specific political and economic context in which this framing occurred. At the height of global neo-liberalism, ‘sustainable development’ was a seductive notion – an approach that appeared to address the emerging ecological critiques of economic growth and North-South disparities, without confronting neo-liberalism *per se*, or questioning the assumption of further growth (McManus, 1999:51). It was a means, in other words, of *incorporating* these concerns into the existing growth-oriented neo-liberal framework.

Where other, previous conceptualisations of sustainability implied a direct challenge to the assumption of continued economic growth, ‘sustainable development’ had the effect of at least partially neutralising that challenge. It is a term that, in McManus’ words “pastes over potential conflicts between environment and economy” (1999:53). The emphasis of the Brundtland Commission was not on ‘sustainability’, but ‘sustainable *development*’. The assumed object is still clearly development, and the question is how to make development sustainable. This is a very different approach to “beginning with a rigorously defined concept of sustainability and questioning ‘development’ and ‘growth’.” (1999:52) In fact, the adoption of and subsequent dominance of the Brundtland ‘sustainable development’ framework effectively marginalised existing perspectives critical of pro-growth economics (namely ‘zero-growth’ or ‘limits to growth’ discourses) (McManus, 1999:48) Far from being the only or inevitable definition of or approach to sustainability, the Brundtland definition is but one of many possible interpretations<sup>2</sup>.

Nevertheless, the Brundtland definition of sustainable development has become both the dominant conception and the source of many of its critics. As McKenzie (2004:2) notes, the sustainable development agenda has been widely criticised because its terms are often so vaguely defined that they become “a smokescreen behind which business can continue its operations essentially unhindered by environmental concerns, while paying lip service to the needs of future generations”. Paehlke (2001:7) sees the Brundtland conception as risking “unconditional advocacy of economic growth” or “growth in marginally less damaging forms”. These interpretations are possible because, he argues, sustainable development is a concept “so amorphous that it might mean anything”. Similarly, Jacobs (cited in McKenzie 2004:2) argues that the vagueness of the definition “allows business and “development” interests (and their government supporters) to claim that they are in favour of sustainable development when actually they are the perpetrators of *unsustainability*”.

The removal of the term ‘development’ and a return to ‘sustainability’ has been seen by some as a way to counter this appropriation of the debate. McManus (1999: 69) for example, calls for a reorientation of the debate in order to focus on sustainability itself (with development as a possible means to move towards sustainability). This approach is analytically sound, and indeed is supported by this paper. In practice however, the term ‘sustainability’ has simply replaced

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<sup>2</sup> See McManus (1999:57-66) for a useful summary of eight other conceptual approaches to sustainability, and Paehlke (2001:6-7) on the ‘limits to growth’ and ‘conservative society’ perspectives that pre-dated Brundtland.

‘sustainable development’ without changing its meaning. In fact ‘sustainability’ has become so widely adopted (and co-opted) by mainstream interests that it could be argued it has lost its ability to signify a more radical agenda. Angst over which term is preferable will not prevent the chosen concept from being manipulated.

As Crabtree (1999:2) points out, with regard to both ‘sustainable development’ and ‘sustainability’:

although bandied about by business, government, media, community and academic bodies alike, definitions and interpretations of these terms are as varied and numerous as the individuals holding them.

It is perhaps wisest to acknowledge that continued struggle and contestation over the meaning of the terms is inevitable, and indeed potentially positive. Robinson (2004:380) for example sees a “constructive ambiguity” in keeping the meaning of sustainability open. He argues that “the lack of definitional precision ... may represent an important political opportunity”, for it allows meanings – perhaps multiple ones – to emerge from various practical attempts to implement sustainability (2004:374). This view also implies that sustainability is an ongoing process, not a fixed state to be achieved (Robinson 2004:381).

While sustainability is a widely used term, this does not necessarily imply that real engagement with the concept is widespread. While the appeal of presenting one’s organisation, or activities or products as ‘sustainable’ is obvious (who wants to be ‘unsustainable’ after all?), the willingness to undertake the deep and critical thinking, (let alone action) that the concepts imply is far less common. It is not hard to find examples of organisations using the rhetoric of sustainability without any evidence of substantial or meaningful action to achieve it. While the language of ‘sustainability’ has become ubiquitous in mission statements and other corporate and organisational public relations material, it is fair to say that such claims are often merely examples of ‘greenwash’<sup>3</sup> or ‘weasel words’<sup>4</sup>. As Robinson (2004:374) argues, it is in part the vagueness of the term that allows such hypocrisy.

Some writers argue that the reason sustainability so often circulates as a vague or ambiguous term is that it is a context-dependent concept. Philip Sutton (2000:2) for example, suggests that “it has to be applied to something before its meaning is clear”. Depending on what their priorities are, organisations can (and do) apply the concept of sustainability to a whole range of things. Some may have as their main aim the sustaining of profit, economic growth or shareholder returns, just as others may seek to sustain forests, fish stocks, public housing or human wellbeing. For McKenzie (2004:5), ‘the basic agenda of those who are performing the research, or profiting from its implementation, will quickly determine the real meaning of the work of any organisation in the field of sustainability’.

I want to argue however, that it is not necessarily useful to only think of sustainability as context-dependent. While it is useful to apply the idea to a particular object (like forestry, fishing or human wellbeing for example), I want to suggest that the real potential of sustainability as an idea

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<sup>3</sup> Derived from whitewash, ‘greenwash’ refers to public relations attempts to portray an organisation, activity or product as ‘environmentally friendly’. Organisations use greenwash to cover up environmentally and/or socially damaging activities, either with rhetoric, or with minor or superficial environmental reforms. See Barry and Frankland (2001).

<sup>4</sup> Watson (2004:1) after Theodore Roosevelt, uses this term to refer to words from which all meaning has been sucked. ‘They are shells of words: words from which all life has gone, facsimiles, frauds, corpses’.

is as an *integrating* framework – a means for considering the relationships between different dimensions, rather than just assessing the sustainability or otherwise of a single element. I will return to this point in the conclusion of this paper.

While disagreement continues about a precise definition of sustainability, the most common approach which has become widely accepted is to conceptualise it as having three interlinked aspects or dimensions – namely environmental, economic, and social. I want to look more closely at this three-dimensional model, and particularly the place of ‘the social’ within it. The ‘three dimensions’ model marks a clear shift from the original two-way focus on the ‘economy-environment’ relationship. What began as a means of highlighting the environmental damage wrought by certain economic activity has, with the addition of the third, social element, become a more complex and multi-dimensional field. With the popularity of this model, sustainability is now commonly understood as requiring a balance between the three dimensions – environment, economy and society. It is common in the literature to represent the relationship between these elements in diagrammatic form – either as concentric circles (to convey the dependence of the economic and the social on the environmental sphere), or overlapping circles (to convey the equal influence, or interdependence of the three spheres) (McKenzie 2004:3-5). This three-part focus coincides with the ‘triple bottom line’ approach to organisational reporting (also known as ‘sustainability reporting’) which is becoming more widely adopted in the corporate sector as a framework for organisations to report on the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of their activities, products, and services (Global Reporting Initiative: 2004).<sup>5</sup>

However, while the three-part model of sustainability and the idea of a triple bottom line are widely invoked, not all the dimensions, or ‘bottom lines’ have received equal attention or elaboration. In particular, the relative lack of focus on the social dimension is notable. Significant work remains to be done if ‘the social’ is to have a meaningful rather than tokenistic place in this model. It is to the emerging work on *social sustainability* as a topic in its own right that I now turn.

### **Sustainability as a social question**

The social dimension of sustainability has received far less attention than the economic and environmental aspects. This applies both to academic and policy circles, and in respect of both the conceptual framework and the practical reporting of social sustainability in triple bottom line reports. This lack of attention to the social dimension of sustainability is noted by many writers (see for example, Adebowale 2002, Koning 2001:5, McKenzie 2004:7, WACOSS 2002).

Part of the reason for the lack of attention to the social content of sustainability is that it has only recently been explicitly acknowledged in the framing of the concept. As discussed above, the sustainability debate was originally conceived as two-dimensional – as an *environmental* challenge to the dominance of economic-centred thinking. As Adebowale (2002:5) puts it,

in the simplistic fight of ideologies – environmental protection versus economic development – few stopped to see that the people most affected by the consequences of

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<sup>5</sup> While this approach is *becoming* more widespread, its influence, particularly in the corporate sector should not be overstated. In Australia especially, sustainability reporting is extremely limited (only 24 corporations provided discrete sustainability/TBL reports in 2003) and the reports that do exist have been described as inconsistent, lacking in rigour, and overwhelmingly favouring positive information (Jones et al, 2005).

environmental and commercial decision making were not only alienated by this increasingly narrow debate but were insufficiently protected by environmental or economic policy.

While ‘the people’ have now been added to the picture, and the economic-environmental-*social* framework is now commonplace, the social element of sustainability is still the least explored or elaborated dimension.

The conceptual framework for social sustainability is widely acknowledged as underdeveloped. Writers note the ‘paucity of genuine research within the framework of ‘sustainability’ into what sustains and promotes an equitable and just society’ (McKenzie 2004:11), and the lack of a suitable framework to operationalise the concept of social sustainability (Koning 2001:2). The “environment-economy framing” is still common in sustainable development research, meaning the connections to issues of social inclusion are not understood or integrated and sustainable development decisions are ‘made in the absence of the information and evidence that would inform a socially inclusive policy approach’ (Adebowale 2002:5).

There has been a corresponding neglect of the ‘social bottom line’ in the context of organisational sustainability reporting. Organisations using a sustainability reporting framework rarely have a definition of social sustainability, or a comprehensive strategy for working towards, measuring or reporting on the social dimensions of their activities. As the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) (2000, cited in McKenzie 2004: 6) reports, “in contrast to GRI environmental indicators ... reporting on social performance occurs infrequently and inconsistently across organisations”. It appears that while it has been relatively straightforward for organisations to understand and incorporate an ‘environmental bottom line’ into their traditional focus on the financial bottom line, incorporating a social perspective has been much more challenging. As McKenzie (2004:7) notes, this suggests that in practice at present the ‘triple bottom line’ corresponds less to the ‘overlapping circles model’ of sustainability, than to the concentric model, in which the economic concerns of a company remain the baseline, and environmental, and particularly social elements are subordinate.

Just as writers and researchers within the framework of sustainability have neglected the social dimensions of the concept, so too have much of the social sciences neglected to engage with the concept of sustainability. This is not to say there has been no engagement. As Becker et al (1999:2) point out, social scientists have been involved in the sustainability debate from its beginning, and there is innovative work on sustainability being produced within the social sciences – the authors cite development studies, political ecology and feminist perspectives on environment and development in particular. Further, Eichler (1999:188) writing specifically of the contributions of sociology to the sustainability debate, points to the existence of a body of relevant sociological literature, albeit not in the mainstream of the discourse. The point here is more that sustainability and the environment remain marginal concerns for the social sciences.

While a lack of compatibility between perspectives derived from the natural and social sciences is not uncommon, from the current vantage point it is perhaps surprising that it has taken so long for the sustainability debate to acknowledge ‘the social’, or conversely, for social scientists to acknowledge the relevance of sustainability as a concept. For as Becker et al (1999:4) point out, while sustainability is usually associated with an environmental focus, ‘it nevertheless describes a field of investigation that is based on a society-oriented definition of problems’. Rather than being ‘about’ the environment then, sustainability can be conceived of as a fundamentally sociological question:

sustainability addresses the question of how societies can shape their modes of change in such a way so as to ensure the preconditions of development for future generations ... it refers to the viability of socially shaped relationships between society and nature over long periods of time (Becker et al 1999:4).

Robinson's definition is similar:

Sustainability is ultimately an issue of human behavior, and negotiation over preferred futures, under conditions of deep contingency and uncertainty (Robinson 2004:379-80).

Sustainability then, turns out to be "a topic of research that is *basically social*" (Becker et al 1999:4, emphasis added). As such, it is one within which environmental questions are just one aspect – the concept also requires consideration of social questions. Or more accurately, it demands an analysis of the complex relationship between the two. Neither social nor environmental sustainability can be considered in isolation – "sustainability has to be conceptualized in strictly relational terms" (Becker et al 1999:6). This insight has clear implications for the relationship between the 'natural' and 'social' sciences. While sustainability has largely been a concern only of the former, clearly a more interdisciplinary approach is needed. As Robinson (2004:379) writes, sustainability "is an inherently problem-driven rather than scientific, concept". While scientific analysis is crucial, it is only part of the picture – what is also needed is an understanding of how complex ecological, social and economic systems interact. Scientific or technical solutions will never be sufficient on their own:

...if sustainability is to contribute to a better life for all, then it will be necessary to go beyond technical fixes and begin to address profound issues of opportunity, distribution, material needs, consumption and empowerment. These questions in turn raise important issues of social and political organization and governance (Robinson 2004: 379)

The lack of attention to the social dimensions of sustainability strikes Koning as intriguing, because it sustainability "is so closely linked with well-being, future generations, quality of life" (Koning 2001:5). As Adebowale (2001:5) writes, sustainability has always been related to a core concept of human *need*, so it is "a fundamental contradiction to the principles of sustainable development to believe that it can be achieved without improved social equity and social progress". Stren and Polese (2000:15) put this in policy terms: "without social policy there can be no effective environmental policy". In an attempt to redress this imbalance, in the next section I will suggest an outline of the areas of social policy that might be considered to constitute the social dimension of sustainability.

### **Social sustainability: some emerging definitions**

There have been many attempts to provide a concise definition of social sustainability, though the breadth and depth of ideas potentially signified by the term makes this perhaps almost as difficult as defining 'society'. However, some progress towards a clear definition is necessary in order to both guide strategies for achieving social sustainability and guard against the term's misappropriation.

In considering the definition of social sustainability, the Australian Urban and Regional Development Review in 1995 stressed the importance of social justice, and cited the then Commonwealth Government's 1992 *Social Justice Strategy* to provide conceptual direction. The strategy called for:

a society with an equitable distribution of economic resources; equality of civic, legal and industrial rights; fair and equal access to essential services such as housing, health and education; and opportunity for everyone in terms of personal development and participation in community life and decision-making'. (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992, cited in Australian Urban and Regional Development Review 1995:16)

In a similar vein, Koning (2001:9) suggests that social sustainability refers to “a society that is just, equal, without social exclusion and with a decent quality of life, or livelihood, for all”.

While these are a clear and useful definitions of social *justice* however, social *sustainability* requires a further dimension. I would suggest that the difference between social justice and social sustainability is the ‘futures focus’ that is contained within the sustainability perspective. A desire for sustainability by definition implies a concern with the future as well as the present. It follows that social sustainability requires not only the creation of a just society in the present, but also the establishment of structures and processes that will guarantee lasting and continuing justice. It necessitates the creation of conditions for the maintenance and improvement of a just society for current and future generations.

One writer who attempts to capture both these elements in a definition of social sustainability is McKenzie (2004:12), although he problematises the idea that a singular definition can be reached, and suggests instead that a range of approaches should be adopted to explore the concept. The ‘working definition’ he offers however suggests that social sustainability is ‘a life-enhancing condition within communities, and a process within communities that can achieve that condition’, and that this condition has the following features:

- ‘Equity of access to key services (including health, education, transport, housing and recreation)
- Equity between generations, meaning that future generations will not be disadvantaged by the activities of the current generation
- A system of cultural relations in which the positive aspects of disparate cultures are valued and promoted when it desired by individuals and groups
- Widespread political participation of citizens not only in electoral procedures but also in other areas of political activity, particularly at a local level
- A system for transmitting awareness of social sustainability from one generation to the next
- A sense of community responsibility for maintaining that system of transmission
- Mechanisms for a community to collectively identify its strengths and needs’ (McKenzie, 2004:12).

This definition contains an explicit focus on both current and future conditions – with its emphasis on inter-generational equity and systems for the transmission of knowledge, as well as reference to the need for maintenance of those systems over time. McKenzie’s definition also stresses processes as much as outcomes, recognising that social sustainability is as much about establishing ongoing social and political processes for democratic and participatory change as it is about achieving a ‘state’ of social justice.

Another useful attempt to develop a model of social sustainability has been undertaken by the Western Australian Council of Social Service (WACOSS, 2002). In recognition that ‘the social has tended to fall off the sustainability agenda’, WACOSS is engaged in ongoing work to develop a more detailed and in-depth understanding of the social dimension of sustainability. The model of social sustainability developed by WACOSS is an extremely detailed consideration of the issue and potentially highly useful. The WACOSS definition of social sustainability is:



Social sustainability occurs when the formal and informal processes; systems; structures; and relationships actively support the capacity of current and future generations to create healthy and liveable communities. Socially sustainable communities are equitable, diverse, connected and democratic and provide a good quality of life' (WACOSS, 2002)

The WACOSS model of social sustainability also includes a set of principles which represent the goals of socially sustainable communities, namely:

1. Equity – the community provides equitable opportunities and outcomes for all its members, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable members of the community. While equity is listed as a separate principle, it is such a fundamental component that it can't be separated from the other principles. In this way, equity is a filter through which all other principles are viewed.
2. Diversity – the community promotes and encourages diversity.
3. Interconnectedness – the community provides processes, systems and structures that promote connectedness within and outside the community at the formal, informal and institutional level.
4. Quality of life - the community ensures that basic needs are met and fosters a good quality of life for all members at the individual, group and community level.
5. Democracy and governance – the community provides democratic processes and open and accountable governance structures (WACOSS 2002:7).

The full detail of the model is not included here, but it also includes a set of characteristics and statements providing further detail on what social sustainability means in the context of Western Australian communities, as well as an identification of areas of overlap between social, environmental and economic sustainability and an identification of the core issues of social sustainability. This detailed model is a good example of both an overarching framework and an attempt to develop a locally relevant application of it.

While the difficulty of proposing a singular definition for social sustainability, or a definitive 'checklist' should by now be apparent, a review of the literature does reveal a number of common themes, suggesting there is reasonable agreement about the basic dimensions or features of social sustainability. I propose that a reasonable distillation of these dimensions is as follows: quality of life, equity, inclusion, access, a futures focus and participatory processes. There are obviously overlaps and connections between these dimensions, however I will attempt to outline each separately here:

- ***Quality of life***

While 'quality of life' may be hard to define, and is necessarily subjective, the phrase does provide a useful means of focusing on the qualitative 'human' dimension of social sustainability – we are fundamentally talking about improving the quality of people's lives. The UK Government uses the term 'quality of life' synonymously with sustainable development in the belief that it is more readily understood by the general public. However, it makes the important qualification that 'quality of life for people today must not be achieved at the expense of people in the future' (DETR, 2000:3). The term must also imply a focus on improvements that can be made to the lives of disadvantaged groups in particular, rather than being a means to justify the unsustainable levels of consumption and waste that tend to accompany the pursuit of increased 'quality of life' by already wealthy or privileged groups. Quality of life is a key principle, but one that cannot be pursued in isolation from the next principle – equity.

- **Equity (or social justice)**

Equity is the most commonly mentioned requirement for social sustainability. As high levels of inequity and social division are so clearly linked with conflict and instability, ongoing social inequity must be seen as a major impediment to achieving social sustainability.

Equity must be the overarching guiding principle for any approach to social sustainability. As the AURDR in full (1995:15) put it, “social sustainability will only be achieved through the pursuit of social equity”. The contribution of equity strategies to social sustainability is also stressed by Stren and Polese (2000:16) who argue that “social sustainability is strongly reflected in the degree to which inequalities and social discontinuity are reduced”.

Numerous authors argue that social sustainability must have a redistributive element, that a sustainable community must be an equitable one. McManus (1999:67) for example, argues that any definition of sustainability must include a social justice component, because

without inter- and intra-generational equity the earth becomes a ‘fire-sale’ for conspicuous consumption by a wealthy minority, while people who are poor adopt desperate poverty-alleviation measures which are detrimental to the environment.

The focus on social justice should make it clear that sustainability does not imply an endorsement of current social conditions. On the contrary, it should be recognised that (for example) natural capital stocks have previously been lost to certain groups – particularly indigenous people – and this must be addressed through “a retrospective social justice component” (McManus, 1999:68)

- **Inclusion**

Closely related to the concept of equity is the notion of inclusion. Many authors stress current levels of social exclusion as one of the impediments to achieving social sustainability. Social exclusion refers to the way poverty, deprivation and related social problems work to exclude people both physically (through inequitable access to transport, jobs or public services for example) and socially from the benefits and opportunities afforded by full social and economic participation.

Specific means of tackling social exclusion are therefore an important part of social sustainability strategies. As Stren and Polese (2000:16) argue, social sustainability is “the polar opposite of exclusion, both in territorial and social terms”. Working towards social sustainability then, means focussing on how to better integrate or include disadvantaged communities in economic, social and political life. This is a similar goal to that described in the WACOSS model as the ‘promotion of interconnectedness within and outside the community at the formal, informal and institutional level’.

- **Access**

Working towards social sustainability requires increasing the level of access (to resources, services and opportunities) for those currently experiencing social exclusion. This means addressing inequitable levels of access to all aspects of life, from employment, housing and living conditions, services and facilities, to opportunities for participation in social, cultural and political structures and processes. As noted above, this requires particular attention to be paid to those groups of people whose access to resources and opportunities has historically been compromised.

- **A ‘futures focus’**

Adopting a sustainability perspective implies a concern with the future as well as the present. Social sustainability requires the creation of a just society in the present, *and* the establishment of

structures and processes that will guarantee lasting and continuing justice. Thus social sustainability requires the conditions to be created for the maintenance and improvement of just social conditions for current and future generations. Here we see the focus on the relationship between the needs of the present and the needs of future generations that is central to the Brundtland definition.

- ***Participatory processes***

Working towards social sustainability necessitates the establishment of inclusive, consultative and preferably *participative* processes for citizens' involvement, both in the identification of issues and the development of goals, structures and decision-making processes<sup>6</sup>.

Sustainable development and community participation *must* go hand in hand. You can't have one without the other. You can dress up all sorts of useful things at the local level in the trappings of sustainable development, but unless those useful things are rooted in and permanently nurtured by their host communities they simply won't deliver the long term environmental or social dividends now available to us. (Porritt 1998)

Robinson argues that sustainability is a process, not an end-state to be reached. It might be thought of as: "the emergent property of a conversation about desired futures that is informed by some understanding of the ecological, social and economic consequences of different courses of action" (Robinson 2004:381). If sustainability is largely a social project, and an ongoing process, then it pays to devote some energy to developing improved social processes for enabling this 'conversation about desired futures'. This includes developing "methods of deliberation and decision-making that actively engage the relevant interests and communities in thinking through and deciding upon the kind of future they want to try to create", including "processes that allow diversity to be expressed without creating paralysis" (Robinson 2004: 380).

### **Sustainability as a useful theoretical framework for social science**

Paehlke (2001:1) argues that the full potential of sustainability theory, with its three-dimensional model of society, economy and ecology, has not yet been realised. Its radical potential lies in the serious challenge it issues to the current domination of political discourse by economism, (the view that economic growth is both a reliable measure of human well-being, and the main objective of public policy). The emphasis of a sustainability framework on non-economic values (such as wellbeing, health, housing or education) has the potential to help advance such issues and achieve alternative political and policy outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

For this reason, I suggest that sustainability is indeed a useful theoretical framework for social scientists to explore. I believe there is great scope to harness some of the currency and 'clout' of sustainability discourse in order to progress issues of social justice and equity. If the social dimension of sustainability is developed and promoted, then sustainability becomes not just a

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<sup>6</sup> On this point, there is an enormous amount to be learned from previous community development work, particularly in the non-government sector. This includes both theoretical frameworks and practical community development projects. Diane Warburton's (1998) edited collection *Community and sustainable development: participation in the future* is a good starting point. There is also a highly relevant body of literature on the issues of deliberative democracy and participative processes.

<sup>7</sup> There are obvious links here to the ongoing work on a Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) as an alternative to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) that aims to measure national 'progress' via social welfare or wellbeing and environmental impacts, rather than just economic growth (some of which may represent harm rather than 'progress' anyway). For a recent discussion of the development of the a GPI in an Australian context, see Hamilton, C and Denniss, R (2000).

framework for environmental policies, but a tool for framing progressive *social* policies – policies that, in a conservative political climate, may otherwise not be easy to advance.

Social and political theorists are now beginning to explore the relevance and potential for ‘sustainability’, and to recognise the significant opportunity that exists to contribute to defining and refining sustainability, particularly its social dimensions. Cheney et al (2004:244) argue that one of the most useful contributions social science can make to sustainability is to make values and power relationships explicit. They suggest it is the theoretical traditions concerned with justice and dialogue in particular that have the potential to contribute to the social change potential of sustainability discourse. Becker et al (1999:7) suggest an analytical framework for considering environmental sustainability that focuses on economic processes, social processes, patterns and factors, and decision-making processes and institutional arrangements. As is clear from these suggestions, the central claims of sustainability concern matters of obvious concern to social science.

Until recently, however, the sustainability debate was largely confined to environmental circles, and the social dimensions of sustainability were relatively neglected. The framing and definition of sustainability at an international level sees global environmental problems as the key concern and natural science and system modelling as the epistemological or methodological framework. Within this paradigm, social science is reduced to research on the ‘human factor’ (Becker, 1999: 287). I would suggest that the relative lack of understanding of the social dimension is partly due to the under-involvement of social scientists in the sustainability debate.

The three dimensional model of sustainability itself, and the (belated) placement of ‘the social’ within it, is perhaps indicative of the lack relative neglect of insights from social science in the sustainability debate. As Cheney et al (2004: 228) assert, many social scientists would question the separation of the ‘social’ from economic and environmental dimensions – and in particular would object to the apparent reification of the economy as a separate sphere *outside* or separate from the social. It is perhaps an indication of how pervasive the economic-centred paradigm has become that sustainability was ever able to be conceived as a relationship between ‘environment and economy’ in the first place, as if ‘economy’ is not absolutely a social creation. However, while the three-part model, with its implication that ‘social’ and ‘economic’ constitute discrete and equal spheres, may be analytically dubious, it can be useful in practice. Insisting on a separate sphere for ‘the social’ does ensure that there is a clear place for a focus on non-economic values. It also highlights how conceptually underdeveloped the social determinants of sustainability are.

As Becker et al (1999:9) point out, in the conventional approach to sustainability, the social perspective is very much an afterthought;

...social processes are considered only from the point of view of environmental targets or goals which have been previously defined in non-social terms and to which societal processes are to be adjusted.

In this approach, social science knowledge is relegated to playing an instrumental role – useful only in making technological solutions more effective (1999:9) Clearly, this approach does not come close to realising the full potential of a social science approach to sustainability. The challenge for those working on sustainability only as a ‘scientific’ or technological challenge without acknowledging that it is also a sociological question is clear.

However, just as those working on sustainability from a natural science or technical perspective need to pay more attention to the insights available from the social sciences, so too do social and political theorists need to engage more fully with existing sustainability debates. In fact, Becker et al issue a strong challenge to the social sciences in this regard. While they argue strongly that the natural science-dominated field of sustainability needs to rethink its lack of engagement with social science, they are just as clear that the social sciences also need 'reorienting' if the opportunities inherent in the sustainability debate are to be fully realised. Because the social sciences are focussed on the study of the symbolic rather than the material, of social meanings as distinct from natural or biophysical processes, they are arguably just as limited as the natural sciences in their ability to understand and explain the *intersection of social practices and natural processes* (Becker et al 1999:10-11). If sustainability is neither about nature nor society, but the complex interrelationship between the two, then an approach which conceptualises society 'without nature' (Becker et al 1999:11) is no more appropriate than one which studies the natural world in isolation from the social.

Becker et al suggest a working definition of sustainability for the social sciences that has *analytical, normative* and *political* elements. In an analytical sense, sustainability means that "social development can no longer be viewed without considering its natural prerequisites, but must be inseparably coupled with the reproduction of them" (Becker et al 1999: 5). It thus uncouples development and economic growth. It also questions the assumption that there is an ideal way for human societies to develop, emphasising the "diversity of paths for societal transformation, depending on the particular cultural or political as well as ecological starting points" (Becker et al, 1999:5). The normative features of sustainability are justice for future generations, the subordination of economic goals to social and ecological constraints, gender equity and democratic participation in decision-making processes. The political dimension is inherent in the focus on relationships between people and the environment, and the systems of governance, policy development and institutional arrangements that determine those relationships (Becker et al, 1999, p.5).

### **Conclusion: Sustainability as an integrative concept**

As argued above, sustainability requires the *integration* of different and traditionally separate fields of knowledge. I suggest that this represents the central challenge but also the great potential of sustainability. Its usefulness as a concept lies in its integrating capability. This view is shared by a number of authors. Becker et al stress the need for better *integration* of knowledge from the social and natural sciences. This integrated approach should be 'problem oriented' or 'actor-oriented', and:

... should be committed to a multiplicity of new forms of cross-disciplinary co-operation where various disciplines, each acknowledging the partiality of their perspectives, co-operate in problem-oriented research" (1999:12)

Similarly, Paehlke (2001:11) sees the sustainability framework as having the potential to bring together much of the environment-oriented work currently occurring across many disciplines, from natural sciences to the humanities, and combine it with social justice research, and to do this "in both value-oriented and empirical terms". For Robinson, the integrative nature of sustainability is crucial: "if sustainability is to mean anything, it must act as an integrative concept" (2004:378). This has clear implications for academics in all fields – Robinson (2004:378) argues that sustainability demands new forms of transdisciplinary thinking, a focus on the connections between fields, and the development of new integrative and synthetic concepts, methods and tools.

I suggest that there is a great opportunity, indeed a necessity for social and political theorists to participate in this transdisciplinary thinking. If we adopt the integrating framework of sustainability we can both answer existing questions from a new perspective, and ask new questions of our own fields. In doing so we take our place as critical participants in the ongoing conversations about how to achieve an environmentally and socially sustainable future.

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