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Chapter 7: Pluralism in practice

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7.1 Introduction

Drawing on examples from our experience we explore some of the dimensions of pluralism that typically manifest in sustainability assessment practice. We build on the definition of pluralism provided in the Foreword to this book: 'the different interpretations which exist of a number of key issues relating to the outcomes of sustainability assessment' and other notions of sustainability assessment explored in previous chapters such as effectiveness, time horizons, spatial scales and legal processes.

The practice of sustainability assessment is pluralistic by definition, because sustainability itself is a contested concept (Davison, 2001). Sustainability is a broad concept that encompasses environmental, social and economic dimensions, with the result that different groups and individuals will have different views about the relative importance of these dimensions and the specific issues within them. Furthermore, because the practice of sustainability assessment is still in relatively early stages of evolution so there are also alternative views of what sustainability assessment actually is and what it should be as a tool to promote sustainable decision-making.

All of these issues arise in the conduct of almost any sustainability assessment process, usually manifested as differences in opinion of various stakeholders in the process. Much of this chapter therefore focuses on stakeholder and community engagement in sustainability assessment. It is important to note, however, that stakeholders internal to an organisation conducting a sustainability assessment are at least as important as the external stakeholders with whom the organisation engages. In both internal and external engagement processes, pluralism must be acknowledged, navigated and ultimately embraced. In this chapter we consider how to deal with pluralism in practice and also consider why pluralism is actually essential for effective sustainability assessment practice.

7.2 Context

There is a very broad spectrum, or pluralism, of sustainability assessment practice and processes around the world. The authors of this chapter live and work in Western Australia, and sustainability assessment practices in this particular jurisdiction are described in some detail in Chapter 10. However, since the examples we use to illustrate pluralism in practice come from our jurisdiction, it is worthwhile to briefly note here two forms of sustainability assessment that have been applied in Western Australia, both of which relate to projects rather than to planning or other more strategic forms of decision-making:

- *external* sustainability assessment imposed by Government on new projects proposed by private companies or government agencies for the purposes of

determining whether or not a proposal should be approved and under what conditions; and

- *internal* sustainability assessment conducted by project proponents themselves as part of project planning, usually to select between options, which in turn are often alternative locations for infrastructure.

The first type of sustainability assessment is characterised as ‘external’ sustainability assessment because it is carried out in accordance with formal processes established by a body other than the proponent (in this case the Government), while the second is ‘internal’ sustainability assessment because it is conducted by the proponent prior to any formal assessment process (Pope, 2006). The two types of sustainability assessment can also be distinguished by the decision question each is aiming to answer (Morrison-Saunders and Thérivel, 2006; Pope and Grace, 2006). The first is essentially a threshold question, “*Is this proposal sustainable enough?*” (i.e. governments only wish to approve new development proposals that they consider to be acceptable or 'acceptably sustainable'), while the second is a choice question, “*Which is the most sustainable option?*” (i.e. private companies and other proponents want to choose and proceed with the best alternative available to them).

The processes applied within each of these types of sustainability assessment in order to answer these questions are different, and pluralism manifests in correspondingly slightly different ways. In light of these types of sustainability assessment, we now explore some of the dimensions of pluralism in practice that we mentioned earlier, pluralism in conceptualisations of sustainability; pluralism in values and interests; and pluralism of process expectations.

7.3 Conceptualisations of sustainability

The contestability of the concept of sustainability has been widely acknowledged ever since the term sustainable development was popularised by the Brundtland Commission in 1987 (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). We will not go into this in detail in this chapter, except to note that different people’s understanding of sustainability is generally related to their broader worldview.

For example, one person (perhaps the CEO of a mining company) may believe that sustainability means economic growth and development with appropriate environmental and social safeguards and mitigations being put in place, while another (perhaps a member of an environmental group) might believe that sustainability means protecting the Earth’s natural systems and modifying society and/or the economy as necessary to achieve this imperative. Often this type of difference in viewpoint is manifested through weak and strong conceptions of sustainability (as outlined in Chapter 3). The key point we wish to make though is that it is unlikely that these two people will ever agree on a definition of sustainability, because their opposing views are grounded in very deep beliefs about the world and about life that typically don’t change quickly.

What does this very fundamental example of pluralism mean for the practice of sustainability assessment? This can be particularly clearly illustrated by the first kind of sustainability assessment described above, in which the purpose of the sustainability

assessment is to answer the threshold question, “*Is a proposal sustainable enough?*” One example of such an assessment was the sustainability assessment conducted by the Government of Western Australia in 2002-2003 to determine whether or not the Gorgon Gas Development should be allowed to be located on Barrow Island, a Class A Nature Reserve (akin to a national park, a Class A reserve has the highest conservation status in Western Australia requiring approval from both houses of Parliament in order to change its status such as enabling industrial development to occur within such a reserve). The Gorgon case study is discussed in more detail in Chapter 10, but the important point here is that this process essentially broke down completely as a result of pluralism in understandings of what sustainability means, especially in relation to management of the natural conservation values of Barrow Island.

The Gorgon sustainability assessment was facilitated by a working group composed of representatives of a number of government agencies, some of which were in favour of the development on economic grounds and some of which opposed it on environmental grounds. The process adopted was essentially to obtain and analyse as much environmental, social and economic information as possible, so that this group could determine whether or not the proposal was ‘sustainable enough’ and could make a recommendation to the Government of Western Australia as to whether or not it should be approved. Unfortunately, however, no matter how much information was generated, members of the working group could not agree: the pro-development group members believed that the data demonstrated that the environmental risks associated with the development could be managed adequately to allow the project to go ahead so that the economic benefits could be reaped, while the pro-environment group members believed it demonstrated that the risks were too great.

In a very clear demonstration of pluralism in practice, in the end two separate reports written or commissioned by different state government agencies were sent to Government, one recommending the development be approved, and the other recommending it be rejected. The Government of Western Australia's own worldview apparently aligned most strongly with the pro-development group and the Government determined that the development could be located on Barrow Island (Pope *et al.*, 2005). The proposal subsequently proceeded successfully to the next stage of assessment and decision-making addressing the details of project construction and implementation. What was particularly interesting in this case with respect to pluralism is that different government agencies operating at the State level in Western Australia fell distinctly into the separate ‘pro-development’ and ‘pro-environment’ camps, whereas it might be expected that ‘government’ would represent a unified front.

Sustainability assessment is often described as an integrated process, whereby different considerations across a range of sustainability factors are (or should be) considered in a holistic way (Scrase and Sheate, 2002; Gibson *et al.*, 2005; Bond and Morrison-Saunders, 2011). Actually achieving integration is a constant challenge to the practitioner and the Gorgon example demonstrates how pluralism in a sustainability assessment process can undermine integration. However, we will also see later in the chapter that this was due in large part to the way in which this particular sustainability assessment was framed, and we will consider alternative ways of approaching

sustainability assessment such that pluralism becomes an opportunity to *enhance* sustainability, rather than hinder it.

7.4 Values and interests

The Gorgon example demonstrates how different conceptualisations of sustainability are often underpinned by very different worldviews and values. This can be problematic when the purpose of the sustainability assessment is to determine if a proposal is sustainable enough because this question cannot be answered without a clear and agreed definition of sustainability (a point discussed in more detail by Bond and Morrison-Saunders, 2011). At the time of the Gorgon assessment, Western Australia did not have a definition of sustainability defined in policy. Even when there is a definition, it is usually so broad that there is still considerable room for different interpretations by people with different worldviews. This means that in a threshold decision there are usually winners and losers.

Many sustainability assessment processes, however, are of the second type introduced above, i.e. they involve a choice question and seek to determine which of a series of options is the most sustainable. Different stakeholders will still bring different values and worldviews to the table, but in choice decisions there are ways in which these can be incorporated into the assessment process so that compromises are possible. Two key dimensions of different stakeholders' value positions are the relative significance they place on different issues (for example across a broad sustainability agenda encompassing environmental, social and economic considerations) and what they consider to be acceptable and unacceptable with respect to these issues. We will consider how stakeholder values can be incorporated into sustainability assessments and decision-making processes in different ways in the following sections.

7.4.1 Multi-Criteria Analysis (MCA) for sustainability assessment

It is common when faced with a decision of choice to use decision-aiding techniques such as Multi-Criteria Analysis (MCA), which provide a transparent structure for the decision-making process. MCA techniques are particularly suitable for sustainability assessment processes based on choice because they allow a large number of considerations to be factored in to the decision, and explicitly enable the different value sets of diverse stakeholders to be incorporated (Bell *et al.*, 2003; Rauschmayer and Wittmer, 2006; Stirling, 2006; van den Hove, 2006). In general MCA processes work best when all of the options are broadly acceptable, i.e. none has a 'fatal flaw'.

The basic steps of an MCA process are:

- Development of options;
- Identification of sustainability criteria that form the basis of the decision (environmental, social and economic);
- Evaluation of each option against the criteria (scoring);
- Determination of the relative importance of each criterion to the decision at hand (weighting); and
- Analysis (combining scores and weights to generate an overall performance value so that options can be ranked).

The values of different stakeholders are incorporated primarily in the weighting step of the process. There are many different ways in which weighting can be undertaken, but essentially it involves asking people to assign a numerical value to the importance a particular criterion has for a certain decision. For example, a stakeholder with strong environmental values may say that biodiversity is twice as important as visual impact, while someone living next door to a potential site for some new infrastructure might have exactly the opposite view. It is also important when conducting weighting to consider the impact that each criterion actually has on the decision. For example, biodiversity might be very important but if all the options have a similar impact on biodiversity, then this criterion may not be very significant to this decision, which is about choosing *between* options, notwithstanding that whichever option is chosen it would be imperative to manage biodiversity issues as best as possible.

MCA processes can be run in conjunction with a group of stakeholders or even a large community meeting. There are different ways of handling the weighting data obtained. Usually, every participant is asked to weight the criteria individually. These can then be averaged, or each person's weights can be run separately through the analysis step, or participants can self-nominate to represent a particular perspective (e.g. environmental, community, industry etc) and the weights for all members of each perspective group can then be averaged, run through the analysis and the results compared with results from other groups. In one Western Australian case study, stakeholders were invited to nominate the perspective with which they most identified (e.g. recreational groups, local residents, local businesses, environmental groups, operations and technical advisors) and the weighting was undertaken within each group and the results compared. As well as highlighting areas of difference, this process also found considerable common ground.

Working with stakeholders to determine their values and weighting of sustainability criteria can be very successful in our experience. However, there are some traps to be aware of. Often, a single stakeholder group will be polarised on an issue, with approximately half the people strongly favouring one option and half strongly favouring another, with each half identifying the other's preferred option as their least favoured option. In such cases, the MCA process may identify a 'best' (most acceptable) option as the one that no-one hates, but no-one likes either. A compromise has been struck between everyone's values, but everyone may be unhappy.

7.4.2 What's your bottom line?

Another way to approach a choice-based sustainability assessment is by a process of deliberation and negotiation around the 'bottom lines' or limits of acceptability perceived by different stakeholders. The purpose here is to identify whether any of the options are fatally flawed and to acknowledge that limits of acceptability are not usually hard and fast rules but need to be negotiated in the context of a particular decision situation.

For example, the major electricity utility in Western Australia was seeking to find a suitable site to build a new electrical substation to provide power to a new water treatment plant being constructed by the major water utility. The search area for the site has significant environmental and heritage values, and is visited by significant numbers

of tourists and day-trippers from Perth and is also an important water catchment. A large number of potential sites were investigated and many of these were ruled out for technical reasons, leaving a short-list of three.

As is usually the case in such situations, none of the three sites was ideal. Site 1 would have required the removal of a piece of industrial heritage, which although not a major tourist attraction was considered to be historically significant. Site 2 was well-hidden from the road and therefore out of sight for tourists visiting the areas, but would have required the clearing of significant numbers of mature trees. Site 3 was in a cleared area adjacent to the major tourism attraction of the area and associated museum and potentially visible from a number of walking trails and view points in the area.

A stakeholder reference group was formed to discuss the site options and try to determine which one was best. The group comprised representatives of the local community, heritage agencies, environmental groups and others. The electricity utility also consulted with government regulators and agencies, including those responsible for environmental protection, water and heritage to seek their views. Although a wide range of environmental, social and economic issues were discussed, the three most important issues that emerged were visual impacts (since standard electricity substations are generally considered to be ugly), environmental impacts, and heritage values. Each member of the stakeholder reference group and each government agencies expressed their preferred site and why they believed some potential sites were unacceptable. Their preferences depended upon which of these issues they considered to be the most important, so some chose Site 1, some chose Site 2 and some chose Site 3. Discussions quickly reached a stalemate.

In this case it was decided not to undertake an MCA because it was not clear whether any of the sites were acceptable at all, i.e. the bottom lines or limits of acceptability were not clearly defined. The process therefore became about negotiating the limits of acceptability with the stakeholders, particularly in relation to the three key issues of environment, visual impact and heritage. The electricity utility invited representatives of agencies responsible for these key areas to a joint workshop. At the workshop, each representative had an opportunity to hear the point of view of every other representative. The group collectively agreed that the potential environmental impacts of developing Site 2 and the impacts on significant heritage of developing Site 1 were more unacceptable than the visual impacts associated with Site 3. It was agreed that the visual impacts could be mitigated by careful placement and screening of the substation and Site 3 was therefore selected as the preferred site by the group as a whole. Certain representatives would still have preferred that a different site had been selected but they could accept the group's recommendation.

This is an example of the use of deliberation in sustainability assessment to negotiate acceptability limits. We will return to consider deliberation and its role in sustainability assessment practice in more detail later in this chapter.

7.5 Process expectations

The examples in the previous section, whereby the sustainability assessment process aims to identify the most sustainable location for a development, are probably the most common forms of sustainability assessment currently practised in our jurisdiction of Western Australia, and are often undertaken by providers of public infrastructure such as water, electricity and roads and by local governments. The Government of Western Australia also recently applied a similar approach to engage stakeholders and incorporate their values in the process of identifying a suitable site for a liquefied natural gas processing precinct in the north west of the state (<http://www.dsd.wa.gov.au/7909.aspx>). There are also examples of large resource companies applying sustainability assessment to ensure that a broad range of sustainability considerations are factored into their site selection processes, as an important part of obtaining and retaining their social licence to operate (e.g. URS Australia 2005). These are discussed further in Chapter 10.

Community and stakeholder engagement is usually an essential part of these processes. While this is sometimes limited to a report being released for a period of public comment and review, it is also increasingly common for proponents to convene community fora or workshops in which participants are invited to participate in the sustainability assessment process in a variety of ways. There may be opportunities to comment on the options, suggest new options, identify pros and cons, or to participate in a structured MCA process, for example by contributing to the weighting process as discussed previously.

It is often the case, however, that some members of the community feel that the role offered to them is too limited and that the sustainability assessment itself is too constrained and may demand a larger, more influential role in planning and decision-making processes. These demands may often be in direct conflict with the views of some decision-makers within the proponent organisation who prefer a more top-down, technical and expert-driven approach to decision-making, with no community engagement at all. The sustainability assessment practitioner may therefore find himself/herself trying to work with pluralism of views about the extent to which stakeholders and the broader community should be involved in decision-making and sustainability assessment (see Fuller 1999, p56 for a summary of typical stakeholder expectations in impact assessment).

One of the most common complaints of frustrated community members and other stakeholders is that the scope of the sustainability assessment is too narrow and that too many important, strategic decisions have already been made before the sustainability assessment commences. For example, in a sustainability assessment to determine the best route for a road, people may ask questions such as:

“Why does the road have to go in this area? Or even, why do we need this road at all? Has rail been considered? What about better public transport to encourage people not to drive?”

It is also often pointed out that none of the options under consideration may really be sustainable (for example they may all have negative impacts on biodiversity), and that

in fact the sustainability assessment is not about finding the most sustainable option but the least unsustainable one. There is thus pluralism in expectations of the sustainability assessment process (Scanlon and Davis, 2011).

In many cases, it is an unfortunate reality that key decisions that shape the sustainability assessment process will indeed have already been made, such as the need for the new road in the first place. These decisions may often be the result of planning processes undertaken many years ago, before sustainability was a consideration and before community engagement became common. For example, in the city of Perth, Western Australia some of the roads currently being considered for construction first appeared on land-use plans formulated in the 1950s. One of these is currently the subject of a highly controversial assessment process restricted to identifying the best alignment of the road. Even if communities and stakeholders were engaged in these earlier, strategic planning decisions, the people involved were probably not the same people who are involved in the latest round of consultation and they don't necessarily have the same views.

The decision to build a new road may also simply reflect the mandate of the government agency responsible. For example a department of planning or a department of transport may be open to wide-ranging options for addressing mobility issues (e.g. railways, public transport, urban renewal and transformation) whereas a highways department will only consider road-related options, often involving construction of new roadways.

Plurality of expectations is a very real challenge for sustainability assessment practitioners. It is very important that expectations are managed as much as possible by clearly drawing the boundaries of the sustainability assessment, explaining the decisions already made and clearly defining the opportunities for involvement at the very commencement of the sustainability assessment. People then have a choice of contributing their views and values to the sustainability assessment at hand, or to oppose the project no matter which site or route is chosen, by challenging the decision-making that has gone before through activism or lobbying. Ideally, though, sustainability assessment with meaningful community and stakeholder engagement would be part of strategic planning decisions as well as project-level decisions. We discuss this further in the next section.

7.6 Embracing pluralism in sustainability assessment

The previous discussion has focused predominantly on the challenges posed by various forms of pluralism in the practice of sustainability assessment. We have also alluded to ways in which pluralism can be managed, for example by clear framing and boundary setting, by more strategic applications of sustainability assessment and by deliberation, and each makes important contributions to learning and understanding. In this section, we take this further and explore these approaches in more detail, not just as ways to manage potentially difficult situations but ways to enhance the practice of sustainability assessment, and ultimately to contribute to better, more sustainable decisions.

7.6.1 Strategic approaches to sustainability assessment

In practice, the narrower the scope or frame of the sustainability assessment the more limited are the opportunities to deliver sustainable outcomes through the sustainability assessment process (Pope and Grace, 2006). Previously we posed two fundamental decision questions (threshold and choice) corresponding to external and internal sustainability assessment approaches respectively. However, for choice type decisions, a spectrum of decision questions that vary in their level of 'strategicness' can be conceptualised (Morrison-Saunders and Thérivel, 2006; Hacking and Guthrie, 2008). The following example discusses this in relation to spatial planning and transport.

If the decision question is “*What is the most sustainable (least unsustainable) route for the new road?*”, the sustainability assessment will be limited to comparing the impacts of the different route options, most of which can be expected to be negative impacts (e.g. loss of biodiversity, noise impacts, congestion and air pollution, visual impacts etc) and finding the ‘least worst’ option. It is likely that community forums will raise questions about the sustainability of cars as a form of transport, and spatial planning based on ever-expanding urban sprawl that requires more and more roads, but that they will be told that these issues are outside the scope of the sustainability assessment. It is also likely that pluralism in views will result in conflict that can only be resolved by someone winning and someone losing, or by compromises and trade-offs that leave everyone feeling cheated.

If, however, the question is framed as “*What is the most sustainable way to ensure an accessible city?*” then the sustainability assessment process is quite different. The options identified could still include roads, but might also look at improved public transport, or high density living where people can walk to amenities rather than driving. The opportunity for more innovative and sustainable outcomes is greatly enhanced. The process is likely to be far more positive, with participants all aligned with the common vision of a more accessible city. They will probably disagree on the best way to achieve this vision (pluralism will still be alive and well) but the process is likely to be more creative and focused on positive synergies rather than trade-offs between a range of unappealing options, with the overall outcome being far greater levels of community acceptance of the decisions.

Ideally, the framing or boundaries of the discourse would be established collaboratively whereby everything that is of concern or interest to the community is included and nothing is ‘outside the scope’ (Monnikhof and Edelenbos, 2001; Doelle and Sinclair, 2006). People are also more likely to participate in this broader sustainability assessment process if it is broadly and positively framed rather than deciding to oppose the proposal through other means. While this ideal may not always be attainable in practice, the key to success as a sustainability assessment practitioner is to push practice as high up the strategic spectrum as circumstances permit (i.e. avoid the trap of asking too narrow a decision question).

7.6.2 Deliberation in sustainability assessment

In the earlier example of the electricity substation we introduced the idea of deliberation in sustainability assessment. Deliberation is a highly contested term (Elster, 1998), much like sustainability itself, but in simple terms, deliberation means that a group of people, bringing a plurality of views to the table, “*carefully examine a problem and*

arrive at a well reasoned solution after a period of inclusive, respectful consideration of diverse points of view” (Gastil and Black, 2008, p.2).

In our example, the deliberative process was quite modest, with just a few key stakeholders in the room, and its purpose was to enable each stakeholder to understand the positions and views of the others, to determine which bottom lines or acceptability limits could be negotiated. While this proved a useful exercise that achieved its purpose, the potential of deliberative approaches to sustainability assessment extends much further into an exploration not just of different views and values, but the beliefs (or worldviews) that underpin them (Gundersen, 1995). This process is sometimes also called ‘dialogue’ following the ancient Greek tradition (Roberts, 2002).

The Western view of decision-making leans towards open, transparent and participative democratic processes, as espoused in international best practice principles for impact assessment such as IAIA (1999). Deliberation or dialogue is at the heart of the notion of deliberative democracy, which has a political dimension and also emphasises the empowerment of the general public in decision-making. The tenets of deliberative democracy have been described as (Hartz-Karp and Pope, 2011):

- representativeness, meaning that the people deliberating and making decisions are ordinary people representative of a society’s demographic (who are likely to bring a pluralism of views);
- deliberativeness, meaning that they engage in deliberations as we have defined above, that respect and explore plurality; and
- influence, meaning that the decisions reached by this group have real influence over policy or decision-making.

Deliberative democratic approaches to sustainability assessment are potentially better equipped to embrace pluralism than other more technical approaches such as MCA discussed earlier.

Even without all the features of deliberative democratic approaches such as representativeness or influence, deliberation or dialogue can be of enormous value when applied as part of a sustainability assessment process. It can facilitate the resolution of issues and the emergence of new ideas or solutions to challenging decision-making situations. This was demonstrated in another sustainability assessment undertaken in Western Australia, the assessment of the South West Yarragadee (SWY) Water Supply Development conducted in 2004-2006.

Very simply, the proposal here was to extract 45 GL/day of groundwater from the Yarragadee aquifer in the south west of the State and pump it 300km to the capital city of Perth to supplement the integrated water supply (Strategen, 2006). The proposal was opposed by small communities in the south west which were not connected to the integrated system and had to rely on small town water supplies that were often unreliable in summer. Their concern was the loss of potential future uses for the water for private initiatives (e.g. an orchard or a dairy) in their own region.

The sustainability assessment process for the SWY proposal was conducted before the proposal was finalised, which meant that there was an opportunity to refine the proposal

through the sustainability assessment to make it more sustainable. The process was coordinated by a working group comprising the proponent and its consultants who were responsible for environmental, social and economic studies of the proposal. Pluralism was evident amongst the group from the beginning, and the views of the social and economic consultants were particularly opposing. The economic analysis showed that the best economic use of water was within an integrated system, which in terms of the SWY proposal meant the economic analysis favoured the proposal to send the water to Perth (the capital of Western Australia 300km to the north). On the other hand, the qualitative social impact assessment highlighted the sense of 'futures foregone' experienced by the local communities in the south west, which was of concern to the decision-makers and perceived to indicate a lack of social sustainability of the proposal.

The members of the working group all brought very different backgrounds and perspectives on the issue but were willing to talk and try to understand each others' views and the underlying reasons for these views. Through this process of deliberation it became clear that there was a solution that would meet both the social and the economic objectives, and that was to extend the integrated water supply system to the south west towns at the same time that the SWY aquifer was developed. Therefore, the economic value of the water would be maximised and the local communities would have a reliable supply of water and not feel that this was being unfairly taken away from them. In this way, the sustainability assessment for the SWY proposal integrated competing considerations in a way that the Gorgon assessment did not, and the result was a more sustainable proposal, which all members of the working group supported.

We believe that deliberation can therefore not only resolve conflicts that can arise from pluralism in sustainability assessment, but can be generative, facilitating the creation of more sustainable proposals than originally conceived. But even more fundamentally, we believe that deliberation about sustainability in sustainability assessment processes can facilitate deep learning that extends beyond just the decision at hand. We explore this in the following section.

7.6.3 Sustainability assessment as a learning process

There are many different kinds of learning that can occur through sustainability assessment processes. Environmental, social and economic studies are typically undertaken and this information is provided to the decision-makers. Since the information is often new, the decision-makers learn something by reading it. This practical type of learning has been called instrumental learning (Sinclair *et al.*, 2008). The type of learning that occurred within the project team in the SWY case, whereby the concept of the proposal was redefined, went beyond instrumental learning and could be considered a form of conceptual learning (Glasbergen, 1996).

However, learning can also be even more profound than this. In their analysis of policy learning in EIA, Sinclair and Diduck (2001) use the idea of 'adult transformative learning' that occurs through deliberation or dialogue as we have described them, when people representing a plurality of views come together to address a problem or a decision. This can manifest not just in a new way of thinking about the decision at hand, as occurred in the sustainability assessment process for the SWY proposal, but a new way of thinking about sustainability and about the world.

We believe that sustainability assessment provides the perfect situation to promote this kind of *transformative learning*, precisely because of the pluralism that is so much part of the character of sustainability assessment. In fact sustainability assessment can be described as a process of decision-making through pluralism. Sustainability as the concept at the heart of sustainability assessment brings with it ambiguity and inherent tensions, and each decision-making situation brings these into sharp relief within a particular context. Sustainability assessment requires multi-disciplinary teams, whose members bring plurality of expertise, backgrounds and beliefs to the process. In a respectful, non-confrontational environment, it is the plurality itself that provides the tensions that allow beliefs to be challenged and creative solutions to emerge.

The potential of sustainability assessment as a forum for learning through plurality is perhaps summed up best by a government participant in the SWY process, who said (Pope 2007, p.269):

“This process has started me thinking more deeply about some of those bigger issues...it’s just made me think differently about it and more deeply. If it can achieve that for me, just working on one little project in our little corner of the world, if we can encourage more of it on other big initiatives and strategic projects and get more and more people involved in looking at things that way, it is going to have an impact.”

7.7 Conclusion

Pluralism lies at the very heart of sustainability assessment practice. As practitioners, we must not just acknowledge pluralism but embrace it is an essential aspect of our practice. The key learnings arising from our experiences with sustainability assessment that future practitioners might find useful are:

- Pluralism in the practice of sustainability assessment arises in many forms, including those we have discussed in this chapter, i.e. conceptualisations of sustainability, values and interests, and process expectations;
- Understanding of pluralism should inform the design of sustainability assessment processes to ensure that expectations are managed and that different views and values are reflected in the process and the decision;
- Decision questions that are as open and strategic as possible will maximise constructive stakeholder participation and the acceptance of decision outcomes by a range of stakeholders, as well as delivering more sustainable outcomes;
- Deliberative sustainability assessment processes, based upon respectful dialogue and a willingness to challenge and explore beliefs and assumptions can facilitate not just better decisions but transformative learning for sustainability.

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