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**Bond, A., Morrison-Saunders, A. and Howitt, R. (2013)
Conclusions. In: Bond, A., Morrison-Saunders, A. and Howitt, R.,
(eds.) Sustainability Assessment Pluralism, Practice and
Progress. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group,
Oxon, UK, pp. 263-270.**

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Chapter 17: Conclusions

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17.1 Introduction

Sustainability assessment is a vibrant and engaging activity that seeks direct actions and decisions towards sustainability. It can be applied to a wide range of activities and involves a broad spectrum of stakeholders. Sustainability assessment is challenging with respect to theory, process and practice. But equally it is a rewarding and essential undertaking to initiate the necessary shift towards positive sustainability behaviours.

Like the fields of impact assessment from which it builds, sustainability assessment is intended to change things. Fundamentally, it is a way of evaluating decisions, projects and processes that allows decision makers in governments, companies and communities to secure outcomes and opportunities that shift a range of human actions away from paths of demonstrably unsustainable – and therefore inappropriate – relationships with and impacts on natural and social systems. Given the dynamics of both natural and human systems, of course, sustainability assessment cannot give simple guarantees that a particular decision, project or proposal will be ‘sustainable’. Not only does the context of pluralism mean that the content of concepts such as ‘sustainability’ will always be socially, culturally and politically contested, but also the goal of sustainability itself is a moving target. Sustainability is not a state that once achieved could be checked off as ‘done’ and left behind. Sustainability assessment offers tools and processes to monitor the extent to which human decisions are producing or contributing to unsustainability, and the efficacy of efforts to be sustainable at various spatial and temporal scales specified as relevant in a particular context.

In this chapter we reflect on the previous sixteen chapters of the book (and the preface) and consider what is offered in terms of helping to design a better sustainability assessment process. The book is presented in four distinct parts:

- the first part explained why sustainability assessment is needed and what theoretical frameworks might be considered when evaluating practice;
- the second part examined pluralism, arguing that pluralism was a critical issue in conducting sustainability assessment;
- the third part examined practice but, in doing so, first needed to establish a framework against which practice could be judged. The framework drew on parts 1 and 2 of the book;
- the final part addressed key challenges and problems facing sustainability assessment and discusses what might be needed to secure improved practice in this important field of impact assessment and policy making.

To frame the remainder of this chapter, we raise a number of questions intended to guide critical reflection on the pluralism of sustainability assessment and the contributions made in this book:

- 1) Did the focus on pluralism throughout this book adequately represent the key issues that need to be taken into account when evaluating sustainability assessment practice?

- 2) How robust is the evaluation framework developed in chapter 8 for judging (and improving) sustainability assessment procedures and practices worldwide?
- 3) To what extent are the countries evaluated in part 3 of the book sufficiently representative of practice (this is important because it is problems identified with this sample of four countries that has led to the recommendations for improvement in part 4)?
- 4) What, key challenges need to be considered when designing or implementing sustainability assessments?
- 5) Are the recommendations made in part 4 realistic and helpful for advancing the theory, processes and practice of sustainability assessment?

The rest of this chapter is structured around answering these questions. One issue we did consider is the fact that, despite being a book on sustainability assessment, we do not set out a particular process to follow. By way of contrast, text books on Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), Social Impact Assessment (SIA) or Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) commonly set out a specific process that if followed should produce an adequate assessment outcome (see, for example, Wathern, 1988, p.18; Canter, 1996, p. 38; Becker, 1997, p.7-8; Becker and Vanclay, 2003, p.8-9; Glasson *et al.*, 2005, p.4; Fischer, 2007, p.4; Hanna, 2009, p. 9-13). Nowhere does our book prescribe for practitioners how a sustainability assessment should be executed, nor what stages should be included. This was a deliberate decision rather than an accidental oversight or omission. We debated this matter intently when proposing and designing the book, and judged it would be inappropriate and misleading to offer up a 'model -based' approach to sustainability assessment. There is no checklist of questions, methods and steps that will work in all circumstances because the specific context of any assessment exercise matters. Our decision was taken because pluralism is central to good sustainability assessment. In our view, this extends not only to views and beliefs about sustainability, but also to governance processes, and sustainability assessment practice, including whether it should be legally mandated or voluntary. Different people rightly will have different views on how sustainability assessment should be realised. Ultimately, too, the specific detail of an approach, we believe, is context-specific and our judgement is that the research drawn into the discussion in this book convincingly demonstrates this understanding is correct.

17.2 The focus on pluralism

There is a clear focus on pluralism throughout this book. This was driven by our understanding, developed on the basis of our experience in doing impact and sustainability assessment research in a variety of settings over the past twenty years, that people matter. Considering pluralism to be central to successful decision-making acknowledges that there are different views and beliefs about what decisions should be, and what constitutes a successful decision-making process. Such differences, of course, are not just because different people might be unevenly affected by a particular project. Cultural differences, for example, constitute what is an appropriate (and sustainable) relationship between human society and the natural world; they constitute the ethical dimensions of intergenerational responsibility differently; they develop profoundly different understandings of risk, responsibility and value. And sustainability assessment must address that pluralism as the foundation for making judgements and decisions.

This understanding is in step with the increasing emphasis on public participation and community engagement that pervades public policy making around the globe, and can be

traced back to seminal publications identifying different levels of participation (see, in particular, Arnstein, 1969) which improved understanding of the extent to which assessment and decision-making practices were marginalising citizens. There was an increasing realisation that when decision-making was left as the dominion of the political, economic and professional elites who were typically insensitive to the rights and hopes of populations directly affected by their decisions, the decision processes themselves were producing bad decisions and negative impacts in terms of social, environmental and sustainability outcomes (Vanclay, 2004). This has led to much greater emphasis on earlier, and better public engagement, particularly within decision making tools such as EIA, SIA and SEA.

Our focus on pluralism is complimented by our adoption of a constructivist theory of knowledge that holds that people generate knowledge and meaning from their shared (and contested) experiences and beliefs. While other theories of knowledge exist, in making judgements and decisions based on sustainability assessments, it is in working through the issues that arise from the shared and contested fields of experience and beliefs that the hard work needs to be done. That capitalist economies and large scale economic decisions by governments and international agencies tend to be driven by materialism (i.e. values and understandings about the generation and distribution of wealth) is part of the sustainability conundrum. Indeed, diversity of ways of knowing is precisely part of the pluralism the book addresses.

17.3 A robust evaluation framework

The evaluation framework developed in chapter 8 is a framework for thinking about effectiveness for assessment processes. Whilst it has been developed based on a review of existing literature, it is very much a research-informed judgement at a point in time. We accept that others have different opinions and reach different conclusion, and that our own knowledge, understanding and conclusions are likely to change over time as we learn more about sustainability assessment and as the challenge of sustainability changes over time. The questions we have asked have collated a significant number of ideas for each category of effectiveness, and therefore allow some level of interpretation by the authors of the practice chapters (chapters 9-12). Sustainability assessment practice is so different in the jurisdictions covered in this book, that we considered providing such a framework was the only approach that would allow any degree of cross comparison.

The application of effectiveness criteria also suggest some anticipated ideal outcome, and therefore is judgemental when applied. Even when trying to take a constructivist approach, this means imposing some level of framing on those who apply the framework. The most obvious example in the framework is the consideration of normative effectiveness to encompass the imperatives of sustainability set out by Gibson in chapter 1. The notion of 'norms' suggest thinking which is acknowledged or accepted in some way, but at the same time, accepting the importance of pluralism suggests that these norms vary between individuals and organisations. Our framework imposes our-norms (as editors) – which is, of course, at odds with an argument that sustainability goals should be broadly agreed by stakeholders at the outset. We acknowledge this apparent paradox and weakness. To be able to compare and appraise practice at all does require some means of evaluation, and when undertaken in a consistent way, this does need an approach like that we have taken.

Moving forward in sustainability assessment certainly requires practitioners to make judgements about the effectiveness of specific sustainability assessment approaches, reports and recommendations. The framework developed here offers a benchmark from which to

judge and to act. The framework itself will not resolve divergent theories of knowledge, but it identifies important questions and frames values and principles in a way that facilitates debate across differences. In this way, the framework is intended to facilitate communication, rather than to present a once-and-forever solution.

So, is the framework robust? We would argue it is a sound means for comparison, but would not make claims that it allows us to draw definitive conclusions as to the ‘effectiveness’ of any process to which it applies. It is a useful device to identify important aspects which should be considered in process design; it is a thought-starter for deliberation by sustainability assessment stakeholders.

17.4 Representing sustainability assessment practice

The argument was made early in the book that the four jurisdictions discussed in part 3 were included because they represented examples of sustainability assessment practice at the time of writing. However, when reflecting on this argument and based on the practice the chapters describe, our initial proposition seems rather tenuous. In England, there is a legal requirement for sustainability appraisal, and in Western Australia there have been voluntary processes conducted under the name of sustainability assessment. In Canada, practice is variable between the different territories, which makes it complicated to generalise about ‘Canadian practice’. In South Africa, the fact that sustainability assessment is conducted is based on an interpretation of the existing laws in the country to the extent that they encompass sustainability principles. Similar claims can probably be made for other countries - after all, any of the impact assessment tools in use worldwide can arguably be considered to be directed towards sustainable development at some level. The truth is, therefore, that some of the examples of practice have been identified because previous academic research has framed practice in those localities as sustainability assessment, whereas in other countries where impact assessment practice may also be described in similar terms, equivalent claims have yet to be publicly declared.

So, the comparison in chapters 9-12 is useful, but should not be taken to be representative of the breadth and depth of sustainability assessment undertakings worldwide. We look forward to future discussion of additional examples of good and improving practice in other jurisdictions (including international arenas), and would encourage readers to use the framework offered here to develop their own systematic approach to reviewing the effectiveness of impact assessment and related processes as a basis for securing more sustainable outcomes in public decision making.

17.5 What key challenges face sustainability assessment?

In the final part of the book, we have aimed to articulate the most significant challenges facing sustainability assessment at this point of its development, and to frame discussion of those challenges in the light of the demands of pluralism and practice. The structure (and hence content to a large extent) of Part 4 of the book was planned before any of the other Parts were written. This did not mean that we had already reached our own conclusions and recommendations on sustainability assessment in isolation from the research and thinking presented in the book. Simply, such an approach was necessitated by the contractual arrangements involved in preparing a book for publication, where some certainty is needed about authors, content and length. So in advance, we had decided that the key areas that needed attention to improve practice would be engagement and learning, better process and

integration into decision making process (so the sustainability assessment was influential in some way).

The attention to engagement and learning is, on reflection, a choice we are very happy with. These chapters acknowledge the importance of accommodating pluralism, and also the imperfections in any assessment process, which are only likely to get better if practitioners actively acknowledge the need to learn how to do them better, and to correct mistakes that will inevitably be made along the way. The chapter on process allowed us to identify the inter-linkages between the various effectiveness criteria, and this, to an extent justified the focus on engagement and learning. It also indicated that good process design is crucial to achieving good process. The chapter on integration illustrates how context-dependent sustainability assessment is. Once the principles we developed in the book are taken forward to consider exactly how a process might integrate with decision-making, then many decisions will already have been made, in particular, about the sustainability framing that will be adopted.

We feel our choice in framing the key challenges has been largely vindicated, but we also recognise that rapid development in fields as diverse as economic crisis, climate risk and natural hazards, means that new challenges to the practice and application of sustainability assessment will emerge rapidly in the future. We therefore encourage readers to reflect on what they judge might be missing from Part 4 in terms appropriate to their own circumstances in time and space, their own cultural, social, political and environmental setting. We would be delighted to respond to debate on their conclusions, but at this point we conclude that we would not have included any other chapters based on the information gained on practice. In the future, as we learn more, this might change.

17.6 Are the recommendations made in part 4 realistic?

There is a danger, when making recommendations, to expect so much to be achieved through the process of sustainability assessment, that transactive effectiveness will not be achieved. The reality of the modern world is that assessment costs money and takes time, and there will never be enough money or enough time to conduct the level of assessment that might be considered ideal. It is also true that levels of uncertainty in economic, environmental and political realms is going to mean that any specific recommendations about what might be 'ideal' in any given setting will be both hard to pin down, and contested by multiple stakeholders.

Our recommendations no doubt have financial implications in the short term for proponents and practitioners, relative to traditional forms of impact assessment. Good engagement is not free, but the key principles are to be transparent and inclusive – and these principles don't cost money. We believe that the systemic benefits from improved sustainability assessment practices (for both natural and human systems) are substantial, demonstrable and desirable – and that approaches can be found which reduce the financial burdens that might arise for particular stakeholders (e.g. proponents or governments). It is, in any case, a reasonable societal expectation that a project, plan or policy, which is ultimately materialistic (as they often are), should be required and should expect to pay for an appropriate level of engagement, and should be held accountable for its implications for future consequences. Our recommendations relating to learning rely heavily on reflection, and in practitioners, proponents, communities and researchers being prepared to take the appropriate actions arising from their reflections. That reflection will sometimes translate into doing things

differently in the next sustainability assessment, but we have also included an expectation that the reflection can also lead to remediation of unforeseen impacts, through some forms of adaptive management, and even to ongoing assessment tasks or processes to some extent. In recognising the significance for sustainability of pluralism, the urgent need for systems that are adaptive to new insights across cultural diversity has been recognised in this book, to counter political economic and legislative systems previously predicated on denying and devaluing the importance of ecological and cultural diversity. The costs of such adaptation might be unforeseen, but our argument is that it is not unreasonable – indeed, in reorienting societies towards sustainability, they may be simple necessities. A parallel might be considered from the consumer society in which we live. If we purchase a (reasonably expensive) good, we expect some form of product support and a guarantee. If something goes wrong, then the guarantee needs to be honoured, and the manufacturer has to embed the price of honouring the guarantee into the price charged for the good. The same principle can surely be applied when considering, for example, resource extraction, with impact and sustainability assessment providing the information on which warranties are based and executed.

For us as editors, the bottom line is that if sustainability assessment is going to lead to legitimate and successful decisions, the sustainability assessment needs to be properly resourced. But resources alone are insufficient to secure and support the changes needed. Nor is better practice in sustainability assessment. This book has demonstrated just how important a shift in societal and institutional understanding of sustainability principles and the development of robust, effective and affordable sustainability assessment process as a normal part of normal decision making in complex pluralist human systems are. It has offered readers an opportunity to consider basic principles, important experiences, effective methods and significant challenges to integrate into emerging practice. We are grateful to our contributors for their work in shaping our thinking and offering discursive openings for readers to pursue their own debates and interests. We look forward to seeing the results of such discourses in the future, and having to respond to them in the future.

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