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Sustainability Assessment and Local Government: Achieving Innovation through Practitioner Networks

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ABSTRACT A strategic approach to local sustainability assessment requires that sustainability implications of proposed policies, plans and programmes are evaluated. These evaluations need to critically consider organizational structures, processes and outcomes. The establishment of ‘communities of practice’, groups or networks of practitioners with shared interests, is a helpful mechanism for facilitating change in a wide range of organizations. This paper analyses the potential for communities of practice to contribute to the implementation of sustainability assessments by local government. Focusing on Sutherland Shire Council in Sydney, Australia, this paper presents the findings of a project that engaged practitioners in the design of a sustainability assessment system. The establishment of communities of practice helped

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to break down the 'silos' created by institutional divides within local government, but this approach also raises challenges in maintaining momentum and overcoming political agendas.

Introduction

It has been widely recognized that local governments are of central importance to the achievement of global sustainability. Of the 2509 actions identified in *Agenda 21* for achieving greater sustainability, around two-thirds require the active involvement of local government (Neil et al., 2002). In Australia, local councils have been at the forefront of efforts to implement sustainability through a diverse array of initiatives including, inter alia, Natural Heritage Trust projects, Landcare projects, Cities for Climate Change programmes, state-of-the-environment reporting and triple-bottom-line reporting. Recognizing their importance, the government of Australia, as part of its national sustainable development policy, requires that all local government authorities incorporate sustainable development strategies in their forward plans.

Despite all the worthy local initiatives that are being implemented, a core challenge to the achievement of greater local sustainability remains the fragmentation of policy-making and implementation (Sauvage & Smith, 2004; Morrison et al., 2004). Procedures need to be in place to integrate sustainability principles and community commitments into council policy formation, planning and actions. This requires that units within local councils work together to develop and implement sustainability assessment frameworks that promote coordinated action across local council departments and between levels of decision-making within council.

New forms of sustainability assessment tools tends to be 'objectives led', that is, the tools are aimed at achieving particular sustainability outcomes, and assessment techniques are based on practices borrowed from policy analysis/appraisal (Pope et al., 2004). This is in contrast to more conventional environmental assessments that focus on impact analysis. Both approaches are being used to achieve local sustainability, but they neglect critical consideration of organizational structures and processes, which can support or hinder the achievement of sustainability objectives.

Key organizational issues concern the adequacy of capacity at an individual and organizational level, coordination between different areas within councils, and council commitment. The development of supporting processes for achieving local sustainability often needs to go hand in hand with broader cultural change that supports organizational learning and behaviour change. A useful approach to addressing organizational change and learning is 'communities of practice', that is groups of committed people who work together to achieve a common goal of change in a particular sphere. Considerable work has been done on the value of communities of practice for the effective functioning of private firms committed to learning and continuous improvement (Wenger, 1998; 2001). The approach has direct relevance to achieving local sustainability as implemented by local councils.

In the sections below, we provide a brief overview of the core concepts behind ‘communities of practice’ and ‘organizational learning’, outline the methods used to develop the sustainability assessment processes in Sutherland, and provide some preliminary results of the work to date with respect to the sustainability guidelines and procedures that are being developed.

Communities of Practice and Organizational Change

Knowledge within any organization is diverse; and this diversity can be the source of innovation and change to address new and complex challenges, such as those posed by local sustainability. For example, while specific areas within local government often have formal responsibility for promoting sustainability objectives, the relevant knowledge is held by a wide range of professionals within the organization. Communities of practice allow people committed to addressing a particular issue or challenge to come together, regardless of their organizational affiliation, to collectively learn and progress organizational goals (Wenger, 1998). These communities are based on commitment to a change process, rather than affiliation to organizational units. Because communities of practice grow out of commitment to an issue, they respond to challenges in a manner that is their own, and thus tend to produce context-specific responses tailored to the organization (Wenger, 1998).

Communities of practice facilitate the building of a ‘learning organization’ that encourages dialogues between members to discover insights not attainable individually (Senge, 1990, p. 11). These dialogues are often most successful when there is a facilitator, at least in the beginning phases, who maintains a commitment to the process, rather than to a particular cause or interest (Bohm, 1996, p. 11). The facilitator can help the group to mediate interests, clarify assumptions and develop options, but ultimately their core task is to work themselves out of a job and create a community that is self-organizing.

One of the primary objectives of communities of practice is to reflect on the goals of their organization and the attendant social relations. This can either lead to the reinforcement of these goals, or to their critical review and eventual adaptation. For local councils this attention to organizational goals, social relations and the wider context is an advantage. The varied experiences and knowledge of council officers who may choose to participate in communities of practice help to ensure that the ideas and practices emanating from them reflect a wide range of social relationships and needs within the community.

In our experience, the informality of communities of practice means that they tend to have layers and overlapping communities (see Figure 1). At the core are people who are actively and regularly involved, the community of practice. Then there are those who provide input from the ‘fringes’, either through occasional participation in the group, or through discussions with active members (interacting groups and individuals). In time the increased knowledge of those directly involved in the community of practice spreads out to the wider organization through the tools and the processes they develop, shown by the permeable boundaries between groups in

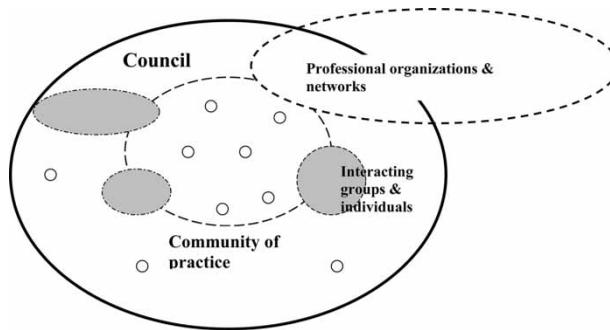


Figure 1. Community-of-practice linkages to the internal and external groups and professional networks

Figure 1. Some of this spread of knowledge occurs informally through the networks of the individuals. But some of the knowledge dispersion is more formalized, through professional associations, gatherings of colleagues, and formal reporting. There is also an ongoing inflow of information and ideas about organizational direction and goals, represented by the overlapping circles.

In our context, communities of practice support organizational learning and contribute to greater local sustainability. Therefore, the goals of the emergent assessment process are to be:

- *Strategic*: focus on changing systems and policies that spread learning and knowledge throughout the organization.
- *Integrative*: use integrating mechanisms to link the organization horizontally (between departments) and vertically (across organizational hierarchies).
- *Learning oriented*: enable learning across organizational boundaries.
- *Systemic*: encourage systems thinking to develop an understanding of the relationships and structures that affect decision-making with corporate values, and responsiveness to internal and external pressures.
- *Networked*: facilitate open learning within the organization and beyond its boundaries (adapted from James, 2002).

In the sections below we explore whether the communities-of-practice approach assisted Sutherland Shire Council to achieve these goals of a learning organization, and the strengths and weaknesses of the approach for advancing the local sustainability agenda.

Enhancing Local Sustainability: Case Study of Sutherland Shire Council

Sutherland Shire Council is located in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) on the southern shores of Australia's largest city, Sydney (see Figure 2). The 335-km² area that the council covers is very diverse, including four national parks, extensive residential areas and some commercial and

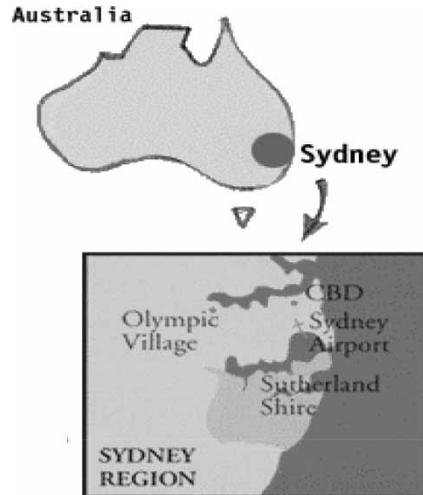


Figure 2. Location of Sutherland Shire Council, NSW.

industrial areas. It is a large council with over 1100 staff serving a population of approximately 214,400 people. This presents some interesting challenges when trying to improve sustainability outcomes through organizational learning and change, given the large number of work areas (units) within the council and the wide range of services and activities in which they are involved.

The overall aim of the Sutherland initiative is to collaboratively develop sustainability assessment processes with a range of senior and middle management officers to:

- complement established corporate goals derived from an extensive community visioning process;
- incorporate the expertise and experiences of council officers who will be implementing the system;
- identify key decision points in local council planning and policy cycles when sustainability assessments can be most effectively applied;
- tailor assessment processes to the business of the individual departments while remaining consistent across council; and
- integrate the assessment process with other related activities such as triple-bottom-line (TBL) reporting.

Sutherland is involved in programmes such as Greenweb (urban biodiversity conservation), Cities for Climate Protection (greenhouse emissions control), a water conservation campaign and various initiatives promoting alternative transport. All of these programmes target specific environmental and/or social issues and sit under the Council's Agenda 21 policies; however, there are few linkages between them and the people who implement them. For the uninitiated staff member, understanding the requirements of all the

different local policies and programmes can be like finding your way through a maze, with no one clear framework or approach clearly emerging. State requirements add a further layer of sustainability-related obligations for councils under the Local Government Act (1997), including:

- to have regard to the principles of Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) in carrying out their responsibilities (Section 7);
- to properly manage, develop, protect, restore, enhance and conserve the environment of the area for which it is responsible in a manner that is consistent with the principles of ESD (The Charter of Act, Section 8);
- to take into consideration the principles of ESD when determining applications for approval under the Local Government Act 1993 (Section 89); and
- to prepare Management Plans and Annual Reports that have regard to the principles of ESD (Sections 403 and 428).

These amendments provide the legal framework for an environmentally responsible system of local government in NSW—but how these responsibilities are to be implemented is not clear.

In partial response to this directive, Sutherland implemented a TBL Management Plan. This was a good exercise for benchmarking performance in a range of areas, but was not useful for affecting decision-making processes and organizational structures. At the same time, a range of other initiatives at Sutherland were affecting decision-making directly, such as the Building Sustainability Index (BASIX) housing codes which ensure water and energy efficiency in housing developments, and the Sutherland Green Purchasing policy which outlines environmental considerations to take into account when comparing like goods and services. However, both these and others remain the primary concern of a few units and have not provided an overarching sustainability framework. In November 2004, the Environmental Science and Policy Unit (ESPU) of Sutherland initiated a programme to improve the application of sustainability concepts and objectives in the day-to-day work of the Council. Initially they focused on a sustainability training programme in response to a growing awareness among senior managers and directors of the need for all council staff to be able to apply sustainability concepts to their work. Using principles from organizational behaviour change, the expanded training programme used structured workshops to focus on the following elements:

- identifying existing and potential barriers to achieving local sustainability;
- maintaining staff involvement beyond the end of the final training sessions;
- tailoring training to the daily work undertaken by participating staff through case studies based on actual developments and decision-making processes;
- involving external expertise to give the training a broader focus and additional credibility;
- using the training as a starting point for wider organizational learning and action on sustainability issues.

The formal training assisted in raising awareness of barriers to implementing local sustainability initiatives, but it did not significantly affect the planning and policy-making processes. Many officers felt that explicit guidance was needed to help staff implement sustainability assessment of their day-to-day activities.

The ESPU also recognized that a programme of voluntary training alone was not sufficient to bring about the desired sustainability outcomes that had been articulated for the Council. There needed to be a process that identified and addressed barriers preventing staff from implementing local sustainability assessments and initiatives, and helped to coordinate sustainability efforts across council. At this point, external facilitators from the Australian National University (ANU) (Keen and Mahanty) were asked to facilitate the initial sessions to help the officers think about the challenges ahead and the options for action, given the experiences of other councils.

A group of committed individuals from engineering and planning units volunteered to develop sustainability guidelines based on a more systemic approach to sustainability assessment across council departments. They became a sustainability 'community of practice' critically examining and thinking about ways in which the council could improve its sustainability performance.

The process for developing a local sustainability assessment system at Sutherland is described in the sections below with reference to the international literature and the experiences of other Australian councils. Unlike in conventional research, we are not reporting on a finished research project; the initiative at Sutherland is ongoing and evolving. What we are sharing is a snapshot of progress to date. Ideally, the learning and actions will continue into the future.

Taking a Strategic Approach to Sustainability Assessment

There is a growing recognition internationally and within Sutherland Council that a more strategic approach is needed that puts in place an organization-wide approach to sustainability assessment (Pope et al., 2004). In contrast to the many initiatives described previously, the new framework needs to critically assess the sustainability implications of policies, plans and programmes in ways consistent with strategic environmental assessments (Partidario, 2000; von Seht, 1999). Rather than focusing on the avoidance of negative environmental impacts (what can go wrong), this approach to assessment focuses on achieving sustainability objectives through improved decision-making processes, policies, plans and actions (Dalal-Clayton & Sadler, 2003).

In Sutherland, a systemic approach was taken to integrate sustainability assessment into planning and decision-making cycles (see Figure 3). The first workshop focused on situating the sustainability assessment system. Firstly, legislative and policy frameworks relevant to local sustainability were explained and documented. These frameworks were linked to

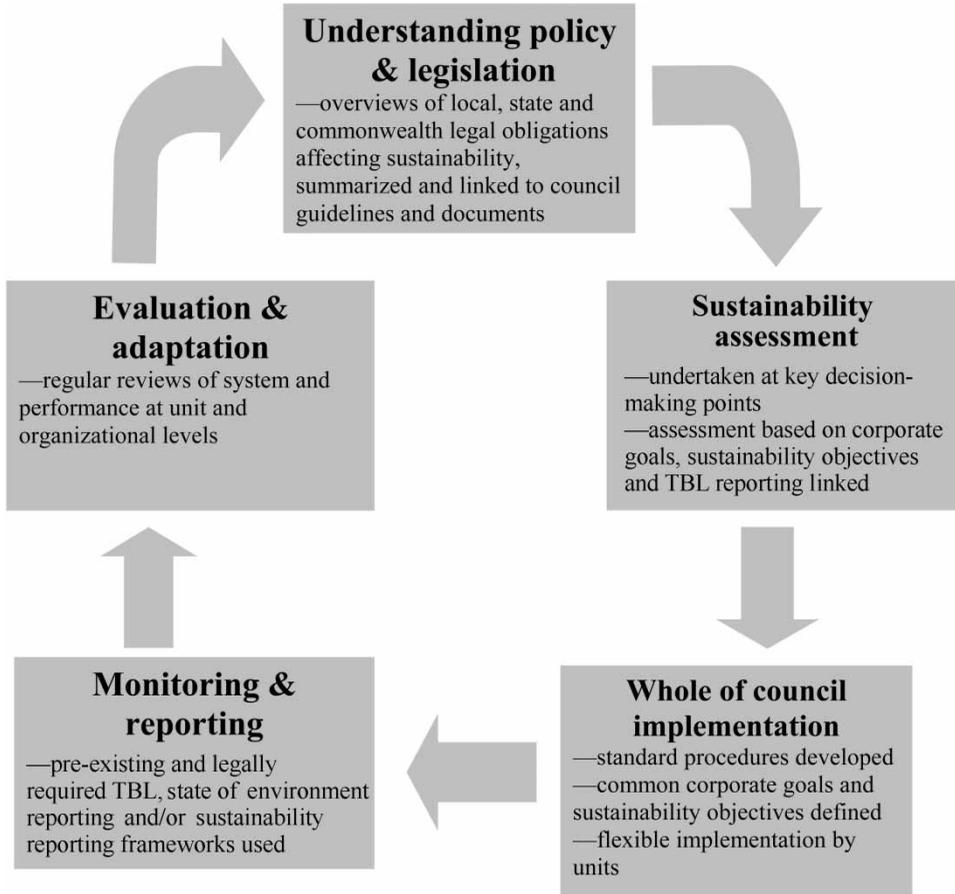


Figure 3. A systems approach to sustainability assessment

decision-making support materials, such as TBL reporting forms and planning guidelines.

One of the greatest challenges for sustainability assessments is to devise systems that are vertically (across organizational hierarchies) and horizontally (across organizational units) integrated. During the first workshop, participants decided that vertical integration could best be achieved by requiring sustainability assessments at a few selected points in the decision-making cycle, as discussed in the next section.

In the second workshop, the group determined that the assessment process would be objectives led rather than focused around issues or sectors, drawing on sustainability objectives compatible with corporate goals (derived from a community visioning process). These were in turn linked to state-required TBL and state-of-environment reporting frameworks. Following the second workshop, core indicators and questions relevant to the sustainability objectives and drawing on issues relevant to Sutherland Council were developed.

Finally, an evaluation process is still to be developed to assess the effectiveness of the system and contribute to continuous improvement and organizational learning. Units will assess the implementation of the guidelines each year in partnership with the ESPU, and the Council will assess the sustainability assessment system approximately every three years.

Collaboratively Determining Key Decision Points for Local Sustainability

As noted above, the practitioner group as a whole worked together to determine key decision-making points when decisions affecting sustainability are taken. This approach to assessment was initially developed at the City of Melbourne in partnership with the International Council for Local Environment Initiatives (ICLEI) (personal communication, K. Bailey, Senior TBL Officer, ICLEI, 7 June 2004; also see <<http://www.iclei.org/anz/tbl/index.htm>>). It became apparent that a wide range of experience and knowledge of council business was crucial to defining these points. Table 1 shows the decision-making points that Sutherland determined.

Table 1. Comparison of local council sustainability decision-making points

Sutherland Shire Council	Melbourne City Council	Baton Forum Retreat
<i>Strategic policy adoption</i> Decisions that determine what areas should receive priority attention/funding	<i>Formal council reports</i>	<i>Policy/plan development</i> Processes that set frameworks in which other programmes and activities occur
<i>Project selection</i> Decisions concerning which project will proceed	<i>Procurement</i> Purchasing and investment decisions	<i>Procurements</i> Decisions about significant council investments
<i>Project brief approval/design</i> Unit-based processes that determine specifications of projects	<i>Capital works</i> Works undertaken and contracted by council	<i>Approvals</i> Processes for final approvals
<i>Project adoption</i> Processes that give final approval to plans, such as council and executive meetings	<i>Human resourcing</i> Recruitment and appraisal processes	<i>Human resource decisions</i> Selection, performance and/or promotion criteria, as well as training programmes
<i>Implementation</i> Purchasing/contracting/works that determine infrastructure, equipment, and council activities	<i>Planning</i> Development applications, policy and strategy, and corporate planning	<i>Capital works specifications</i> Contracting and other processes affecting development specifications

Sources: Sutherland Council Workshop, 23 August 2004; Kirsty Bailey (Senior Officer, ICLEI), 7 June 2004; Baton Forum workshop, 11 November 2004.

To demonstrate the potential diversity between councils, decision points arising from Melbourne City Council deliberations are also shown, as well as decision-making points viewed as important by nine different councils represented by their sustainability officers who participated in a recent retreat on local sustainability (Keen & Sauvage, 2005). One key difference is the inclusion of human resource management by the City of Melbourne. The reference to strategic policy adoption in Sutherland highlights a desire by the staff concerned about local sustainability to better integrate sustainability at higher levels of the Council's work. These decision points become the 'triggers' for sustainability assessments. Thus the trigger is not some arbitrary size of development or type of development (as is mostly the case with Environmental Impact Assessments), but rather is stimulated by a crucial point in the decision-making process.

For each decision point, a 'lead' unit within the Council was determined, as well as the other key units that should be consulted in the assessment process. This set up a referral process that would help to ensure that a wide range of expertise and experience were included in the assessment, and that the assessment process would support and extend organizational communications.

Building Sustainability Assessment Guidelines

While integrating frameworks for sustainability assessment are important to ensure consistency across the Council, the actual work of individual units, for example engineers and planners, is quite different. For sustainability assessments to be meaningful, and for practitioners to engage fully with the assessment process, some tailoring of the process is needed. At the unit level, the relevance of the process to unit-based work was increased by having senior and respected officers develop assessment questions that were tailored to their unit's work and directly relevant to the corporate goals and sustainability objectives defined for the whole council (see Table 2).

There are significant areas of overlap on issues concerning water, nature conservation and energy efficiency. One important difference between the groups was a stronger focus by engineering on 'hard' design issues such as the use of infrastructure design and materials, while planning dealt to some extent with these but also with 'softer' design issues such as the availability of diverse housing types and the appropriate planning controls for a particular area. In general, the engineers developed questions that were easily assessed while the planners' questions were more conceptual. Many of the planners' questions were very closely related to the sustainability objectives, perhaps reflecting the difficulty they had translating the principles into practical questions.

The voluntary nature of the community of practice meant that progress was often slow because meetings had to fit in with other work obligations. However, the quality of the assessment guidelines benefited greatly from the practical insights of the practitioners. Because the people developing the questions were a subset of the implementing group, further refinement could occur once the assessment system was piloted and implemented.

Table 2. Linking corporate goals, sustainability objectives and unit concerns at Sutherland Shire Council

Corporate goals	Selected sustainability objective examples	Example of assessment questions—planning unit	Example of assessment questions—engineering department
Improve our suburbs	Encourage efficient use of natural resources, energy and water	How does the project contribute to greater energy efficiency of buildings?	Do the materials used in the proposed project minimize social and environmental impacts? (i.e. are the materials recycled/ recyclable or do they have a long lifetime?)
Increase citizen involvement in community life	Ensure open, accountable and participatory decision-making processes	Does the plan/ project ensure that consultation programmes optimize involvement of the community as appropriate to the project and to all statutory responsibilities?	Does the project/ facility facilitate a range of community events and activities?
Build safe, active and healthy lifestyles	Create a safe and healthy community for all	How do planning strategies optimize potential for active use of areas?	How does the project provide for a range of activities and interests that promote a healthy and active lifestyle?
Nurture our environment	Enhance health and beauty of bushland, waterways, beaches and wetlands	Does the project enhance the health and beauty of bushland, waterways, beaches and wetlands?	How does the project have regard to Water Sensitive Urban Design principles?

(Table continued)

Table 2. Continued

Corporate goals	Selected sustainability objective examples	Example of assessment questions—planning unit	Example of assessment questions—engineering department
Maintain a prosperous local economy	Encourage a strong and diversified economy	How does the plan/project ensure that current and future employment and land use opportunities are protected?	Does the project provide sustained employment opportunities?

Thus, rather than facilitators ‘correcting’ or ‘improving’ assessment questions, they merely posed questions for the practitioners to consider. The emphasis was on giving the practitioners the lead in developing the assessment process. This ensured that the assessment system would fit the context and be applicable to the unit’s work.

Table 2 illustrates the complementarities that can be established by integrating sustainability assessments into local council decision-making frameworks. In an effort to increase reflection on current practice and its implications for sustainability assessment, each participant was asked to keep a daily diary for three weeks on the key issues and activities they dealt with each day, highlighting those of direct relevance to achieving local sustainability. The diaries were analysed to check the relationship between day-to-day tasks, council goals and key decision points identified in workshops.

The decision points developed in the workshops had meaning in terms of the activities staff performed in their day-to-day work, since nearly all participants gave one or more examples of activities relevant to each of the decision points. However, the diaries revealed that staffing and human resource management activities, which featured in diaries, were not covered in the decision points developed. This was reflected back to participants, but they felt that the decision points selected were the most important and that human resource issues could be dealt with indirectly through these.

Reflecting on Practice

Reflection and organizational learning can occur at many different levels. As outlined above, an important starting point is establishing communities of practices that provide an opportunity for committed individuals to work together to build systems that will support organizational change and learning. In building a fresh approach to local sustainability assessment at the council level, piloting the system on a small scale within a few select units

is necessary to ensure the system is robust enough to extend to the rest of the council. This is presently occurring at Sutherland.

The initial stages of the Sutherland process involved active facilitation of the community of practice by external facilitators from the ANU. At this stage, there were high levels of enthusiasm and commitment to the process. Once a framework for the assessment systems was established, the process of developing assessment questions relevant to work areas and a model set of guidelines rested in the hands of the engineering and planning units with the support of the ESPU, and much less direct input from the external facilitators. The transition from externally facilitated to self-driven organization is not an easy process. Some groups may need longer periods of co-facilitation before being left to manage on their own. A major challenge facing communities of practice that wish to become self-sustaining is how they can advance their ideas within the context of existing organizational structures and power hierarchies, and how they will continue to sustain organizational learning and change processes. At Sutherland, a key issue that has affected the level of motivation and enthusiasm for the local sustainability agenda are the structural constraints within the Council. As one participant in a workshop expressed it,

The case study [we used to trial an assessment system] highlighted the poor relationship between Council's five strategic goals, triple bottom line, and ecologically sustainable development. This relationship impacts upon the sustainability guidelines and assessment process and may continue to present many ongoing problems. (Workshop participant, 23 August 2004)

There were also concerns about how this group could influence the thinking of councillors and executive management. This is a critical issue for local government in Australia and highlights that change in sustainability outcomes will not be achieved solely by communities of practice and the development of individual capacity within local government organizations, but will also need some attention to the wider political and social context in which the organizations operate. In discussions at the Baton Forum (a forum for local sustainability practitioners) many felt that to really advance local sustainability within local council, the explicit support of the executive was needed *as a starting point*.

Greater reflection on sustainability and how it can be implemented in the local council context can be achieved partially through the design of the assessment system. Reporting systems such as TBL reporting and state-of-environment reporting tend to focus only on assessing outcomes, for example whether water quality has improved, not processes. Recent innovations in monitoring and evaluation tools critically assess processes and causes as well as outcomes (Duda, 2002). Process indicators evaluate the status of organizational and stakeholder activities, and lead to such questions as: 'Have communities been consulted?' Causal analyses evaluate changes to activities and behaviour that lead to the degradation of the environment and

may include such questions as: ‘Were environmental criteria outlined in the Green Purchasing policy applied before making this purchase?’ These types of questions are in addition to the traditional focus on environmental status indicators that evaluate changes in the biophysical and social environment. All are needed in sustainability assessments. Causal and process analyses require an understanding of organizational processes and local contexts—communities of practice are well equipped for this task.

During the development of the Sutherland sustainability training and assessment system, the staff and ANU facilitators shared their experiences with the wider community, and ran interactive workshops with external local practitioners. The workshops were used to brainstorm some of the more complex issues facing local sustainability assessment at Sutherland. Other external support networks include the Baton Forum, practitioners and officers who participated in conferences and workshops, and electronic networks supported by ICLEI, Australian Department of Environment and Heritage, and Australian Environs group (a local government association committed to improving environmental management).

Conclusion: Reflecting on Communities of Practice and Sustainability

Our experience with Sutherland supports the use of communities of practice as a way of promoting organizational change towards the integration of sustainability goals. The direct engagement of practitioners in the development, trialling and implementation of the assessment system ensure that it fits the context of the Council and the individual units. Engaging communities of practice presents some benefits and challenges that need to be assessed with reference to the context.

Some of the benefits achieved in the Sutherland case study may have been influenced by the unique characteristics of the Sutherland community. Sutherland already had a track record of high-level performance and commitment to continual improvement, particularly given the ESPU objective of maintaining Sutherland’s standing as a leader in local environmental management. It is likely that Sutherland’s corporate commitment to continuous improvement influenced the willingness of staff to form a sustainability community of practice, and to remain committed to the process despite the extra work it involved.

The voluntary nature of communities of practice means that ideas and processes progress at their own pace—and not according to any externally imposed schedule (or contracted period for the facilitators’ consultancy). Therefore this approach is not well suited to crisis situations where action must occur immediately. Rather it is suitable when there is a commitment to long-term organizational learning and change, or where a shift in the corporate culture and values is desired.

The greater the diversity of the group, the more likely it is that innovation—and conflicts—will arise. The voluntary nature of communities of practice means that in the face of conflict no individual needs to commit to working out the issue; instead they can vote with their feet and simply not

return to the group. Brown and colleagues suggest that establishing rules of engagement or social contracts early on can help to develop a common understanding of the group and the processes by which tensions will be addressed (Brown et al., 2005). Fortunately, these problems have not yet occurred at Sutherland, but they certainly could arise in groups where individuals hold strongly opposing views of a common concern. In Sutherland, the diversity within the group was its strength and a source of innovation.

The role of external facilitators and the transition to self-managed communities of practice can be challenging. Early discussions on the role of the facilitator and how to manage the transition process should be an integral part of setting up communities of practice—when facilitators are involved. In the Sutherland case the facilitators made clear from the beginning that the development of the guidelines and the implementation of the system were entirely up to the group. After the initial three meetings the group, with the assistance of the ESPU, decided that they could take over the process and develop the guidelines. The ANU facilitators remain supportive of the project, but mainly in a distant and informal advisory role when contacted.

Progress did slow significantly after the ANU facilitators ceased their formal role; however, the quality of the outputs were unaffected. The slower pace of work reflected the competing demands on the practitioners' time, not necessarily a lower level of enthusiasm. The ongoing time commitment is another area that needs to be agreed in the initial stages, and perhaps more attention could have been paid to this.

Finally, as with all groups the world over, power relations can permeate communities of practice. In the Sutherland case, as with local government in other areas of Australia, translating sustainability goals into action depends not just on having good assessment processes; at the end of the day political decisions come into play. Communities of practice may feel the pressure of the organization's decision-making hierarchy, and external political pressures. Their informal structure built on interests, not workplace structures, can result in new ideas emerging that do not fit with existing organizational thinking. This is both their strength and their weakness—innovation and change don't come easily. Sustainability often requires organizational change and an evolution in our thinking. Communities of practice can in some conditions provide the supportive network to face this challenge.

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