

Local sustainability – the problems, practicalities and possibilities

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Any initiative to promote sustainability must relate to people. People must be able to identify with the theory and practical application of sustainability because its success or failure will ultimately depend on the willingness of people to adopt its principles. It is essential that a true understanding of sustainability is promoted from the outset of any project. It must be presented as an integrated package of economic, environmental and social best practice.

Definition

In a practical situation it is useful, in fact necessary, to have a working definition of sustainability. Simple definitions set a point of reference for a mixed audience. Definitions should be simple and practical and must be comprehensible to all individuals, whatever their background.

People will have heard the word “sustainability”- most likely mis-quoted. There will be a vague recognition, but general lack of understanding as to what it means. Because the concept is vague, there will probably be a perception that it is something complicated and beyond the scope of a local community, but a simple working definition can bring sustainability into focus for a community. The definition can be broadened, adapted, or abandoned as work progresses. The usual case is that, as understanding grows, there is no longer any need for a definition. As a project progresses and practical action gathers momentum, “sustainability” becomes a household word, a way of thinking and a way of living. However, it is useful to have a short definition at hand for newcomers to a project, or for a community to articulate to others what they are doing.

It is easy to offer definitions of sustainability, but it is advisable to avoid spending too much time determining their phraseology. Many community meetings devote time to refining definitions, even after the concept has been adopted. In a working context it is the *understanding* that is important and once this has been achieved, the definition becomes less important.

A useful working definition is that from the Brundtland report. Acknowledging the shortcomings of the report, its definition “*meeting the needs today without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*” is useful. When this is explained, phrase by phrase in public, communities generally accept it because they relate to “*meeting needs*” and to the needs of “*future generations*”, the latter generally being understood as their own children.

Alternatively, or additionally, Richard Douthwaite’s definition is also useful: “*systems which could exist for hundreds of years and would not have to be changed, unless people decided to change them*”.

Another simple working definition is : “*adopting best practice in all that we do*”.

If we leave problems behind us, then we are not acting sustainably because problems will accumulate and sooner or later, singly or cumulatively, they will impact on somebody and impair their ability to look after themselves. If this happens sooner rather than later, the impact of our practices will affect ourselves.

Masai people say “*to fail nature is to fail ourselves and the generations that come after us*”. Masai people have adopted this as a living motto, but it is popular among Irish communities as a principle of sustainability.

In some cases the word “sustainability” may be off-putting and it may be a useful strategy to reserve the term for a later stage in a project. Alternative terms, such as “good practice” may be used initially to introduce the concept. The appropriate terminology is best decided by the individual(s) who are presenting “sustainability” at local level.

Discussion

Introductions to sustainability at community meetings inevitably generate discussion of global and other issues. It is important to foster these discussions from the beginning of a project because they encourage thinking and generate innovative ideas. Issues of sustainability are so broad and challenging that it is easy to spend considerable time discussing global problems rather than local solutions. The relationship between global and local scenarios must be stressed to emphasise the collective responsibility of local communities. It is also important to instigate some [well-planned] action in the early stages of a project because this energizes people and helps to maintain community confidence in a project.

Problems

“Landscape links” / policy and reality

If we examine what we do and how we do it, we must admit to ourselves that we are not following “best practice” and problems are accumulating. Global warming is perhaps the ultimate manifestation of what is going wrong.

Man evolved on this earth, like all other species. As part of a continuing process we adapted to our surroundings and lived off the land, in communication and rapport with the landscape. As a result we, like all other species, maintain linkages with landscape. It is to be expected that we have an inherent understanding of our environment. For example, we should have a basic understanding of how our rivers work, when they are in good condition and when there is something wrong. Although environmental legislation is useful, we should not have to rely on it to tell us when our waterways are clean, when we can safely drink the water, or breathe the air. We should not have to rely on policy to tell us how to treat our environment – we should “know” from our own experience with the landscape and from an understanding that is partly learned, partly inherited.

In every human being there remains an innate and deep-rooted connection with landscape. Some people feel it very strongly, others may not be aware of it, but there are few people who do not experience it in some way at some time in their lives. However, living today in a modern world of busy lifestyles, many people are removed from direct or conscious links with landscape. “Landscape links” can be demonstrated in the ease with which people begin to relate to environment when it is explained to them, especially if this explanation is offered outdoors. A few minutes spent in showing the basics of the earth and its species opens up peoples’ minds and reawakens their ability to absorb sensory information and relate to what is around them. They begin to see and wonder at things, which previously would have gone unnoticed. Moreover, they begin to understand landscape and ecology – maybe not in a way that they could articulate by scientific reasoning and explanation - but by an inherent understanding that can be easily nurtured and supplemented by information.

Among the current profusion of policy there exists an enormous gap between policy and reality. A river may comply with all of the required standards, but this does not guarantee that it is healthy - because a river is an interaction of numerous factors, it has life and policy cannot determine life. Likewise, people are emotional creatures and policy cannot regulate emotions. It is the complexity of interacting individuals, emotions, cultures and peoples’ interaction with landscape that determines our collective effect on the earth - and in turn, its effect on us. Policy cannot determine life - it is only by working within an understanding and acceptance of the earth that we can function within it and experience true well-being.

Information

What keeps people at such a distance from the world around them? Are they not all living on the earth and influenced by it? This distance is maintained primarily by lack of information. Despite this being hailed as the Information Age, it is really only the Age of Information Technology - there is an appalling lack of information relating to local environments, ecology and the earth’s functions. Without this information we cannot function properly within the earth’s capacity and in keeping with the earth’s processes. People of previous generations lived closer to the landscape and had an understanding of it, but because so many people now live busy lifestyles, mainly in an urban context, they are removed from that interaction which gives understanding. Therefore, people need information that will explain and keep alive their innate landscape links. This is not provided to people - on the contrary, it appears that it is actively denied.

Where is the information that explains to people what local landscapes and habitats are, the previous influences that created them, what affects them and what species live locally? People are denied such information but, if it were available, it would allow them to make more informed decisions regarding development. Enriched with such information they might think differently and create a demand for environmentally-sensitive developments and best practice – for sustainability. By distancing people from environment and keeping their “landscape links” dormant, it is easier for aggressive economic growth to maintain momentum despite its consequences. People become dependent on certain services and products and when people are

dependent, or feel dependent, they are less likely to accept explanations of the adverse impact of our lifestyles and economic systems, or alternatives to these systems.

Likewise, when there is a controversy relating to the environmental effects of a proposed development, it rarely receives public attention until the development, or at least the plans, are well advanced. Those people who do manage to gather information (often with great difficulty) try to inform others, but this is usually too late – it is never easy to inform a population *during* controversy – too much has happened, too much inaccurate information is in circulation and there is little opportunity to go back to basics and explain in detail what is really happening, the potential consequences of the proposed development and the choice of alternatives. In reality, in most situations, local groups are portrayed as merely “protesting about another development” and are labelled as “NIMBYs (Not In My Backyard). Such social labels further segregate concerned groups from the remainder of the population, thus making it even more difficult for them to inform the public and force an unbiased debate.

In these situations, individuals, communities and collectively the nation, are starved of the information which would allow them to make informed decisions or comments. As a result, situations usually end up as controversies – one is either “pro” or “anti” the particular development. There is no unity – communities become isolated within the country, or groups become isolated within communities. There is no overall consideration of best practice, proper debate does not take place, opportunities for real integrated progress are lost and unsustainable developments proceed – status quo is maintained!

It is only by information and networking that communities can make it known that local issues are national issues and national issues are local issues which ultimately affect everybody.

Media

The media play a role in maintaining this process. By failing to publish a story, not alone do they deny people the right of information, but they indirectly deny people the opportunity to network and force a more sustainable outcome to an issue. The environmental truth about situations is often forfeited in favour of more dramatic stories. For example, the story of a few so-labelled “environmentalists”, interested only in “a snail” who held up the construction of the Kildare by-pass to the detriment of people was promoted by the media, but the alternative story – the truth – was refused by major newspapers and television presenters. After publishing a story newspapers and television documentaries are often reluctant to re-visit the topic, even when reliable environmental information is offered – they are “in the business of selling news” and “nobody wants old news”.

Challenge

Human beings work best when challenged. It is natural for a species to be responsible for its own survival, but the challenge of survival has been taken from peoples’ lives and replaced with pressures of daily living. Human ingenuity is wonderful, but it is restrained within mental straightjackets of dependency on systems that are not working for people and over which they have little or no direct control. The most challenged communities in the world have been the

most innovative in self-help. In developed countries people are locked into economic systems and in many cases grant-dependence, which do not allow them to realize their own strength and potential. This robs them of the confidence and challenge of self-reliance.

Practicalities

In any sustainability project it is important to be aware of the context in which one is working. It is essential to recognise past problems and current constraints (local, national and global) so that these may be challenged. Examination of past problems is often portrayed as negativity and this is frowned upon in modern dialogue. However, to ignore past influences would be negligent since it is essential to understand the influences which shaped our current situations. It is also important to acknowledge and where possible, put right the failings of the past. This is positive action and must be openly discussed. Thus, the problems of lack of information, lack of challenge, broken “landscape links”, power of the media, etc. must be recognised, openly acknowledged and challenged. Reliable environmental information is fundamental to an effective dilution of these effects.

Action for Sustainability

Ref. Co. Wexford Partnership Action for Sustainability Project
The Sustainability Web by Anne Behan

One’s role in creating and encouraging sustainability at local level depends on one’s access to community. As an individual, a person may have to lead by example, or by networking outside his/her community. Alternatively, if a person or group has access to community groups/discussion there is better opportunity to promote action towards sustainability.

In initial contact with a community on the subject of sustainability, one must expect at least some opposition to the theory and practice of sustainability – it will be portrayed as unrealistic, impossible, impracticable, etc. People will confuse wants with real needs.

It is important to encourage as large a community participation as possible and if it can be achieved, to expand groups beyond the existing community development associations. There will be a number of stages in the progression towards sustainability:

- A simple working definition is useful as an introduction.
- The starting point must be open discussion – this may take place over several meetings. Allow the discussion to flow without offering too much information or direction initially. Gently introduce some thoughts on how existing systems are not working for people and some examples of alternatives that are working for people. Encourage the discussion to progress to wants and needs. Accept what communities are planning for themselves because they will tend to do this anyway - but encourage them to think in terms of best practice.
- After a period of general discussion direct the meetings to specific local issues.

- Ask special interest groups to consider the best and worst case scenarios of their proposed activities. Then, collectively as a community, consider how groups may achieve goals without causing the negative impact.
- Do not worry that you do not have all of the answers – nobody has, but by pooling community expertise and knowledge it will be amazing what can be achieved.
- Investigate ways in which individuals and groups within a community, or between neighbouring communities, can combine resources to best effect e.g. sports clubs sharing facilities, car-pooling, etc.
- In terms of practical action, the provision of accurate information on the local environment is important. Information allows for true and informed consultation. Consultation is meaningless, in fact dangerous, if people lack information because damaging decisions can be made and justified as if they were the wish of the people.

A simple, accurate explanation of what the local environment is, how it was formed (local geology), what lives there (local ecology), with examples of named local places will generate awareness and appreciation. Such information can engender an awareness and sense of responsibility towards the local environment. This stage of a project should be easy and pleasant to achieve - people are generally very welcoming of local information if it is well presented to them.

- It will be necessary to develop a set of local indicators to measure progress. These must be reliable, meaningful and have local application and relevance to human community.
- Technical details of, for example, waste management programmes, energy conservation etc. are relatively easy to formulate, but do not consider issues in isolation. Always examine the relationships, or linkages, between elements of the community. Assess proposed action plans in terms of their potential effects on these interactions. These interactions represent the life of a community – what makes it “tick”. It is important to take account of these unseen relationships if a community is to be sustainable. Examination of local interactions will help to shape more detailed and integrated plans and devise a set of local indicators
- Always give due consideration to the less tangible aspects of life such as identity, heritage, sense of place and time, etc. Association with heritage is fundamental to the human psyche and issues of society, environment and economics will never be resolved if human emotions and beliefs are not acknowledged in the process.

Possibilities

When people begin to discuss sustainability at a local level and realize the importance of self-reliance and local systems, it is both amazing and encouraging to witness the local solutions to local problems which are proposed by local people.

Great progress has been made in certain aspects of best practice in numerous communities (numerous examples can be found on the internet). By designing action which takes account of

the interactive forces within communities the possibilities for progress towards sustainability are enormous.

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