

Circles of Sustainability: An Integrated Approach



Global Compact Cities Programme

Critical Reference Group

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In the present context of global climate change, intensifying urbanization, increasing transnational insecurities, and a heightening divide between rich and poor, there is a pressing need for new ways of working towards local and global sustainability. However, with the intersecting pressures of market-based drivers and national-interest considerations dominating policy-making, nation-states are confronting the limits of their negotiating possibilities. This was dramatically underscored in the Copenhagen Climate Conference. Similarly, the limits of market reform, given the base-line requirements of contemporary capitalism, have been shown time and again—most pointedly in the recent global financial crisis and its aftermath of ‘business as usual’. At the same time, just as nation-states have come under increasing pressure to act otherwise, so have corporations come under pressure to aver from participating in corruption and avoid malfeasance. Across the late-twentieth century and into the present, the century-long trend to audit corporations economically has been widening to include questions of ecological sustainability and social responsibility. The Global Compact, the Global Reporting Initiative, and a burgeoning collection of other reporting and indicator sets have been developed in order to sensitize profit-driven corporations to the ‘social’ and

‘environmental’ costs of doing business.¹ Now cities are increasingly being drawn into this same ambiguous process. What does this mean for the role of cities in providing a different kind of global leadership on sustainability questions, and becoming part of a different form of global governance?

Cities are amorphous and unwieldy entities. On the one hand, except in the fields of global tourism and commodity exchange, all but a few cities until recently have tended to be inwardly-turned institutions relatively unaware of the potential for their local practices to affect global regimes. On the other hand, the intensification of globalization has afforded cities the potential for renewed governance power—at least in some areas—to set relatively independent agendas. This is particularly so in the arena of sustainability. Examples such as ICLEI (the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives), the C40 (originally, the Large Cities Climate Leadership Group), the UN Global Compact Cities Programme, and even the Mayors Group at Copenhagen in 2009 suggest that cities are moving to act collectively to affect social change around urban sustainability.² Part of this process has involved cities monitoring themselves more actively in relation to sustainability measures, the subject of this briefing paper. The question that we want to pursue is, ‘Can a viable form of sustainability auditing be developed that provides a platform for local-global learning and sustainability governance while avoiding the usual pitfalls of existing auditing and indicator systems?’

The animating concern of this briefing paper is that urban sustainability auditing is currently being done without sufficient attention to translating the process out of the economically-defined strictures of the triple-bottom line approach or the status-orienting fantasies of liveability lists. In other words, cities face the same issues that have bedeviled nation-states and corporations when it comes to sustainable development, but on different terms. The problems are manifold. Cities are being listed in league tables that do more to emphasize global inequities than enhance sustainability. The technical form of the sustainability indices tends to maximize practices of narrow compliance. There is a tendency for externally-derived indicators to drive planning on locally-specific questions. And most generally, there is a masking of structures of power and a distorting of values in relation to questions of sustainability and liveability in a given city.

Reporting on sustainability indices and liveability metrics can potentially enhance the reflexivity of the urban planning process, but there is a galloping tendency to treat the issue of how to improve one’s ‘city ranking’ on a hierarchical table as more important than the sustainability issues themselves. Two prominent indicator tables are the Mercer Quality of Living survey and the Economist’s Intelligence Unit survey. Both get front-page headlines in cities around the world, particularly in those cities which do well. However, in neither case does the survey contribute substantially to enhancing either liveability or sustainability. This should be obvious when we consider their claims and orientations. Mercer for example is based on ‘carefully selected factors representing the criteria considered most relevant to international executives’. It is not based on the life-quality of locals, but rather, ‘For the purposes of this report, quality of living assesses the degree to which expatriates enjoy the potential standard of living in the host location’.³ While ‘identifying the best infrastructure based on electricity supply, water availability, telephone and mail services, public transport provision, traffic congestion and the range of international flights from local airports’⁴, liveability indexes like the Mercer say little about material quality of life, social inclusion and exclusion, or a city’s impacts within the ecosphere. The commercial liveability indexes

1 See S. Fritsch, ‘The UN Global Compact and the Global Governance of Corporate Social Responsibility: Complex Multilateralism for a More Human Globalisation?’ *Global Society*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2008, pp. 1–25.

2 One important joint publication in this area is the report by Cities Alliance, ICLEI and UNEP, *Liveable Cities: The Benefits of Urban Environmental Planning*, Cities Alliance, Washington, 2007.

3 www.mercer.com.au/qualityofliving (last accessed 5 January 2009).

4 *Ibid.*

measure things based in a presumption that unfettered access to consumer goods and services represents the highest social good. In short, these do not necessarily indicate whether a liveable city is a sustainable city. While such indexes measure things in unilateral terms, shoe-horning the ideal of liveability into criteria of (affluent) consumer satisfaction, sustainability provides a vague and indeterminate orientation for action, one not readily adopted by policymakers and planners.⁵

This briefing paper explains how the auditing of cities for sustainability might be done otherwise. Achieving sustainable cities we argue begins as the task of reflecting upon the nature of human activity in those places. The aim is to develop practices that can ensure that cities and communities are being re-created to 'meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.⁶ The renewed emphasis on the importance of the city brings together issues of sustainability, measurement processes, and how cities might be part of an alternative mode of governance across the globe; one that shifts the emphasis away from narrow market or prestige considerations. Our call here turns on three simple precepts:

- 1) Auditing systems have the potential for masking the underlying problems and even inadvertently making them worse as cities concentrate on the metrics rather than the intersecting sustainability issues themselves.
- 2) Developing an adequate auditing approach entails going back to basics—that is, going back to rethink the very foundations that structure the way in which we attempt to measure issues of sustainability. There are no perfect indicators of sustainability, and attempts to gather good indicators without attending to the issue of their inter-relation are bound to fail.
- 3) Enacting an adequate auditing system entails building a global platform around (existing and newly formed) formal and informal institutions.

In light of these three precepts, the following discussion takes as its orienting structure the work being done by the Global Compact Cities Programme in slow collaboration with other governance bodies such as the Global Reporting Initiative and UN Habitat.

The Limits of Sustainability Indicators

Developing an adequate indicator set is extraordinarily difficult. Our research identifies at least six inter-linked problems with prevailing ways of approaching the task of identifying and implementing policy and practice based on indicators of sustainability. These are, first, the one-dimensional quantitative basis of many such projects across both the Global South and North means that achieving sustainability is often reduced to a technical task—gathering data and ticking performance boxes. The problem of achieving sustainable development is dealt with as an instrumental one with expert consultants enlisted to generate the 'right' indicators and then to tailor a technical solution in order to get the indicators 'back on track'. This might work in a limited way for command-governance corporations with their hierarchical decision-making processes having direct and comprehensive reach within the institution, but it does not work in more complex social formations of governance such as cities.

Second, metrics-centred projects present a relatively abstract view of things. Of course, all understandings of social life take the form of knowledge that is abstracted from lived conditions through observation and analytical reframing. Thus, a further concern is that the

5 J.B. Robinson, "Squaring the Circle? Some Thoughts on the Idea of Sustainable Development," *Ecological Economics* 48 (2004).

4 This is the classic definition of sustainable development from the World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, p. 8.

type of abstraction characterizing many quantitative indicators-based projects drives new forms of unsustainability. Indicators-based projects can thus in certain respects circumvent the problem of understanding cities and communities as places for human activities in the here and now. Achieving good results on the indicators themselves comes to be an end in itself. Technical questions submerge the need to engage reflexively in the long-term process of creating and reproducing a sustainable polity, community, or organization.

Moreover, and third, the size, scope, and sheer number of indicators included within many sustainability projects, means that indicator sets are often unwieldy and resist effective implementation. Over recent decades, indicator-based projects have become central to a broad range of sociological, community-development, environmental and policy-oriented research aimed at engendering sustainability. An explosion of indicators is extending itself horizontally across the globe and vertically, on the back of processes of globalization, from neighbourhood to international policy-making. There are corporate-sustainability indices, city-liveability indices, community-sustainability indices, waste-disposal indices, and so on, and so on. The challenge faced here is that of providing a flexible framework that speaks to existing relevant measures of sustainability, including for example incorporating many of the GRI indicators. The approach described here offers a means for translating between different indicator-sets by broadening their terms of reference, extending the domains upon which they focus, and streamlining the process of actually selecting indicators and applying policies and practices in light of them.

Fourth, the scientific emphasis inherent in many indicator-based projects tends to mask the possibility of taking into account the structures of power and the cultural-political assumptions that always frame assessments of ‘sustainability’. Often primarily quantitative in approach, indicators-based projects offer valuable tools for measuring the standing of a city, a corporation, or community in relation to some or other definitive concept of ‘sustainability’, ‘sustainable development’ or ‘liveability’. This is where the focus seems too narrow, and is limited to the rise and fall of the metrics and the immediate responses required to move up the ‘league table’. Such approaches fail to bring into question the nature of the inter-relationships and of the societal structures that go into creating and reproducing conditions for a sustainable city, corporation or community.

Fifth, even when indicators-based projects attempt to deal with complex issues, particularly when they add in cultural and political dimensions—for example, measuring and assessing ‘well-being’, ‘inclusion’ or ‘cohesion’, they still tend firstly to reduce these social questions to step-by-step technical questions. Step one: assume a social good (for example, people meeting together socially is a cultural good); step two: draw a one-to-one connection between a social good and its indicators (social indicators should include how many cafés are in given area or how many bowling clubs operate to allow people to meet); step three: draw a one-to-one connection between the indicators and social policy (encourage the opening of more cafés or bowling clubs). In that process such projects tend to assume generative values of what is good and what is bad—inclusion is good, exclusion is bad; participation is good, authority is bad. Despite best intentions, such projects tend to displace understandings of living in cities and communities as a lived and contested condition differently conceived across different cultural settings, and they tend to use thin evidentiary claims about what constitutes a sustainable or unsustainable practice. In effect, good and bad practice is assumed, the indicator set is built, and policy is based on changing the indicators. Our argument is that indicators can make a greater contribution to understanding and practicing sustainability, but only when seen as part of a broader approach to how persons engage with each other and on what terms.

And, sixth, is the fact that an emphasis on indicator sets that are completely externally derived too often means that a city, corporation or community loses focus on the locally available resources and conditions that might support alternative sustainable practices or

challenge existing unsustainable practices. This is because ‘global’ indicators may not necessarily capture the problems associated localized complexities. The current tendency of reporting initiatives to emphasize one kind of reporting agency—usually corporations—means that attempts at integration tend to produce *ad hoc* assemblages of indicators with extra bits tacked on the end. Indicator sets become like the house that Jack built, trying to add rooms and corridors when what is needed is redesigning the whole abode. Triple bottom-line accounting is an instance of this with environmental and social sustainability being tacked on the back end of a continuing economic imperative of profitability.

These problems, and the associated issue of indicators ‘proliferation’, are intimately related. Every new set tends to be developed *de novo* and for a new purpose. Our claim is not that existing quantitative data is unimportant or unnecessary, or that a new and more perfect set of indicators will be developed that will make all others redundant. Understanding and using quantitative data is part and parcel of engaging to achieve sustainability within complex and ‘globalizing’ world. All manner of conditions, from population demographics to climate change data, resource-use figures, and even ‘rankings’, can provide useable information about the world. However, the approach advocated here views this *information* as one contribution or ‘input’ into the creation of *knowledge* that can support practices aimed at achieving sustainability. On the other side of raw *information* are the fields of power and values that give shape and form to *knowledge*, and qualify its uses. Seeing things in this way involves a rethinking of what indicators actually are. In effect, we are suggesting that many of the things that are understood as ‘indicators’ in quantitative terms need to be taken as metrics embedded within a more comprehensive qualitative framework. In other words, *quantitative* metrics need to be understood in terms of *qualitative* indicators.

Circles of Sustainability

The Global Compact Cities Programme ‘Circles of Sustainability’ approach to developing layered indicators of sustainability is intended to overcome these problems. It is intended to involve policy-makers and citizens in reflecting upon and negotiating knowledges about how best to practice sustainability. The ‘Circles of Sustainability’ approach suggests that—amidst major societal and ecological challenges—activities need to be woven, unwoven, and rewoven in the light of new knowledges about them. The approach sets out a program for *engaging citizens in the job of achieving long-term sustainability* with the following dimensions:

- 1) It is a task of reflexive practice;
- 2) This practice is conducted across the broad domains of economy, ecology, politics and culture;
- 3) The indicators that are developed within these four domains are translatable across different situations;
- 4) Therefore, the indicators are developed within a common global *qualitative* framework that allows for local choice about relevant *quantitative* indicators or metrics; and,
- 5) The process of developing the indicators enhances global learning and supports comparative bench-marking across different places, practices and institutions, allowing cities to collaborate regionally and globally in learning about sustainability.

Our intention is to include but going beyond the important abstracting task of measuring and assessing. We want to take the approach out into the field, so to speak. We want to make it work as an engaged set of practices designed with an image of human activity as situated within and reflexively responding to the social and natural environment. In this approach, systems theories and ‘hard’ or ‘positive’ scientific knowledges become discrete elements of the research and practice, rather than dominant framing rationales. What is suggested here is

that ‘technical’ and ‘scientific’ problems of ‘system performance’ need to take a back seat to the task of negotiating the form and content of the economic, ecological, cultural and political relations in and through which people create and reproduce the cities and communities in which they live. This, we contend, will help cities contribute to the task of achieving sustainability in a globalizing world. Seen in the light of these issues, the task of developing sustainability ‘indicators’ implies two overarching questions:

1. What is it that makes a city or community sustainable?
2. What is it that, when present or missing, makes a city or community unsustainable?

Sustainability indicators are therefore and in the first instance, simply a means for assessing the ‘distance’ between a current state of affairs and the ongoing task of achieving a sustainable way of life in the context of a given city, institutional or community setting. In the second instance, however, they must also be much more—a means of instituting dialogue over the very conditions of sustainability.

In order to address the problem in these terms, the ‘Circles of Sustainability’ approach is conducted across two levels. After working through the scope and social definition of the body in question—that is, developing a Social Profile of the city or community and identifying the key problems it confronts—the first level of analysis centres on redefining these in terms of four domains of social practice. This first level moves away from the usual approaches, such as a triple bottom-line accounting, to one that gives equal weight to the four *domains* of economics, ecology, culture and politics. The second level involves rethinking the question of how a city or community measures and evaluates sustainability by reflecting upon a series of qualitative social themes, and how these relate to the quantitative indicators that are chosen to provide the basis for ongoing management of the task of achieving the sustainability goal (Figure 1). The next section of this paper outlines the four domains and links them to some common, and some not so common, quantitative indicators, before providing an outline of the tasks that Level One engagement involves. Discussion then describes Level Two engagement in the process.

Figure 1. Circles of Sustainability

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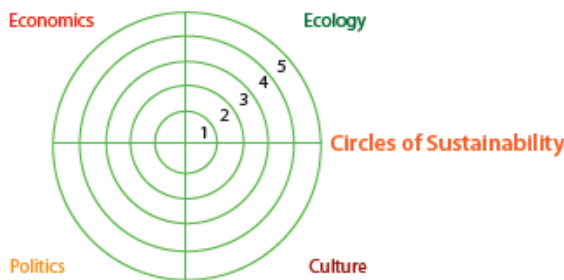
Circles of Sustainability

The Circles of Sustainability is an indicators set which offers an interpretation of a city's or a community's sustainability. The indicators in each segment of the large circle establish the breadth and scope of sustainability, while the small circles offer more depth, and focus attention on key social themes. The Circles of Sustainability have been developed by the Global Cities Institute and the United Nations Global Compact Cities Programme.

Background considerations

1. What kinds of things indicate that a city is sustainable?
2. What kinds of things (when missing or present) indicate that a city is unsustainable?
3. Who benefits and who loses in the current situation and how might this be changed?
4. What does it mean, in relation to current norms, to negotiate these matters?

Level One



1 - unsatisfactory 2 - minimal 3 - satisfactory 4 - good 5 - excellent

Questions

What is the depth of awareness of the issue in relation to each domain?

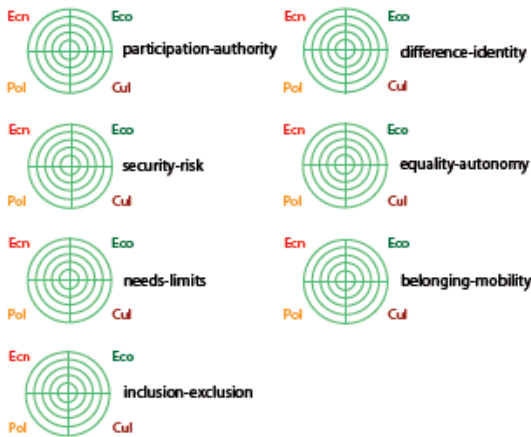
How adequate have been the practical responses to this issue in relation to each domain?

How appropriate have been the resources brought to bear on this issue in relation to each domain?

How well have responses to this issue been monitored across each domain?

Level Two

Social Themes



1 - critical 2 - compromised 3 - liveable 4 - resilient 5 - optimal

Questions

What is the depth of awareness of the relationship between this theme and the issue in relation to each domain?

How adequate have been the practical responses to negotiating the terms of this theme across each domain?

How appropriate have been the resources brought to bear upon these negotiations?

How well have the negotiations been monitored?



The Approach in Practice: Level One

Many indicators projects work from what we've been referring to as a 'triple-bottom-line' model. They characteristically aim to measure the impact upon the economic, social, and environmental 'bottom lines' of a discrete functional unit. The key implication of seeing things in this way is not just that it tends to centre on the economic but also that it assumes a strong commensurability of values between the different domains. Even when moving beyond plain monetary value and return on investment, triple-bottom-line approaches tend to presume that social, environmental and economic sustainability are either commensurable *a priori* of other considerations or that the economic domain provides the basis for translating between them. The orientation of such approaches to project-evaluation means that strong commensurability *and* strong comparability of values are taken as givens. In these approaches, all actions and their effects are calculated under the same *numeraire*⁷, as if the holism of sociality itself were not comprehensively disrupted by the instrumentalism of the agent carrying out the project. That is, as if the social tensions that are created when acting to achieve something in society did not produce multiple situations in which the values of those affected were rendered incommensurable. For example, instead of treating the ecological domain as having its own imperatives, the environment becomes 'an economic externality': simply another cost and so, subordinated to economic activity. The approach developed here rather, recognizes the tension between (generative) values across different domains (for example, between 'needs' and 'limits' across the domains of economics and ecology) while remaining cognizant of the need for comparability across (particular) values—that is, across the way in which such tensions are negotiated.

Defining the Domains of Sustainability

Instead of treating social life as something separate from the economy, the approach discussed here starts with 'the social' and conceptually divides it into four *domains* of practice—the economic, the ecological, the political and the cultural. This is not to relegate the social to a background feature of human practice, but rather a deliberate decision to put *sociality as a process* at the centre of all questions about sustainability. It means that the economy is treated as one of four *social* domains rather than as something separate, with its own intrinsic rules and norms.⁸

Within each of these domains, the difficult task of negotiating a set of indices remains. The following discussion sets out both to define the domains and begin to consider how they relate to various metrics. In the final version of such an indicator set, like the Global Reporting Initiative framework, we would seek to have some core metrics (to allow for some comparability) and a large number of additional interrelated metrics which a body considering sustainability might choose from or add to (to allow for contextual relevance).

7 Martinez Alier, J. *The Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar (2002), p. 29.

8 This not to suggest that the four domains are in practice completely divided spheres of activity. All that is being said here is that it is useful for analytical purposes and for assigning metrics to treat them as separable realms. It does not mean that we cannot talk of 'the culture of economics' or 'the economics of ecology'. Neither does it mean that we are simply taking for granted the contemporary sense of a separate domain of the economy, as distinct for example from the political, which is not supposed to interfere with the mechanisms of the market. That is a peculiarly modern understanding of the relationship between the economy and the political which arose historically with the establishment of the capitalism as the dominant mode of production and exchange. It is relevant that the concept of 'ecology' was coined at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century and derived from the same Greek word *oikos* meaning 'house, dwelling place, habitation' as in the concept 'economy'. Part of the more recent confusion is that, with the dominance of capitalism, there has arisen an understanding of the economic that takes it in both directions. On the one hand, economic considerations are treated as having spread into all aspects of life, and, on the other, the economic is projected as a *necessarily* separate domain based on the imperative of market freedom.

The Economic Domain

The economic domain is defined in terms of activities associated with the production, use, movement, and management of resources, where the concept of ‘resources’ is used in the broadest sense of that word. The domain of economics bears upon questions of production, exchange, consumption, organization, and distribution of goods and services, as well as the criteria for value that coincide with such relations. While the social scientific sub-discipline of economics deals with important aspects of the economic domain as it is being conceptualized here, economics most often focuses exclusively upon quantitatively appraising the value and costs of production and distributive activities, and the market opportunities for active consumption. Such an approach is unsuited to the present aims, because in failing to account for where it is that (economic) value comes from, economics as a discipline tends to take as given the ends of economic activity. As such, the concept of an economic domain that is used here ‘takes a step back’ and aims to look more closely at how value is constituted as a meaningful thing in and through the relations of exchange and production. That is, rather than privileging the technique currently predominant in the economic domain—that is, capitalistic markets mediated via abstract value (money) as the medium for exchange—the approach takes as given only that people draw upon resources to produce and exchange things, knowledges, and services in order to in order to maintain and enhance their lives.

In this sense, key indicators of economic sustainability currently in use may be too narrowly conceived.⁹ For example, the unemployment rate, the percentage of persons participating in paid work in the formal economy—often determined quantitatively as a measure of workforce participation—is a useful indicator only when is put in social context. It depends firstly on how the unemployment rate is determined: for example, in Australia, the United States, and Britain, an ‘employed person’ is defined as working more than an hour in a week.¹⁰ Insofar as it is not possible to sustain one’s self on one hour of paid work per week under almost any circumstances without other support, this makes the figures suspect. Secondly, it depends upon the relationship between formal employment, wage levels and the cost of living. Even if the unemployment rate is set at a higher number of hours, such an indicator fails to draw attention to the average wage rate. People living in a city with low rates of unemployment might also be mired in working poverty because wage rates are too low. Alternately, such an indicator fails to draw attention to the number of hours that employed people work. People with jobs in a city with a high unemployment rate, and which may even have a ‘good’ social security system, might be working unsustainably long hours even though they are paid relatively well. Thirdly, in many places—and arguably across much of the Global South—unemployment measured on such terms is deeply problematic for reasons that turn on the relationship between the formal, the informal economy and the nature of social reproduction. The ‘monetary’ aspects of the economic domain in cities and communities across the Global South often take a subordinate place to non-monetary forms of economic activity. In terms of the overall goal of achieving sustainable development, enhancing the informal economic means of reproducing one’s life might be more sustainable than advocating increased involvement in monetarized economic relations.

5 As has been described by B. Ehrenreich, *Bait and Switch: The Futile Pursuit of the Corporate Dream*, Granta, London, 2006; J.B. Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*, BasicBooks, New York, 1991; R. Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, Yale University Press, London, 2005; amongst others.

10 See, <http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/user-guidance/lm-guide/concepts/employment/index.html>; <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/6202.0Glossary1Nov%202009?opendocument&tabname=Notes&prodno=6202.0&issue=Nov%202009&num=&view=>; http://www.bls.gov/cps/cps_htgm.htm. Accessed 11 Jan. 2010.

N.B. In the US the definition of employed is actually if a person ‘did any work at all’ in the survey period, usually one week.

The indicators or metrics of sustainability in the Economic Domain might include some of the Global Reporting Initiative indicators, but they would need to be rewritten in significant ways to make them relevant to other bodies than just corporations.

Table 1. GRI Economic Indicators

Economic Performance	
EC1	Economic value generated and distributed, including revenues, operating costs, employee compensation, donations and other community investments, retained earnings, and payments to capital providers and governments. (Core)
EC2	Financial implications and other risks and opportunities for the organization's activities due to climate change. (Core)
EC3	Coverage of the organization's defined benefit plan obligations. (Core)
EC4	Significant financial assistance received from government. (Core)
Market Presence	
EC5	Range of ratios of standard entry level wage compared to local minimum wage at significant locations of operation. (Additional)
EC6	Policy, practices, and proportion of spending on locally-based suppliers at significant locations of operation. (Core)
EC7	Procedures for local hiring and proportion of senior management hired from the local community at significant locations of operation. (Core)
Indirect Economic Impacts	
EC8	Development and impact of infrastructure investments and services provided primarily for public benefit through commercial, in-kind, or pro bono engagement. (Core)
EC9	Understanding and describing significant indirect economic impacts, including the extent of impacts. (Additional)

To these we would consider adding other metrics such as the local minimum cost of living (that is, the socially defined poverty level taking into account the nature of economic reproduction); the proportion of population involved in sustainable subsistence agriculture (the 'first' 2,500 Kilojoules per day from produce grown); or the proportion of population involved in in-kind trading networks (the 'first' 2,500 Kilojoules per day from produce grown). More importantly, we would argue that the subdomains of economics as presented by the GRI need rethinking. Again this entails going back to basics to consider economics as a set of practices rather than an ideologically understood series of outcomes such as 'economic performance' or 'market presence'. We suggest the following subdomains:

1. Production and Resourcing
2. Exchange and Distribution
3. Consumption and Leisure
4. Work and Welfare
5. Technology and Fabrication
6. Wealth and Allocation
7. Other

The Ecological Domain

The ecological domain is defined in terms of the intersection between the social and the natural, focussing on the important dimension of human engagement with and within nature. This is to emphasize that—despite the fact that the natural environment is a material reality that extends beyond the human experience of it, and despite the increasing capacity of technoscience to reconstitute elements of nature—the ecological domain in the broadest sense as both social and natural. This is not quite the same as the point most crudely made in arguments which suggest that nature is always socially constructed or we are seeing the end of nature. Certainly, more and more of nature is being physically reconstructed, but it is important not to lose sight of the fact that nature continues as a realm beyond the human even as it includes us as biological beings. Nature beyond the human always bears back upon the human condition, and this has consequences for dealing, for example, with natural disasters and what used to be called 'Acts of God'.

Some examples of indicators or metrics from the GRI include:

Materials	
EN1	Materials used by weight or volume. (Core)
EN2	Percentage of materials used that are recycled input materials. (Core)
Energy	

EN3	Direct energy consumption by primary energy source. (Core)
EN4	Indirect energy consumption by primary source. (Core)
EN5	Energy saved due to conservation and efficiency improvements. (Additional)
Water	
EN8	Total water withdrawal by source. (Core)
EN9	Water sources significantly affected by withdrawal of water. (Additional)
EN10	Percentage and total volume of water recycled and reused. (Additional)
Biodiversity	
EN11	Location and size of land owned, leased, managed in, or adjacent to, protected areas and areas of high biodiversity value outside protected areas. (Core)
EN12	Description of significant impacts of activities, products, and services on biodiversity in protected areas and areas of high biodiversity value outside protected areas. (Core)
EN13	Habitats protected or restored. (Additional)
Emissions, Effluents, and Waste	
EN16	Total direct and indirect greenhouse gas emissions by weight. (Core)
EN17	Other relevant indirect greenhouse gas emissions by weight. (Core)
EN18	Initiatives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and reductions achieved. (Additional)
EN19	Emissions of ozone-depleting substances by weight. (Core)
EN20	NOx, SOx, and other significant air emissions by type and weight. (Core)
EN22	Total weight of waste by type and disposal method. (Core)
EN23	Total number and volume of significant spills. (Core)
EN24	Weight of transported, imported, exported, or treated waste deemed hazardous under the terms of the Basel Convention Annex I, II, III, and VIII, and percentage of transported waste shipped internationally. (Additional)

Some examples of indicators or metrics in the Ecological Domain, which extend the GRI sets, may include indicator sets widely used in ecological economics: HANPP (human appropriation of net primary production); EROI (energy return on energy input); Ecological Footprint; MIPS (material input per unit service). Other ecological indicators or metrics used might include biodiversity across locality, preservation of species across locality, and carbon kilograms per head of population per year (carbon footprint mean). Here, the suggested subdomains are as follows:

1. Earth, Water and Air
2. Flora and Fauna
3. Place and Habitat
4. Materials and Energy
5. Building and Infrastructure
6. Emission and Waste
7. Other

The Political Domain

The political domain is defined in terms of practices of authorization, legitimation and regulation, where the parameters of this area extend beyond the conventional sense of politics as concerning the state to include not only issues of public and private governance but also basic issues of power. In this sense, politics is not just a practice restricted to governments. It is carried on in space and over time, anchored in bodies, and is extended or amplified, withheld or diminished through technologies and the techniques and knowledges associated with their uses. The political is derived etymologically from the Greek concept of the *polis* or city, hence the concept of *polity* as a organized governance system, but we extend it here to include all processes of authority formation including those that occur in corporations, non-government organizations, and even non-formal institutions such as the family to the extent that relations of authority pertain in a relatively generalized and enduring way.

Here the GRI framework does not help us very much though it does have suggested indicators around the question of corruption. Indicators of sustainability in the political domain might include the following, but note that this first take on the political domain has begun with conventional indicators that focus on the state and citizenry: citizens' participation in electoral processes; presence of independent political parties; availability of representatives to electorate for consultation; accountability of government body to citizenry; and the number

and intensity of armed conflicts per decade. They would be organized in relation to the following subdomains:

1. Organization and Governance
2. Rights and Justice
3. Communication and Dissemination
4. Representation and Negotiation
5. Conflict and Insecurity
6. Dialogue and Reconciliation
7. Other

The Cultural Domain

The cultural domain is defined in terms of practices, discourses, and material expressions, which, over time, express continuities and discontinuities, and commonalities and differentiations, of meaning. Like all the other domains, this apparently simple domain of human life is extraordinarily difficult to define simply.¹¹ It has its etymological history in the concept of ‘cultivation’ or ‘tending’ including the cultivation of nature such as in agriculture, and then later the cultivation of character and aesthetics. While the dominant contemporary use of the concept of ‘the cultural’ is in relation to the arts or popular culture, we have defined it here more broadly to emphasize patterned expressions of social meaning that include but extend beyond either the ‘culture industries’ or the realm of the aesthetic. In working towards a set of relevant indicators, here again the GRI framework does not provide us with much help. Examples of indicators of sustainability in the cultural domain might include the following: the number of sacred places in a given area and the way in which they are recognized, used or maintained; the number of community celebrations or festivals in given area per year and the level of public involvement; and the percentage of individuals who feel that they have adequate access, freedom and time for artistic activity.¹² The subdomains for culture can be analytically distinguished as follows:

1. Engagement and Placement
2. Symbolism and Aesthetics
3. Memory and Projection
4. Enquiry and Learning
5. Wellbeing and Resilience
6. Reproduction and Affiliation
7. Other

Qualitative Engagement: Moving Beyond ‘Traditional’ Indicators

Developing an indicator set on these terms involves long-term social commitment of the participants. Alongside and integral to the task of deciding on the metrics that will inform our understanding of the four domains, Level One begins with something of a sustainability ‘self-definition’ task. This task is designed to get the process moving, and forms a discrete but complimentary aspect of the wider research effort of ‘Social Profiling’. One of the first tasks of the project is to ask how the city or community in question defines itself as such. This encourages participants to set out some ‘objective’ criteria that establish where their city community is located in space, in time, and within wider societal contexts.

The key aim here is to ‘profile’ the city or community in question in terms of the four social domains.

6 See Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Fontana, Glasgow, 1976.

7 The last example comes from M. Holden and C. Mochrie, *Counting on Vancouver: Inaugural Report of the Vancouver Urban Observatory*, 2006.

This task takes place in conjunction with a questionnaire and series of ‘strategic interviews’ and ‘conversations’ that the UNGCCP Local Secretariat uses to establish some understanding of the city or community in question. While this might include things like exploring historical relationships with other communities, cities, and/or institutions for example, such matters are not at this stage central concerns of the mapping task. Included in the approach at this level is the need for development of a social profile. This is intended to provide a high-level, strategic view of the community or city.¹³ The Social Profile is strategic, and serves as a guide and overview of the city’s or community’s aims and objectives, as well as a timeline for the project and identification of key participants and those affected by its implementation.

In summary, this initial stage will build up a Social Profile of the city or community and its place in the world. The objective is for participants, and members of the collaborating research team to come to some understanding of what the city or community is, and how it is situated within the world. To this end we suggest that a series of four questions are useful to framing the first level of self-assessment:

- A. What is the depth of awareness of (a. questions of cultural sustainability; b. questions of economic sustainability; c. questions of ecological sustainability; d. questions of political sustainability)?
- B. How adequate have been the practical responses to (a, b, c, d)?
- C. How appropriate have been the resources brought to bear on (a, b, c, d)?
- D. How well have responses to (a, b, c, d) been monitored?

	a Cultural Sustainability	b Economic Sustainability	c Ecological Sustainability	d Political Sustainability	Means/Sources of Verification
A	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	Policy documents, Reports, Legislation.
B	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	Quantitative Data
C	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	Government Reports, Institutional Reports, Qualitative Evaluation
D	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	1-2-3-4-5	Quantitative Data Government Reports, Institutional Reports, Qualitative Evaluation

The Approach in Practice: Level Two

The examples of indicators across the domains presented as part of Level One are helpful. However, these offer little room for actual negotiations over what it is people can put into making a city or community sustainable. The aim of going beyond ‘traditional’ indicators is to *negotiate* over what constitutes knowledge about how best to practice city or community life, and to develop and implement *learning* and *practice* along these lines. Our suggestion is that it is only by engaging in the task of deliberating over the normative criteria that frame possibilities for implementing these indicators that these can become guides to sustainable development practice.

Hence, Level Two takes things a little further, and builds upon Level One by developing a deeper understanding of what goes into understanding how communities change over time *in relation to* broader societal contexts. It is aimed at understanding how best a city or community might develop the resources it has, and how it might better gain access to further

8 Global Reporting Initiative, *Sustainability Reporting Guidelines: Version 3.0*, Collaborating Centre of the UN Environment Programme, New York, 2006.

resources, mindful of the need to account for sustainable development to citizens, in order to increase sustainability in ‘globalizing’ conditions. Hence, the overarching questions from Level One—(1) What is it that makes a city or community sustainable? (2) What is it that, when present or missing, makes a city or community unsustainable?—are in Level Two complemented by two further guiding questions:

- 3) Who benefits and who loses in the current situation and how might this change as different practices are negotiated?
- 4) What does it mean, for present and potential beneficiaries and losers, to negotiate these matters?

The key questions in Level Two are designed to elicit reflection upon how some of the most important over-arching issues that inform social life in space and over time might contribute to or detract from the goal of achieving sustainability. Below are the seven ‘social themes’ that constitute the basis for negotiating the boundaries within which indicators of community sustainability need to be established. Represented in the form of pairs of related concepts, each social theme draws attention to major sources of tension within communities. Participants are asked to reflect upon and substantiate the ‘objective’ position of their city and its communities in relation to each of the social themes, (cross-cut by the social domains of economics, ecology, culture and politics).

1. participation—authority
2. identity—difference
3. security—risk
4. equality—autonomy
5. needs—limits
6. belonging—mobility
7. inclusion—exclusion

Each of these Janus-faced themes is embedded in existing debates that draw broadly from existing ethical traditions. The concepts contained within the pairs are in tension, but they are not opposites. Even within the various classical traditions ranging from socialism to liberalism, and from Confucianism to Christianity, there is no obvious answer to the question of what constitutes the good; therefore, the key question is how are these tensions socially negotiated within different settings in order to enhance positive sustainability. Because of constraints of space, we limit ourselves to describing two or three of those social themes and showing how they might work as possible qualitative indicators of social sustainability. It bears repeating, that in each case the central issue is to work through in practices how the associate concepts with such social themes are being (and will be) negotiated.

Participation—Authority

Across the tensions inherent in this social theme, participants need to think about how it is that participation in sectors of social life is related to the authority structures of the body in question. The assumption here is not that participation is better than authority, or vice versa. Rather, what is being brought into question is the degree to which people participating in social life can do so in a meaningful way, and how they do so in relation to the forms of authority exercised within their community, city or organization.

Identity—Difference

Across this continuum, participants are called upon to think about how it is that notions of difference are related to social identity. The aim here is to elicit an understanding of how well a community, city or organization copes with difference, while being mindful of the fact that too much emphasis on difference can lead to fragmentation and dissolution of the strengths of a life in common. If a social identity is too strong, or too strongly enforced, this might give rise to an unsustainable and unjust xenophobia. On the other hand, if difference and diversity

within a given body are given too much emphasis, then it may be weakened in political situations requiring a common voice, such as in negotiations over funding matters. For example, in terms of the political domain, this question is aimed at eliciting how power relations within the community might support a strong sense of identity that, as such, includes a capacity for coping with change. The key here is not how much diversity and how much commonality, but how the play of difference and identity is negotiated.

Inclusion—Exclusion

Typically in contemporary debates, ‘social inclusion’ is treated as a social good to be achieved and ‘exclusion’ is a bad thing to be avoided.¹⁴ The issue that this very common conception of the problem elides is that in certain circumstance it is exclusion that leads to a social good. For example, in places where harassment is common or social difference is threatening, there may legitimately be a need to exclude ‘outsiders’ from certain activities or places—for example, excluding other than Moslem women from a public swimming pool on Thursday afternoons. Sometimes even the open and mobile presence of others in a zone of difference—for example a customary sacred site—renders that site cultural and politically dead. A second, and more abstract point, is that concentrating on overcoming questions of exclusion tends to leave issues of exploitation unaddressed. Unless, for example, we take seriously the forms of poverty specific to being marginalized under contemporary conditions of globalization, exclusion is seen to have no perpetrator. Seen in this way, exclusion or exploited inclusion ‘is the form that poverty develops in conditions where the realization of profit occurs through organizing economic operations in [globalizing] networks’. It represents the ‘exploitation of the immobile by the mobile’ and therefore, suggests that a city, community, or organization act to tie-down the perpetrators of such exclusion-inclusion exploitation.¹⁵ The point is that only by coming to grips with how—on what terms and who—a city, community or organization includes *and* excludes some and not others that sustainable development in its most meaningful sense can be implemented.

Although for the present purposes the seven social themes listed are more than sufficient for highlighting the complexity of social sustainability the list could be extended for example to include the following:

8. past—present
9. wellbeing—adversity
10. local knowledges—expert systems
11. mediation—disconnectedness
12. freedom—obligation

In practice, a particular city, community or organization could chose to investigate less than the seven social themes in the primary list. As with the four domains we would give guidance on the appropriate set of metrics that would be appropriate to throwing light on the different social themes. At this level, we also can repeat the same questions asked in Level 1, except that this time the questions are asked in relation to the social themes.

Grounding an Alternative Approach

While it seems complex on first presentation, the ‘Circles of Sustainability’ approach attempts to reverse the privileging of technique over reflexively engaging in the world. Indicators-based projects often seem to perpetuate a particular set of epistemological and ontological assumptions concerning our place in the world. At risk of caricaturing important and helpful efforts aimed at achieving sustainability, it does seem that some indicators-centred

9 M. Eames and M. Adebawale, eds, *Sustainable Development and Social Inclusion: Towards an Integrated Approach to Research*, Policy Studies Institute, London, 2002.

10 L. Boltanski and E. Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso, London, 2005, pp. 354–5.

approaches embed uninterrogated ideas or beliefs about the social within the research task. Themes such as inclusion, participation, identity, and security are treated as if they can directly be translated into substantive empirical claims. Moreover, indicators projects tend to see the social world as a closed system or unit possessing system-like properties. Of course at one (very abstract) level, the globe *is* for all intents and purposes a closed system. However, we argue that such a perspective privileges the possibility that the world and its parts *are* objectively knowable as a closed system, and that pulling the levers up or down will give relatively automatic and predictable outcomes.

This is a problem for several reasons. Research premised upon understanding the social in terms of ‘system differentiation’ tend to assume an apolitical metaphor of ‘harmonious interchange’ can characterize human activities.¹⁶ We suggest that it is precisely in humans’ capacity to critically evaluate and even disrupt the interchange of power and value that efforts to practice sustainability need to be understood as dissolving or breaching ‘systemic’ boundaries. Humans are able to imagine themselves *and* to act as if they are not part of a closed system environment. Indeed, it might be argued that it is precisely the untrammelled proliferation of human activities that is a key source of unsustainability. With this view in mind however, the question emerges as to what kinds of forces would need to be deployed in order to create a world where conformity with system requirements is enforced? As writers such as Val Plumwood have suggested, these would more than likely need to be both deeply unjust, and as such would ultimately prove unsustainable.¹⁷

A number of relatively recent indicators-based projects, themselves based in systems-theorizing, do recognize and attend to this problem. For example, Joanna Becker argues that there are sufficient similarities between ‘Living’ and ‘Social’ systems, such that the latter may be understood on the same terms as the former. In this view, ‘healthy social systems ... consist of a diversity of inter-dependent but self-sufficient entities appropriate in scale and low in entropy so as to provide stability and durability while at the same time being responsive to the uncertainty and fragility of evolutionary succession’.¹⁸ Arguably, *a priori* meta-theoretical claims—about the positive benefits of diversity, the self-sufficient inter-dependency of atomistic units, and the applicability of evolutionary succession to social life—hang over such approaches. Although recognizing the need in indicators projects for what Simon Bell and Stephen Morse call a ‘circular “soft” approach of beneficiary learning by stakeholders’.¹⁹ However, Becker’s systems-theory tends to be uni-directional. It privileges an understanding of systems that can be known in their entirety. In this case, obscured behind the meta-assumptions of systems-theorizing is the need for cities or communities to deal adequately with disputes over pressing human issues that often run contradictory to predicted system expectations. Some examples include the possibility that members of a city or community might legitimately call for homogeneity, as against diversity, or demand measures to institute strong other-reliance, by contrast with self-sufficient interdependency.

A similar example is found in work by John Peet and Hartmut Bossel. They aim to develop an ‘ethics-based systems approach to indicators of sustainable development’. Moreover, the co-authors emphasize how ‘a participatory process is essential, to ensure that both knowledge and value are appropriately incorporated into the process’ of developing indicators of sustainability. However, their set of ‘basic orientors’, which draw on systems-theory—existence, psychological needs, effectiveness, freedom, security, adaptability and coexistence—frame the participatory choice of indicators by a city or community.²⁰ Once

11 J.C. Alexander, *The Civil Sphere*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006, p. 33.

12 V. Plumwood, ‘Inequality, Ecojustice and Ecological Rationality’, *Ecotheology*, no. 5/6, 1999.

13 J. Becker, ‘Measuring Progress Towards Sustainable Development: An Ecological Framework for Selecting Indicators’, *Local Environment*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2005, p. 99.

14 Becker, ‘Measuring Progress Towards Sustainable Development’.

15 J. Peet and H. Bossel, ‘An Ethics-Based Systems Approach to Indicators of Sustainable Development’, *International Journal of Sustainable Development*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2000, pp. 224-5, 33.

more in this example, it is suggested that certain meta-theoretical assumptions pervade such an approach, which may in practice remove from a city or community the capacity to debate and 'learn' from sustainability projects. Interestingly, Peet and Bossel elevate the ecological challenge to the position of a working deontological principle.²¹ While recognizing that the 'sustainability moral postulate' is 'entirely sensible and reasonable for most people', positing some or other deontological ethical principle of sustainability from it obscures the actual problem. That is, positing a deontological principle of sustainability returns us to the abstraction that allows the social to be observed as a system. By contrast, the approach developed here recognizes that the problem of establishing sustainability arises precisely at the point where debating and negotiating over the ethical principles to be applied breaks down.

Gerard Delanty has argued that, 'Science is increasingly becoming a communicative system that interacts reflexively with society'.²² This understanding of scientific knowledge is important. As the threats posed by climate change to the *sustainability* of human society become increasingly urgent, the nature of scientific knowledge about the environment becomes increasingly relevant to concerns with sustainability. Indeed, scientific knowledge is increasingly being produced and acted upon in ways that respond to and represent concerns hitherto seen as part of the ambit of the social sciences or humanities. Indeed, scientific knowledge is increasingly being politicized and as such, subjected to 'external' and 'non-scientific' evaluation and critique. Conversely, Delanty's point can be understood to mean that contemporary citizenship needs to be partially re-conceived on process of engagement; as a 'learning' condition. This is an argument that Delanty himself has taken up in relation to a concept of 'cultural citizenship' that is developed through engagement in social practices aimed at fostering 'communicative competencies'.²³

Meanwhile, at least since the Rio Summit and Brundtland reports, the knowledge created by the social sciences is increasingly called upon by policy-makers as a means for preparing societies for climate change, and for developing sustainable ways of living. In this sense, the social sciences have come to occupy an 'interpretive space' in society. Social scientific knowledges, especially when combined in research with knowledge from the 'natural' sciences, constitute part of what Peter Wagner sees as 'part of the discursive self-understanding of social life'. What is important about these understandings is that they not only help to demystify scientific knowledge and represent it as a part of social life, but they help to break down a legitimacy deficit between 'hard' and 'social' science forms of knowledge.²⁴

Conclusion

Overall, it is argued that this approach will go some way towards responding to the key contemporary issue in the literature on auditing sustainability—the difficulty of discerning 'clear links between the development of an indicator programme and actual changes in decision-making and policy outcomes'.²⁵ It is often recognized that many indicators projects continue to 'show few signs of true engagement and dialogue with citizens over time', and that 'the endeavour to put sustainable development into practice by developing indicators is a

16 Peet and Bossell, 'An Ethics-Based Systems Approach', p. 224.

17 G. Delanty, 'Knowledge as Communication: A Review of Recent Literature on Method and Theory in Social Science', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2002, p. 83.

18 G. Delanty, 'Citizenship as a Learning Process: Disciplinary Citizenship versus Cultural Citizenship', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, vol. 22, no. 6, 2003, p. 558.

19 P. Wagner, *Theorizing Modernity*, Sage, London, 2001, p. 36.

20 F. Sommers, 'Monitoring and Evaluating Outcomes of Community Involvement: The Litmus Experience', *Local Environment*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2000, pp. 483–91.

difficult task in terms of citizen participation'.²⁶ Guiding the present set of suggestions for rethinking indicators-based projects is the primary claim that they tend to blur the possibilities for bringing into question the structures of social power and criteria for values that can support sustainable practices or challenge unsustainable practices. Indicators-based research can tend to conflate structural conditions, institutional processes and desired outcomes under pre-ordained understandings of societal conditions, as if these were *objectively knowable*. To the contrary, an excessive emphasis upon quantitative data sets and metrics as generically constituting 'indicators' can work to mask or occlude possibilities for appraising situations in terms of the quality of human practices for those participating in them. Indeed, it has been suggested that 'educating stakeholders about the process of achieving sustainable development may be the most important result of the indicator selection process, even if implementation remains uncertain'.²⁷ While projects such as Sustainable Seattle and the Regional Vancouver Urban Observatory hold a deep commitment to expressions of citizens' values, 'based on the vision of what residents want for themselves, their families and their communities',²⁸ we want to take things further. That is, we want to engage people in the job of *achieving sustainability as a task of itself*, while being located within a framework of global collaboration that brings together cities as sites of local-global sustainability governance.

The problem confronting research into sustainability that is aimed at developing 'indicators' therefore appears as one of understanding on what terms a city, community, or organization creates and reproduces itself: in local-global space and over time. Recognizing this as a problem creates demands that the research engage with the social body that is being 'studied' as well as examine how *relations of power and its legitimation and criteria for socially determining values* affects the task of achieving sustainable practices. Our argument is that achieving sustainable development is the task of reflecting upon the nature of 'development', and creating and implementing societal practices, such that people in place themselves create and reproduce their own ways of life, which 'meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

Seen in this way, sustainable living—including sustainable producing, exchanging, communicating, organizing and enquiring—requires both local and globalizing knowledges. One side of the process of developing indicators of sustainability and implementing sustainable development involves *learning about* and *negotiating over* what constitutes knowledge about how best to practice sustainable, city or community life. Learning in this sense requires on the one hand that the epistemological status of expert abstracted knowledges is contextualized and qualified in the process of dialogue with citizens. On the other hand, it also means that citizens and planners have a responsibility that goes beyond minimally conceived 'rights and duties' or stakeholder 'capacities and responsibilities'. In this case it means citizens and planners trying to understand the implications of indicator systems beyond getting excited or depressed by the placement of one's city or community—high or low—on taken-for-grant league tables. The emergence of this basic social competence in thinking about sustainable development requires an open sceptical questioning of both local visions and the taken-for-granted meaning of various presentations of 'indicators' of sustainability in achieving those visions. It entails relating indicators to a broad commonsense of liveability in relation the possible economic, ecological, political and cultural consequences of different pathways of development.

In this light, any project engaging with people in a city to develop appropriate indicators of sustainability is an ethico-political project of co-operative practice. It is a practice best

21 K. Eckerberg and E. Mineur, 'The Use of Local Sustainability Indicators: Case Studies in Two Swedish Municipalities', *Local Environment*, vol. 8, no. 6, 2003, p. 612.

22 Becker, 'Measuring Progress ...', p. 88;

23 S. Bell and S. Morse, *Measuring Sustainability: Learning by Doing*, Earthscan, London, 2003.

24 SustainableSeattle, *Sustainable Seattle and Indicators*, King County, Seattle, 2005, p. 6.

effected in the intersection of considerations over how institutions of local and global governance can work together. In effect, we are proposing a *neo-deliberative* approach to the in-common and ongoing task of delineating and enacting sustainability as a normative goal. This contrasts with accepting the Habermasian premise that deliberation is or can be freed of value-considerations and so offer normative criteria in itself. Rather, the approach developed here recognizes that a relative consensus on the norms or principles that will orient a city, community or organization to sustainability needs to be established as a point of departure by those holding different value commitments as they enter the debate. This relative consensus will most often not meet the standard set by ‘communicative rationality’. Therefore, interlocutors require a framework like the one developed here need to manage the situation. The task then of dialogically working together in a negotiated practice of intersecting governance can expose unsustainable practices, unhelpful relations of power and inappropriate ways of valuing things. In the words of the Regional Vancouver Urban Observatory, ‘Urban indicator projects attempt to create consensus around shared values and key trends’.²⁹

The requirement of negotiating over the effects of implementing sustainable development practices—who benefits or loses out, which institutions or groups are empowered or disempowered, what kinds of overall benefits accrue to a city, community or organization, or what kinds of losses will be taken on by a city, community or organization—is central to their success. To a large extent, sustainable development as a societal practice requires the approval and acceptance of those it involves. This claim holds in relation to macro-issues, such as urban-planning regulations, as well as micro-issues, such as kerbside recycling programs. Without the involvement and support of citizens, members and/or workers, sustainable development as a societal practice will fall short of its aims. To make this point is not to ignore or diminish the need for regulations or even punitive measures such as restrictions on resource exploitation or fines for non-compliance or participation. It is to suggest that these regulations need to be developed, negotiated and understood in the broader context of national-state and globalizing conditions as part of a commitment to sustainability.

Indeed, it is the commonalities and continuities of the social world—in all their complexities and abstractions as global relations, states, cities, communities, and administrative, legislative, economic and civil institutions—that make negotiating the complex intersecting dimensions of sustainability possible. An approach which begins at this level of generality and simultaneously takes into account, and encourages, critical reflection upon the differences between cities-in-place, we suggest, offers much more than all the high-profile global summits put together, with their dead-end ‘agreements’ over metrics and levels of unsustainability.

25 Regional Vancouver Urban Observatory, www.rvu.ca, accessed 5 May 2008.