

Coming full circle

CAN WE MEASURE THE SUSTAINABILITY OF OUR CITIES, COMMUNITIES AND ORGANISATIONS? AN ECONOMIC FOCUS MAY LEAD ITSELF TO MEASUREMENT, BUT RESEARCHERS AT RMIT ARE PROPOSING A MODEL WITH A DECIDEDLY SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE.

In 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.

Indeed, the growth in the use of sustainability indicators is phenomenal. Even one of the most widely used and prestigious frameworks for developing indicators, the 'Global Reporting Initiative' (GRI), sees 'reducing report proliferation' as a major issue. There are corporate-sustainability indices, city-liveability indices, community-sustainability indices, waste-disposal indices... the list goes on.

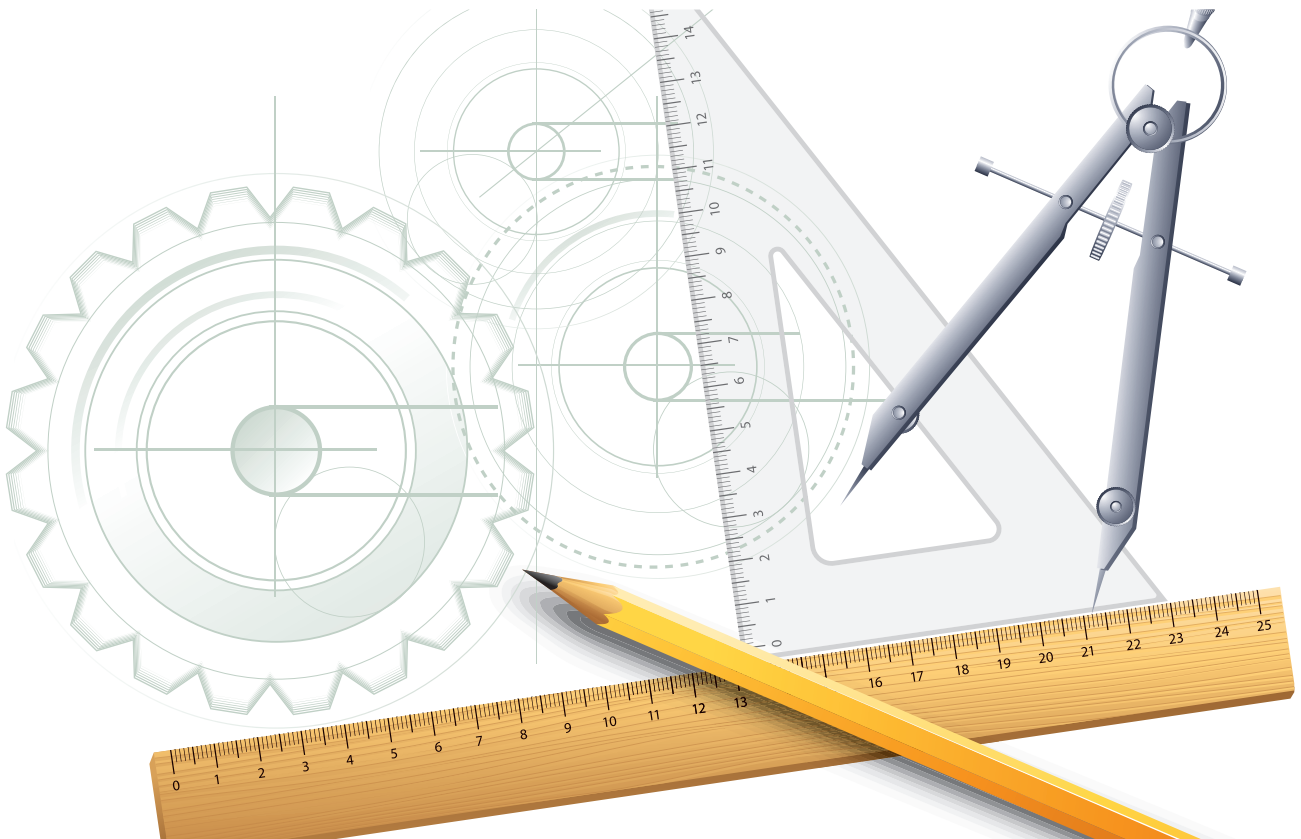
Ticking boxes

The development of an adequate indicator set is, in fact, extraordinarily difficult. The one-dimensional quantitative

basis of many such projects means that the achievement of sustainability is often reduced to a technical chore – the task of gathering data and ticking performance boxes.

The size, scope, and sheer number of indicators included within many sustainability projects means that indicator sets are often unwieldy and resist effective implementation. An emphasis on externally-derived indicator sets can often cause a city, corporation or community to lose focus on the locally available resources and conditions that might actually support alternative sustainable practices, or challenge existing unsustainable practices.

Further, indicator sets tend to become like 'the house that Jack built', trying to add rooms and corridors when what is needed is a redesign of the whole abode. 'Triple bottom-line' accounting is an instance of this, as ecological and social sustainability are tacked on the back end of a continuing economic imperative of profitability.



Flexible framework

The point 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 with the complex and 'globalising' world to achieve sustainability.

Achieving sustainability begins as the task of reflecting upon the nature of human activity. The aim is to develop and subsequently to implement practices that can ensure cities and communities are being recreated to 'meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (*Our Common Future*, The Brundtland Commission, 1987).



Professor Paul James, Director, RMIT Global Cities Research Centre

In the first instance, sustainability indicators are simply a means for assessing the 'distance' between a current state of affairs and the ongoing task of achieving a sustainable way of life, given the context of a city, or an institutional or community setting. In the second instance, however, sustainability indicators can be much more – a means of instituting dialogue over the very conditions of sustainability.

The challenge here is to develop a flexible framework that speaks to existing relevant measures of sustainability, translates between them, and then broadens the terms of reference and the nature of the social engagement. Amidst major societal and ecological challenges, activities need to be woven, unwoven, and rewoven in the light of new knowledge.

Circles of Sustainability

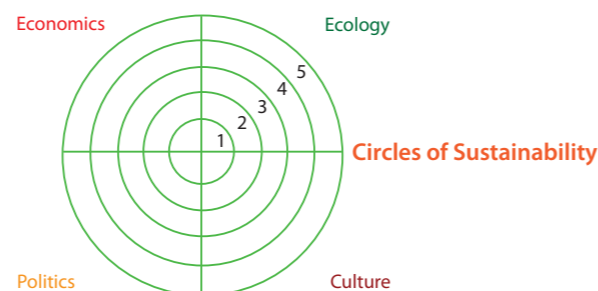
In order to achieve this, the Global Cities Institute and the UN Global Compact Cities Programme has developed a set of

Circles of Sustainability

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?

Figure 1: 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.

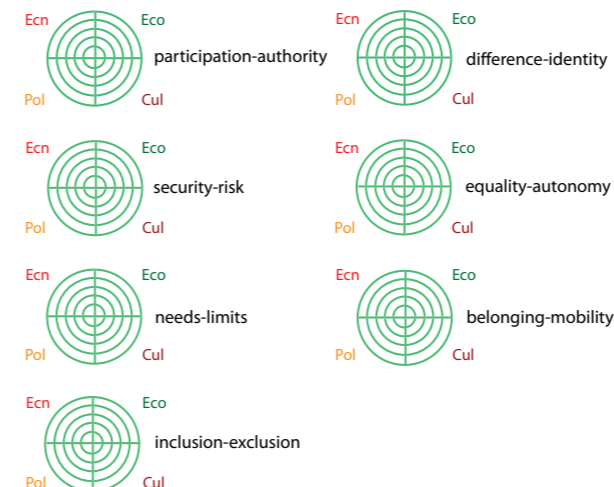
sustainability indicators employing a two-level approach. The first level of analysis centres on redefining the core domains of social practice. It moves away from the usual approaches such as triple bottom-line accounting, which continue to place economics at the centre, to an approach that gives equal weight to economics, ecology, culture and politics.

The decision to place sociality at the centre of all questions about sustainability is a deliberate one. It means



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?

that the economy is treated as one of the social domains, rather than something separate with its own intrinsic rules and norms. It is towards the job of recreating social relations that efforts to constitute sustainability must be directed.

Social themes

Level Two of the COS has a greater depth of analysis and is designed to elicit reflection on how some of the most important over-arching issues that inform social life might contribute to or detract from the goal of achieving sustainability. Seven pairs of 'social themes' have been selected (see figure 1), each drawing attention to major sources of tension within communities.

The concepts contained within the pairs are in tension, but they are not opposites. The key question concerns



Dr Andy Scerri, RMIT Globalism Research Centre

how these tensions are socially negotiated within different settings in order to enhance wellbeing.

For example, in relation to the theme of participation-authority, participants need to think about how participation in sectors of social life is related to the authority structures of the body in question. The assumption 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 this behaviour relates to the forms of authority exercised within their community, city or organisation.

Society rules

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 organisation creates and reproduces itself. Recognising this as a problem creates demands that the research engage with the social body that is being 'studied', and that it should also examine how relationships of power affect the task of achieving sustainable practices.

The achievement of sustainability requires reflection upon the nature of 'development', and the creation and implementation of societal practices that enable people themselves to create and reproduce their own ways of life. This is, as the classic Brundtland definition would have it, meeting the needs of the present without compromising future generations.

Article by Professor Paul James and Dr Andy Scerri of the RMIT University Globalism Research Centre. Professor James is also Director of the Global Cities Research Institute at RMIT. For more information, visit: www.rmit.edu.au/GLOBALISM.