

The Social Side of Sustainability

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Abstract:

When the term sustainability is used, in most people's minds this conjures up images of the environmental protection, climate change, saving the planet. Those who have been in this industry for a while probably have a slightly broader understanding of the concept of sustainability incorporating social and economic aspects as well as environmental. Despite recognition of these other elements, the social side of sustainability has often been overlooked. The original concept of sustainability, presented by the Brundtland Commission, focused on the idea of sustainable development which has social issues at its core. Somehow, this focus has been lost.

This paper seeks to explore the issue of social sustainability – what it is, how it affects what we do and why it is important. The way in which we deliver the built environment has a huge impact on social sustainability. Planning is the process in which we do this and therefore the way that we go about our daily business will, often inadvertently, be contributing to social sustainability. If social sustainability is not given due consideration, it often results in lost opportunities, or at worst, negative social outcomes. It is important to take a practical approach that makes it easy to apply consideration of social sustainability to projects, policy development and programme implementation.

This paper presents ways in which this can be achieved to improve social outcomes and provide for the social well being of future generations. It explores the benefits that can be gained, for both the public sector, and the private sector and applies across all industry sectors including transport, housing, waste and infrastructure to name a few.

Full Paper:

What is Social Sustainability?

Although this paper is entitled 'The Social Side of Sustainability' it is not intended to add to the already substantial amount of literature that discusses the concept of sustainability and what this involves. It is much more focused on one aspect of the sustainability debate, which has seen the least amount of research over the years, and that is the social side. It looks at how the work that we do, as planners, contributes to social outcomes and how we can improve the way we do things to help to ensure that this contribution is positive.

For me, the idea of social sustainability is quite simple – it is about people. It is about understanding people's needs and desires, considering the effects of our actions on the wider community and anticipating and embracing social change to allow people to provide for their social wellbeing in the future.

Naturally, the social aspects of sustainability are intertwined with the environmental and economic aspects. A large part of a person's social wellbeing is dependent on their economic status – how fulfilling their job is or whether they make enough money to support their lifestyle. The environment also has an effect on social wellbeing – recreation often involves use of environmental resources and the physical environment in which we live is important. However, the social aspects are about more than just the indirect effects of environmental or economic sustainability. Sustainable development is about places that allow people to provide for their social needs. However, social sustainability is about more than just a place.

Social wellbeing is a concept that has received a lot of attention in recent times. There are a number of different ideas as to what constitutes social wellbeing. Although this is not an exhaustive list, for the purposes of this paper, it is considered that social wellbeing is influenced by the following:

- Health
- Personal relationships
- Safety
- Standard of living

- Material affluence
- Equality
- Freedom
- Achievements
- Community connectedness
- Future security
- Environment and services

The concept of social sustainability is about more than just providing for our social wellbeing – it is about sustaining a high level of social wellbeing in the long-term. There are a number of social factors that are key to sustaining social wellbeing in the long-term. These include:

- Equity
- Understanding
- Diversity
- Inclusion
- Quality of life
- Opportunity
- Individual empowerment¹

It is important that we consider how these aspects are maintained as changes in the social environment occur in the future.

Why is it Important to Consider Social Sustainability?

As planners, everything we do has an effect on social sustainability.

Setting an agricultural policy in a regional plan that requires farmers to change their methods may result in higher operational costs or a move away from traditional practices passed down through generations. This will have both an economic and a social effect.

In the energy sector, closing a mining operation that has been the main source of employment for a whole town in a rural part of New Zealand will have social consequences, not just around loss of employment, but also sense of community and lifestyle.

By permitting the development of a new area of housing, we will not only have an effect on the social sustainability of existing residents but also the new residents living in the new development. This is particularly true of housing developments where affordable housing and private housing is required to sit together side by side.

It is therefore inherent in our jobs that we have an impact on social sustainability. So we need to try and ensure that the impact that we have is positive, or that the negative impact is fully considered and mitigated where possible – or strategies are put in place to deal with it. Although many of you would consider that these issues are being addressed as part of your job, we don't always explicitly consider them in enough depth.

The Minister for Local Government has expressed a view that social issues should be dealt with by national government. However, this takes a very narrow view of the types of activities that have a social effect, as this is often greatest in the activities of local government. By dealing with social issues at a national level, there is also a reactive approach rather than a proactive approach looking at those activities that determine social outcomes. In the health industry, there has been a move away from treatment, to preventative action – essentially from the reactive to the proactive. This has, in some cases, been supported by an appropriate shift in funding, to tackle the determinants of health, rather than the health problem itself. This is what we need to do with social sustainability.

If we don't do this we end up with social problems, such as:

- Deprivation and poverty
- Crime and safety issues
- Inequality and segregation of communities
- Low quality of life
- Social exclusion

These problems then need to be fixed and this can be more costly than getting it right in the first place.

¹ www.stirlingcitycentre.com.au

There are good reasons to consider the social impacts of your activities and operations, even if it is not part of your core business as is the case with many governmental organisations.

Risk management – by looking at the potential social impacts of our actions, in terms of likelihood and consequence, we can plan for and mitigate potential negative outcomes. This can help to avoid substantial delays and costs later in the process as problems that weren't previously considered become apparent.

Successful outcomes – for organisations who are specifically tasked with improving wellbeing, such as local government, the consideration of social issues at an early stage can lead to improved community outcomes which contribute to KPIs and service delivery.

Improving the bottom line – for private sector organisations, such as developers, considering the social implications of a new development at the design stage can create a better social environment which people want to live in. This can increase the value of land and properties and therefore impact on the bottom line.

Reputation – in recent times, consumers have become more demanding about the products and services that they buy. It is often the case that people will consider more than just cost and quality when deciding which provider to use and will often factor in ethical or environmental considerations. By improving your approach to social wellbeing, you can improve the reputation of the organisation which may be a factor in attracting customers.

Cutting through the red tape – considering the positive social contribution that our actions can make is often overshadowed by negative outcomes. However, understanding the social benefits can be a valuable tool and help to mount a strong argument to secure planning permission, or funding for a project.

How do we Consider Social Sustainability in Planning?

So, how do we be proactive in our approach to social sustainability? How do we ensure that we consider the social aspects of all of our activities, rather than as is frequently the case, just those when there is an obvious social impact? It is important to consider the social impacts of everything we do. This includes policies, projects, programmes, operations and management – though often, this is only considered at the project level.

Social Impact Assessment

The main tool used to assess the social effects of a policy, project or programme is social impact assessment (SIA). SIA should take a holistic view of the impacts of proposed changes, including both positive and negative effects, and provide a framework to compare the effects of different activities.

Robust Research

The key to good SIA and many other elements of social sustainability is good research. Research into the determinants of social wellbeing helps to establish what we need to focus on to enable a proactive approach to improving social wellbeing and therefore contributing to social sustainability. It also helps to understand the existing situation to provide a solid baseline for comparison. Research into other policies or developments also helps to establish the likely effects of a particular action. Research can be used to make policy decisions, or to prove that a course of action is appropriate.

Quantifiable Outcomes

Where possible, it is important to try and quantify social impacts, so that comparisons can be made more easily. It is also important to have a robust methodology for quantifying impacts so that the results of any assessment are credible. Although it can sometimes be difficult to quantify social impacts, establishing benefits and costs associated with a particular approach can help with prioritisation and comparative analysis, and can add to the bank of research available for future proposals.

Other Assessment Tools

There are alternatives to traditional SIA that are used or in the process of being developed. Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) tries to look at a project or policy in a holistic sense and address all the environmental issues including social and economic. Sustainability

appraisal is a relatively new tool being promoted to assess the quadruple bottom line of proposals. When considering such a wide range of issues, multi-criteria analysis is often used as the basis of these assessments to allow for prioritisation and decision making in a structured way. There are also specific tools such as Health Impact Assessment and Equalities Impact Assessment that concentrate on a particular part of social wellbeing. Whichever framework is used, one of the main influences of the success of the process is the level of public participation.

Public Participation

Public participation is a vital element of understanding the social consequences of our actions and proactively managing social outcomes. It is important to understand how communities function and get to the root of existing social issues in order to be able to predict what the effects of particular actions will be, and put in place the programmes to manage and improve social outcomes. There is no better way to do this than to talk to the community themselves. The tools and techniques around public participation would require another paper in its own right, but needless to say, there are a variety of ways that the public can be engaged in this process in a meaningful way, and the most effective approach will depend on the issues, level of involvement required and decision making framework.

Social Planning

When planning for new developments, it is important to consider social infrastructure at the outset. It is often the case that physical infrastructure or 'hard infrastructure' is planned in detail, such as transport and utilities. However, the 'soft infrastructure' which incorporates both community facilities as well as other less visible elements of social wellbeing, often receives far less attention. The design of a place can have a substantial impact of social sustainability. This can include the positioning of key facilities such as schools and open spaces, the interaction between different elements such as social housing and private housing and the overall quality of the design. Good urban design often helps to overcome a number of social issues, and can be as simple as understanding where people need to cross a road and allowing them to do so safely.

In addition to design, there are other aspects that can influence the success in social terms of a new development. For example, the way that social housing is let and managed, the maintenance of open spaces and community facilities and the approach to community involvement and development.

Community Development and Behaviour Change

However, social planning is about more than the physical environment and considering the social issues in the design of new places. It is about how existing communities and new communities develop and change as they grow and mature. Managing this process helps to maintain strong communities and provide for social sustainability. In the past, more effort has been put into planning for new communities than in the management of communities once they are established and this often means that social problems develop in the long-term that could have been avoided.

A large part of community development is providing the opportunity for communities to meet their potential and fulfil their own needs. However, in some cases, a change in mindset or behaviour is required to do this. In health, for example, there is a push towards changing unhealthy behaviours such as smoking, excessive drinking and lack of exercise, to encourage people to achieve a more healthy lifestyle. There are also programmes encouraging a change in behaviour for people who don't currently work to move from reliance on the benefits system to move active participation in the economy. In order to achieve these goals, programmes can be established to help to actively encourage behaviour change, using change management techniques and social marketing.

Monitoring

One of the most important, and often overlooked, aspects of delivering social sustainability is ongoing monitoring of social issues and outcomes. By monitoring communities in the long-term, we can better understand the actual effects of our activities, which helps to make more accurate predictions in the future. It also allows use to develop a greater understanding of social change over time.

Overall, the tools and concepts described above are simple measures that can help to achieve more positive social outcomes and encourage everyone to consider social issues

alongside environmental and economic considerations. It is important that we take a proactive approach to improving social wellbeing, rather than a reactive approach that fixes social problems. This may require a shift in mindset amongst practitioners from both the public and private sector and also requires an integrated approach between different agencies, organisations and the community themselves to be successful.