

Defining sustainability

...before we can even start talking to people about sustainability, we need to be able to communicate what it is.¹

2.1 If Australians are to embrace a national Sustainability Charter, they first need to understand the concept (and reality) of sustainability. However, to date there is no single, universally accepted definition of sustainability or sustainable development and, as evident in this inquiry, any discussion about definition quickly generates debate.

2.2 The most frequently cited definition of sustainable development comes from the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, entitled *Our Common Future* (also known as the Brundtland Commission Report after its chair):

...development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.²

2.3 Although this definition emphasises the long term and ethical aspects of sustainability, it does not clearly identify the necessity for a sustainable environment, just society and healthy economy. Many would argue that these features are the underlying principles of sustainable development and need to be articulated in any definition.

1 Ms Sharon Ede, *Transcript of Evidence*, 24 May 2007, p. 5.

2 Dunphy, D, Benveniste, J, Griffiths, A & Sutton, P 2000, *Sustainability: The corporate challenge of the 21st century*, Allen & Unwin, New South Wales, Australia, p. 22.

- 2.4 Dunphy et al offer a broader definition of sustainable development that better conveys underpinning ecological, social and economic principles.

Sustainable development comprises types of economic and social development that protect and enhance the natural environment and social equity.³

- 2.5 This definition suggests that sustainable development is more a process than an outcome. In fact, one submitter to the Committee's inquiry into sustainable cities stated that the overriding concept of sustainability is:

...a journey, not a destination.⁴

- 2.6 Many submitters agreed with this notion.⁵ Their position, which could be partially attributed to the absence of a concrete definition of both sustainability and sustainable development, is primarily based on the view that a journey would facilitate a process of continual improvement and flexibility.⁶

- 2.7 A number of submitters, by contrast, argued that sustainability is a destination. One submitter uses an analogy of pregnancy to support this proposition.

In my view, *sustainable* is like *pregnant*: it's not possible to be a little bit pregnant, and a society is either sustainable or unsustainable.⁷

- 2.8 This is reinforced by another submitter who contends that the proposed Charter will be rendered meaningless if it is based on the premise that sustainability is a journey, as opposed to a destination, because it is not possible for a particular resource to be partially sustainable (as implied by the term 'journey').⁸ Moreover, one

3 Dunphy, D, Benveniste, J, Griffiths, A & Sutton, P 2000, *Sustainability: The corporate challenge of the 21st century*, Allen & Unwin, New South Wales, Australia, p. 23.

4 Mr Chris Davis, *Transcript of Evidence*, House Environment and Heritage Committee, Sustainable Cities inquiry, 29 April 2005, p. 36.

5 AusCID, *Submission no. 70*, p. 2; Mr Alan Parker, *Submission no. 23*, p. 7; Mr Ian Smart, *Submission no. 88*, p. 8.

6 Minerals Council of Australia, *Submission no. 94*, p. 2.

7 Mr Gordon Hocking, *Submission no. 13*, p. 1. See also Caloundra City Council, *Submission no. 98*, p. 3; Save Our Suburbs (Ryde District), *Submission no. 10*, p. 2; Szencorp Group, *Submission no. 108*, p. 1.

8 Ms Jill Curnow, *Submission no. 18*, p. 1.

submitter maintains that while sustainability is the destination, sustainable development is the journey.⁹

- 2.9 The Committee also received evidence that sustainability is both a journey *and* destination.¹⁰ Babcock and Brown, for instance, argued that the journey represents continuous action (surrounding the value of meeting human needs while reducing environmental and social impact), whereas the destination relates to an outcome of a biomimetic economy (where patterns of production and consumption replicate those of nature).¹¹
- 2.10 Other witnesses regarded the concept of sustainable development as an oxymoron¹² claiming that sustainability and development are incompatible because in order for society to live within sustainable means, development (in the form of production and consumption) must be decreased, not increased (as implied by the term ‘development’).¹³
- 2.11 The journey versus destination discussion provides a platform for further debate on what sustainability and sustainable development mean to Australians. It is clear that some form of definition is required, whether it be conclusive or visionary in nature, so that the proposed Charter and all levels of government as well as industry and the community are on the same path and headed in the same direction.
- 2.12 This viewpoint is supported by numerous submitters to the inquiry who argued that, as a starting point, the proposed Charter must clarify the meaning of sustainability.¹⁴ The process of clarification will involve looking at existing definitions, including those in the international arena, and identifying what the terms sustainability and sustainable development mean in an Australian context.¹⁵ Some submitters suggested that it may be necessary for Australia to

9 HATCH, *Submission no. 99*, p. 2.

10 Babcock & Brown, *Submission no 59*, p. 2.

11 Babcock & Brown, *Submission no. 59*, p. 2.

12 Dr Murray May, *Submission no. 16*, p. 1; Sustainable Population Australia Inc., *Submission no. 44*, p. 6.

13 Dr Ted Trainer, *Submission no. 30*, p. 6.

14 Centre for Public Agency Sustainability Reporting, *Submission no. 45*, p. 3; Dr Murray May, *Submission no. 16*, p. 1.

15 ARUP, *Submission no. 73*, p. 2; Australian Association for Environmental Education, *Submission no. 31*, p. 2; HATCH, *Submission no. 99*, p. 2.

develop a 'new' or different definition.¹⁶ This may, in fact, be an opportunity for Australia to demonstrate leadership in this area.

Australia's position

2.13 In response to the Brundtland report (see paragraph 2.2), Australia adopted the concept of Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD). The COAG endorsed National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development (NSES D) provides the following definition of ESD:

Using, conserving and enhancing the community's resources so that ecological processes, on which life depends, are maintained, and the total quality of life, now and in the future, can be increased.¹⁷

2.14 The Committee has received evidence critical of the term ESD because it implies that ecological systems should sustain development.¹⁸ The term *ecological development* (where the environment, society and the economy fall under the term 'ecological') is offered as an alternative because it emphasises that development should sustain ecology.¹⁹ Moreover, it is argued that ESD is outdated, not easily accessible, nor displayed in a format comprehensible to the general public²⁰ and focuses too heavily on environmental impacts rather than the holistic function of the environment, society and the economy.²¹

16 ARUP, *Submission no. 73*, p. 2; HATCH, *Submission no. 99*, p. 2.

17 Ecologically Sustainable Development Steering Committee 1992, *National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development*, Australian Government, Canberra, viewed 17 February 2007, <http://www.environment.gov.au/esd/national/nsestd/strategy/intro.html#WIESD>.

18 Ms Sharon Ede, *Submission no. 68*, p. 2.

19 Ms Sharon Ede, *Submission no. 68*, p. 2.

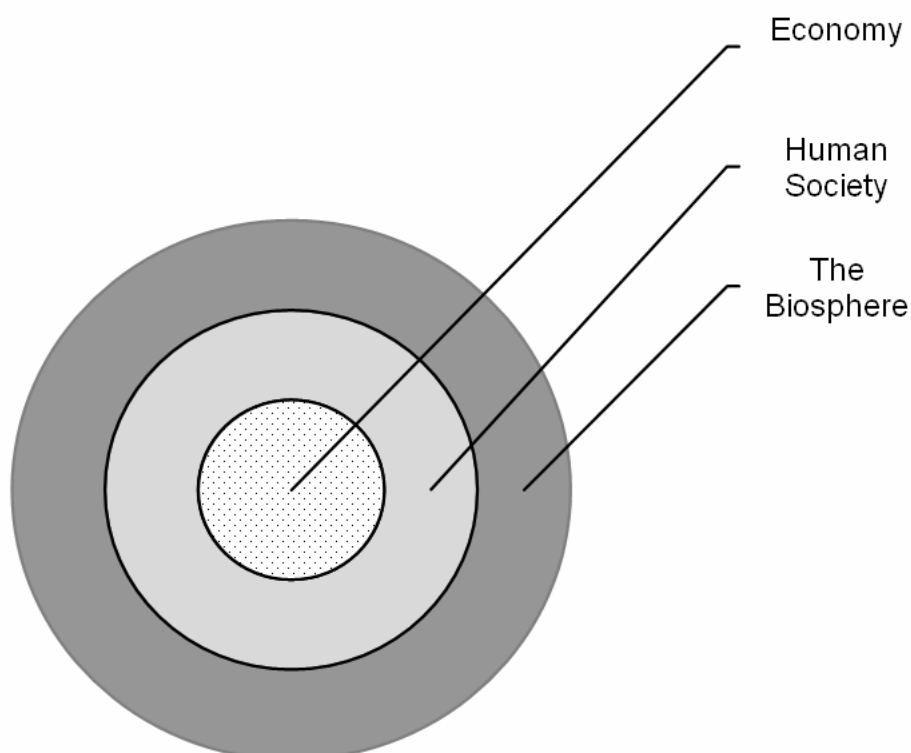
20 Associate Professor Terry Williamson and Mr Bruce Beauchamp, *Submission no. 96*, p. 3.

21 ARUP, *Submission no. 73*, p. 2.

Triple Bottom Line

2.15 It is generally agreed that the relationship between the environment, society and the economy – often referred to as the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) – is the underlying principle of sustainability.²² Various models of sustainability depict this perceived relationship. For example, some theorists believe the three dimensions are of equal importance; others contend that the environment and society play subsidiary roles to the economy; while others view the three elements concentrically where economics is subordinate to society which in turn is subordinate to the environment (see Figure 2.1, below).²³ A preferred model should be adopted when defining what sustainability and sustainable development mean to Australia.²⁴

Figure 2.1 Concentric model of sustainability



Source: Water Corporation, Submission no. 115, p. 3.

22 Australian Council of Recyclers Inc., Submission no. 81, p. 5.

23 Peet, J 2002, 'Sustainable Development: why is it so difficult?', *Pacific Ecologist*, vol. 4., Summer 2002-2003, pp. 16-20.

24 Centre for Public Agency Sustainability Reporting, Submission no. 45, p. 3.

- 2.16 Further to the TBL debate, some submitters argue the need for a fourth dimension of governance performance – a quadruple bottom line²⁵ – while another argues that the TBL is misleading altogether because its entities are means, not ends.²⁶ Here, it is advocated that the bottom line should encapsulate the continuation of human happiness, well-being and good health – the economy and social institutions are vehicles with which to achieve this end.²⁷

The Committee's position

- 2.17 In its previous report, *Sustainable Cities*, the Committee chose to refer to a 'vision for a sustainable city' rather than define sustainability. It then articulated a set of principles and practices, to be continually applied in the context of urban life in order to create sustainable cities.
- 2.18 The Committee now acknowledges that the scope of the proposed Sustainability Charter must extend beyond the urban environment in order to address the issue of what sustainability and sustainable development, in a holistic sense, mean to Australia.²⁸ This may result in a definitive or visionary statement – it may even be necessary to sub-define sustainability within the context of the various areas covered in the Charter.
- 2.19 In the Committee's view, Australians must begin a journey preceded by an agreed definition of sustainability and sustainable development, in order to reach an agreed destination. The important task of developing the definitions of sustainability and sustainable development should be one of the first tasks of the proposed Sustainability Commission.

25 ARUP, *Submission no. 73*, p. 3; EcoSTEPS, *Submission no. 25*, p. 3; Property Council of Australia, *Submission no. 107*, p. 1.

26 Professor Tony McMichael, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 November 2006, p. 2.

27 Professor Tony McMichael, *Transcript of Evidence*, 2 November 2006, p. 2.

28 Ms Sophie Constance, *Transcript of Evidence*, 24 May 2007, p. 11; Professor Daniella Tilbury, *Transcript of Evidence*, 24 May 2007, p. 11.