Benchmarking Sustainability: the use of Indicators

Introduction

The concept of sustainable development is both very popular and elusive. The overwhelming appeal of sustainability is situated in the strong belief of mutual care for the world, hindering or excluding unwanted environmental effects of development, and responsibility towards future generations (Wheeler, 1993). However, while appropriate and praiseworthy in principle, this conception appears to be too vague to provide an adequate basis on which to build a generally shared perception of sustainable development (Butler, 1998). For many people, this is an important reason to discard the notion and argue about the actual effects of such an approach.

Defining and achieving sustainable development has become one of the major policy debates of our generation. Since the term “sustainable development” first came to public attention with the publication of the Brundtland Report (or “Our Common Future”) in 1987, it has been much contested by international forums, academics, scientists, public sector institutions, and private businesses (Eber, 2002). However, it is fair to say that much of the discussion on the concept has been structured around the World Commission on Environment and Development’s (WCED, 1987, p. 43) well-known definition of sustainable development as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Milne, 1998). For the WCED, this involves a process of change in which economic prosperity must be integrated with environmental integrity in a manner that is socially equitable and preserves the culture of a society. In this sense, sustainable development is a comprehensive and inclusive approach which stresses the interdependence of the natural environment with economy and society – the “triple-bottom-line”.

Evidently, the concept of sustainable development is complex both in theory as well as implementation. In an ideal situation we would be looking at a strategy that promotes environmental conservation, development of peripheral areas, enhanced natural resource management, community support etc. Furthermore, in addressing sustainable development, different levels of analysis may be used from global to the destination level, or from household to individual level (Butler, 1998). The relative weight and importance of the subjects related to sustainable development is hardly objectively determinable with universally true standards and depends on the values and ideologies of various stakeholders (Hall, 1998).

All the above seem to have created a lot of confusion regarding sustainability and its intended use depending on the point of reference we choose to employ which in turn has led over the years to a lot of convenient criticism and many lost opportunities.

In fact, and for no obvious reason, sustainable development was for a long time synonymous to environmental protection. (Garrod and Fayal, 1998)
and this partially true reality led all the developments in the field for some years and up to the late 80s.

**Sustainability and Community Development**

Since the 1990s a social movement has emerged focusing more on sustainable community development. (Innes & Booher, 2000) thus broadening the initially perceived spectrum of sustainability.

It may be argued that the social element was already incorporated in the core idea of sustainability but it is also true that it was never explicitly stated or clearly defined. In reality, social wellbeing would be considered more as an aftereffect of the proposed acts for environmental conservation. However, this clarification did not wave the complexity of sustainability but it did lead to new theories concerning sustainable development and its community context.

The key element in this approach can be found in the very definition of what constitutes a sustainable community. Obviously, the description of a sustainable community may vary upon perspective and should be geographically, economically and historically defined (Benetatos, 2008). You do need however a starting point and if we had to agree upon a generic definition then we might say that:

"Sustainable is a community that meets the diverse needs of existing and future residents, their children and other users, contributes to a quality of life and provides opportunity and choice. They achieve this in ways that makes effective use on natural resources, enhances the environment, promotes social cohesion & inclusion, protects the human rights and strengthens economic prosperity”

( Modified from the Eagan review-UK, 2004)

But the question still remains. How do we reach to the point of creation of such a community and how do we create effective policies and measures to validate our strategy. Some of the answers may be found in the usage of the wide spread techniques of policy axis that denote priorities and indicators that provide the measurement instruments.

**Using Performance Indicators**

The most widely accepted and at the same time challenged method of measuring sustainability refers to the use of Sustainability Indicators. There are many definitions available for indicators and we can accept that an indicator may be defined as the measure that enables you to understand your position in relation to where you want to go and under certain conditions; it shows you the way to do so. In other words we are using indicators to provide a point of reference when comparing effects of development in different points in time thus evaluating whether our strategy and policy measures had the anticipated result. As an afterthought such a system can also provide with valuable information about the reasons of success or failure.

However it has been said that the use of indicators is an intellectually appealing idea with little practical application (Wheeler, 1996). In fact it has been argued that: "Millions of Dollars and much time of talented people has been wasted on indicator reports
that remain on the shelf gathering dust” (Innes, 2000), representing some of the heavy criticism addressed towards the use of indicators.

In any case it is always important to remember that:

“Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count;...and everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted ”

Albert Einstein

It is reported that the use of indicators has some very important limitations that need to be taken under consideration when engaging in employing such a system.

**Indicator Limitations**

• The role of an indicator is...to **indicate**...not to **dictate**: This implies that the actual scores of an indicator are not the goal but only the means to our broader plan.

• In order to provide meaningful information an indicator must be seen through an evaluation process like benchmarking.

• Indicators are created in a given moment in time and a community is not a machine. A community is a living organism that usually evolves faster than the supporting theory of the indicators.

• Some indicators are too demanding in terms on data requirements. Furthermore, these indicators may have been developed based on information provided by a more organized society that already possesses significant data collection systems. In this case, and even though such indicators may be tested and found to be of great value in a specific societal context, they may be also rendered useless in other destinations where there is lack in appropriate data.

• Indicators produce only a snapshot in time. In order for such a system to be effective we need to secure continuity.

**Indicators and Benchmarking**

As quoted above, a set of indicators may have effect only when seen through a relevant benchmarking system that will give meaning to the produced measurements.

Benchmarking off course is widely used in business terminology in an effort to measure effectiveness. However, in our case we would like to consider benchmarking in a different manner:

“...not though the spectrum of competitiveness. We would rather view this as a process that exemplifies average and best known practices” (Modified from the Eagan review-UK, 2004)

This is not a process that will lead us from “bad to good” but from “bad to better” in an ongoing improvement development. A partially self regulating and self adjusting procedure to match the evolving nature of a community, leading to the best possible outcome given resources, place and time.

**Creating a benchmarking Model**

It is not in the nature of this study to test a benchmarking model for our indicators. This would require resources such as testing time that is not available. Thus, we chose to use as a basis already
established models such as the EU Sustainable Development Indicator report that was revised over a period of about 10 years as well as the UK model for Sustainable Communities issued in 2004.

**Focal Point:** with an international group of experts in the broader field of sustainability, academics and partnering to the EUROMED program community representatives we adjusted the appropriate elements of existing theory to create a **tailor made sustainability model**. This model was designed:

- to address the particularities of the participating regions (Greece, Tunisia, Italy, Palestine & Jordan) as a pilot for the broader area of the Mediterranean
- to suit the needs of a fair trade driven local economy based on producing and exporting olive oil to US and EU Markets.

The model develops indicators in seven major categories, all aiming to provide a framework for policy making that will lead to our vision of a sustainable community as presented in previous points.

More specifically these areas include the following:

Based on these areas we produced 25 indicators:

**Governance**

1. Provide Continuous Process of Participation
   - Document frequency of meeting and participant participation processes
   - Establish indicators of participation (composition, demographics)
   - Document meetings and responses (Establish record of public participation)
   - Provide for local community access to information and feedback

2. Establish means for continuous monitoring
   - Develop evaluative assessment tool for measuring goal attainment
   - Establish strategic milestones
   - Provide participation for multiple respondents (farmers, producers, community, partners)

3. Promote local community resiliency
   - Establish “over-time” collection of measurement date on participation
   - Document participation changes over time
   - Measure progress towards goal attainment
   - Establish an index measuring residents’ ability to achieve agreement

**Economics**

4. Optimize benefits to households
   - Collect data on employment and income
   - Establish profile relating to cooperative venture
   - Establish indicators relating to housing residency and other permanency factors
   - Employ economic data sets measuring individual wealth
   - Employ indicators to measure local “good life” factors
   - Establish community health index

5. Optimize direct consumer and producer linkage
   - Monitor types and amount of contact (i.e. website hits)
   - Develop education and promotion materials about producers
   - Promote open houses in villages
   - Promote youth exchange programs
   - Create website

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EUROMED Sustainable Connections: Benchmarking Sustainability: the use of Indicators
6. Emphasize social and environmental business models
   - Incorporate elements of presentations at Bellagio workshop as aspect of business plan
   - Reduce carbon footprint of cooperative venture
   - Incorporate an environmental management, social and cultural element in business plan regarding production and delivery process
   - Attempt to achieve “zero waste” production and operational goals

7. Invest in local capacity
   - System for identification of local needs through surveys, meetings and other means
   - Measurement of investments in local community
   - Rate of return on community investments

Social and Cultural
8. Ensure adequate local olive oil supply
   - Establish export surplus quota respecting adequate local supply to community
   - Measure affordability and availability of local oil supply

9. Reverse rural abandonment
   - Measure number of people returning/remaining in village
   - Migration profile indicators
   - Overall growth of local economy (i.e. new business starts)
   - Assessment of future goals of residents through attitude surveys

10. Promote education and cross communication
    - Workshops and meetings
    - Online networking
    - Technical services
    - Reflection of program objectives in local school curriculum

11. Provide equitable returns
    - Establish system of fair profit distribution

12. Respect cultural and legal norms
    - Promotional material about local communities
    - Compliance with local and national laws
    - Co-authorship of locally produced materials reflecting communities

13. Protect Heritage and Enhance community resiliency
    - Curriculum in schools
    - National publications and news releases
    - Visible manifestation of cultural practices
    - Regional and global workshops and festivals

14. Promote family identity and wellbeing
    - Measure family connectivity to community
    - Increase of Diaspora connectivity

15. Special attention to non-native workers
    - Provision of directed social services
    - Perform satisfaction surveys
    - Inclusion of non-native workers through interviews to assess sense of “belonging”

16. Opportunities for women/youth
    - Provisions for inclusion in all aspects of project
    - Increase in wages and monitoring of unemployment rates
    - Subsidies provided through available grant-in-aid programs
    - Survey of expectations of work conditions compared to experienced work conditions
    - Inclusion of youth and woman in conduct of planning evaluation and surveys

Environment
17. Environmental friendly processes
    - Air and water quality assessment of production processes
    - Application of ‘best management practices’ in all phases of production
    - Evaluation of local versus imported production inputs
    - Achievement of FLO (Organic product) compliance and certification

18. Practice Regenerative Agriculture
    - Employ soil testing monitoring and practices for organic certification
    - Conduct water quality testing
    - Emphasize bio diversity in orchard management practices
    - Encourage collaboration with universities for research of data and testing
    - Establish school curriculum enabling students to engage in local monitoring for environmental quality

19. Increase resiliency to hazards
    - Measure local preparedness to hazard events
Theodore S. Benetatos  
POLICY ANALYSIS 3:4 BENCHMARKING SUSTAINABILITY: THE USE OF INDICATORS

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>20. Establish traceability</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Develop hazard prevention and fire prevention plan</td>
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<td>• Develop protocol for hazard mitigation drills and evacuation</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Incorporate resiliency to hazards plan in business plan</td>
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<tr>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>21. Implement Best Practices employing scientific and local knowledge</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Certification of product origin, type, place of production</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Emphasize traceability in marketing and labeling</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Establish independent testing laboratories to assure quality product evaluation</td>
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<td>• Emphasize quality in terms of objective measurement as well as subjective, based on local expert evaluation</td>
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<tr>
<th>Labor</th>
<th>22. Fair Wage and Protection of Workers</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Meet International Certification Rules (FTO, others)</td>
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<td>• Meet ICO and UN standards, as applicable</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Ensure human working conditions</td>
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<td>• Conduct continuous research on worker conditions</td>
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<td>• Establish system for worker conditions monitoring and assessment</td>
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<th>Labor</th>
<th>23. Non-Exploitive Relations</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Provide for worker access to voice opinions and concerns</td>
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<td>• Inspection and monitoring mechanisms ensuring evaluation and investigation of worker complaints</td>
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<th>Global Partnerships</th>
<th>24. Understanding Diversity and Commonality among partners in promoting peace and justice in Mediterranean Region</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Promote programs for inter-cultural exchange (including youth exchange)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Develop sense of broader collaborative and dependency among cooperative partners</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Promote system for exchange of technology and traditional practices among partners</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Encourage direct, cross-cultural and producer-consumer connectedness</td>
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<tr>
<th>Global Partnerships</th>
<th>25. Cross-cultural connection among consumers and producers</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Establish programs promoting exchange of local and technical knowledge for producers and farmers.</td>
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Bibliography and References


Innes J & Booher D (2000) “Indicators for Sustainable Communities”


