Sustainability Assessment
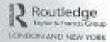
Pluralism, practice and progress

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and thinking presented in the book. Simply, such an approach was necessitated by the contractual arrangements involved in preparing a book for publication, where some certainty is needed about authors, content and length. So in advance, we had decided that the key areas that needed attention to improve practice would be engagement and learning, better process and integration into decision-making process (so the sustainability assessment was influential in some way).

The attention to engagement and learning is, on reflection, a choice we are very happy with. These chapters acknowledge the importance of accommodating pluralism, and also the imperfections in any assessment process, which are only likely to get better if practitioners actively acknowledge the need to learn how to do them better, and to correct mistakes that will inevitably be made along the way. The chapter on process allowed us to identify the interlinkages between the various effectiveness criteria, and this, to an extent, justified the focus on engagement and learning. It also indicated that good process design is crucial to achieving good process. The chapter on integration illustrates how context-dependent sustainability assessment is. Once the principles we developed in the book are taken forward to consider exactly how a process might integrate with decision making, then many decisions will already have been made, in particular, about the sustainability framing that will be adopted.

We feel our choice in framing the key challenges has been largely vindicated, but we also recognise that rapid development in fields as diverse as economic crisis, climate risk and natural hazards means that new challenges to the practice and application of sustainability assessment will emerge rapidly in the future. We therefore encourage readers to reflect on what they judge might be missing from Part 4 in terms appropriate to their own circumstances in time and space, their own cultural, social, political and environmental setting. We would be delighted to respond to debate on their conclusions, but at this point we conclude that we would not have included any other chapters based on the information gained on practice. In the future, as we learn more, this might change.

Are the recommendations made in Part 4 realistic?

There is a danger, when making recommendations, to expect so much to be achieved through the process of sustainability assessment, that transactive effectiveness will not be achieved. The reality of the modern world is that assessment costs money and takes time, and there will never be enough money or enough time to conduct the level of assessment that might be considered ideal. It is also true that levels of uncertainty in economic, environmental and political realms is going to mean that any specific

recommendations about what might be 'ideal' in any given setting will be both hard to pin down, and contested by multiple stakeholders.

Our recommendations no doubt have financial implications in the short term for proponents and practitioners, relative to traditional forms of impact assessment. Good engagement is not free, but the key principles are to be transparent and inclusive – and these principles don't cost money. We believe that the systemic benefits from improved sustainability assessment practices (for both natural and human systems) are substantial, demonstrable and desirable – and that approaches can be found which reduce the financial burdens that might arise for particular stakeholders (e.g. proponents or governments). It is, in any case, a reasonable societal expectation that a project, plan or policy, which is ultimately materialistic (as they often are), should be required and should expect to pay for an appropriate level of engagement, and should be held accountable for its implications for future consequences. Our recommendations relating to learning rely heavily on reflection, and in practitioners, proponents, communities and researchers being prepared to take the appropriate actions arising from their reflections. That reflection will sometimes translate into doing things differently in the next sustainability assessment, but we have also included an expectation that the reflection can also lead to remediation of unforeseen impacts, through some forms of adaptive management, and even to ongoing assessment tasks or processes to some extent. In recognising the significance for sustainability of pluralism, the urgent need for systems that are adaptive to new insights across cultural diversity has been recognised in this book, to counter political economic and legislative systems previously predicated on denying and devaluing the importance of ecological and cultural diversity. The costs of such adaptation might be unforeseen, but our argument is that it is not unreasonable – indeed, in reorienting societies towards sustainability, they may be simple necessities. A parallel might be considered from the consumer society in which we live. If we purchase a (reasonably expensive) good, we expect some form of product support and a guarantee. If something goes wrong, then the guarantee needs to be honoured, and the manufacturer has to embed the price of honouring the guarantee into the price charged for the good. The same principle can surely be applied when considering, for example, resource extraction, with impact and sustainability assessment providing the information on which warranties are based and executed.

For us as editors, the bottom line is that if sustainability assessment is going to lead to legitimate and successful decisions, the sustainability assessment needs to be properly resourced. But resources alone are insufficient to secure and support the changes needed. Nor is better practice in sustainability assessment. This book has demonstrated just how important a shift in societal and institutional understanding of sustainability principles and the development of robust, effective and affordable sustainability assessment processes as a normal part of normal decision making in complex pluralist human systems are. It has offered readers an opportunity to consider basic principles, important