

UBC Social, Ecological Economic Development Studies (SEEDS) Student Report

Social Sustainability 2

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Introduction

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'Sustainable' as, "able to be upheld or defended; able to be maintained at a certain level." However, in the past fifty years sustainability has started to take on its own meaning, one closely tied to conservation. Sustainable development has been famously defined by the Brundtland Commission as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Sustainability is most often pictured as being made up of three equal aspects, those of economic, environmental, and social sustainability. However, while clear definitions can be imagined for both environmental and economic sustainability, social sustainability is often left as a murky and undefined concept that is used as a catch-all basin for any aspect of sustainability that don't fall into either of the other two categories. This has created the present situation where social sustainability means very different things to different organizations. This is clearly seen in the annotated bibliography listed in Appendix A which examines the ways different corporations, institutions, governments define and quantify social sustainability, and what they view as key concepts in achieving social sustainability. How social sustainability is defined varies widely depending on the purpose of the organizations, as do the key concepts. Some corporations consider social sustainability to mean simply the health and safety of their workers, while to some universities it means creating a vibrant artistic community. Social sustainability is also sometimes imagined as the opportunity to educate the target audience about environmental sustainability, with no concerns unique to itself. Despite these large differences in ideas of social sustainability, key themes emerge as items that are integral to social sustainability. The terms that come up most frequently are; **equity, diversity, cultural heritage, strong communities, and health & safety**. These five terms can be seen as the backbone of social sustainability, and any attempt to quantify social sustainability must include them.

University Context

Next it is important to identify which concepts of social sustainability are necessary or appropriate in the university context. Universities have very different situations than either governments or corporations. Unlike corporations, their concerns are not limited to their workers, products, and local communities. Rather, their stakeholders include students, faculty,

staff, and, especially in the case of UBC, residents on campus. Their primary concerns are the education of students, both undergraduate and graduate, and research, and they must try to fit these concerns into the concepts of social sustainability. Universities also have the opportunity to act as examples for the wider community, a concept often referred to as ‘the campus as a living lab.’ Universities have to decide what actions they can directly change, and which they can only hope to influence. For example universities may be able to affect what type of housing is built on land they develop but they are then only able to influence the actions of residents who buy housing on that land. This forces universities to choose between specific obtainable goals and far-reaching unquantifiable ideals. Also, universities face an added wrinkle in that they are not only trying to implement sustainability principles, but they must grasp how elements of learning and research fit into this matrix.

Social Sustainability Guidelines

There are some specific guidelines in existence which aim to help both corporations and universities report their progress in sustainability principles. These are the Global Reporting Index (GRI) and the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS). For a detailed breakdown of these two guidelines see Appendix B.

The GRI is geared at corporations, and is used by several of the corporations listed in Appendix A. However, it is not always directly relevant to the University context. Following convention it divides Sustainability principles into Economic, Social, and Environmental principles. The Social principles largely apply to how a company treats its employees. The guidelines are international in their scope and as a result can address issues that are not relevant to the Canadian setting, such as measures relating to Child Labor Policies. Finally, the guidelines also address responsibility for product safety and accurate labeling, also issues that are not as critical in the university context. However, despite these qualifiers, the guidelines do outline broad categories relevant for social sustainability. These are issues of diversity and non-discrimination, community practices, and health and well-being. These guidelines link, fairly directly, to the five key concepts highlighted earlier and identified by keywords in the annotated bibliography. The one concept identified earlier which is missing is the concept of cultural

heritage, which is absent because it is not a priority for corporations. However, it should still a priority for universities.

The STARS program was aimed with the university in mind, and so does not face the same issues as the GRI. However, when trying to focus on issues of Social Sustainability the STARS program can be problematic. It does not divide its credits into the three aspects of sustainability, choosing instead to divide them into categories of Education and Research, Operations, and Administration and Finance. Nevertheless, like the GRI, it is possible to use the STARS programs to determine which sub-categories are relevant to determining social sustainability. The first category of Education and Research can be broadly linked to social sustainability, especially in the university context, and so all of the sub-categories dealing with curriculum, faculty, and research are all related to social sustainability. The second category of Operations fits better into Environmental Sustainability, but the third category, Administration and Finance, has several sub-categories that deal with issues of sustainability. These are the categories of Community Relations and Partnerships and Diversity, Access, and Affordability. These two categories again link back to the key concepts of social sustainability identified earlier

Social Sustainability Definition

By looking at all the organizations listed in Appendix A and how they have worked to define and quantify social sustainability certain themes begin to emerge. The concepts that stand out the strongest from the subjective process of determining keywords are the ideas of diversity, equity, health and safety, vibrant communities, and cultural heritage. It is clear that these are important aspects of social sustainability, and would have to be included in any working definition of social sustainability. Other themes identified in this process fit into these themes, so we see for example that fairness, social justice, and accessibility can all fit under the theme of equity, while themes of engagement, participation, cultural cohesion, and building relationships all fit into the theme of vibrant communities.

The definition should include the sense of improving conditions; of working towards a goal. It should also include the goal of maintaining things at the current level, the meaning of sustainable defined in the definition of the word. This means not only including things that aim to be improved, such as diversity, equity, or health & safety, but also including things to be

retained for future generations, such as our cultural heritage. The theme of vibrant communities can be seen in both these ways, both as something to improve and something to maintain.

Taking into consideration the key themes identified in the annotated bibliography, and the categories relevant to social sustainability listed in the GRI and STARS guidelines, it is possible to come up with a definition of social sustainability for the university context, and to outline goals to work towards. With all these things in mind, the proposed definition of social sustainability is:

Social Sustainability is a process of improving equity and diversity, supporting and building strong and vibrant communities, and preserving cultural heritage and traditions.

This definition then brings with it a set of goals, or clusters, or activities for UBC to focus on, which can then be broken down further into defined targets that have clear objectives and timelines. The goals, with accompanying definitions, are:

Equity:

UBC is working to provide equitable opportunities and outcome for all its members, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable. This means ensuring social justice and the fair distribution of resources to provide fair access to education, jobs, housing and local services. Equity also exists between generations, and UBC is working so that future generations will not be disadvantaged by the activities of the current generation.

Diversity:

UBC will encourage a heterogeneous campus community of students, residents, faculty and staff that value a broad diversity of thought, background, and perspective. All cultures and religions are to be accepted and given equal prominence in the university. The university will be home to a diverse range of ages, from babies and pre-school children to the elderly.

Vibrant Communities:

UBC is working to increase common experiences that express a sense of place. It is encouraging interactions within the community, community participation, and community stability. Students will be made aware of community groups, especially such groups with a

sustainability focus; membership and active participation will be encouraged. Faculty will be encouraged to develop sustainability focused courses and research projects, and a system for transmitting awareness of social sustainability from one generation to the next will be put in place. Building vibrant communities also entails caring for the health and well-being of the individual members of the university. This involves working to reduce injuries suffered on campus, improving personal safety throughout the university, and entrenching a commitment to human rights around the world.

Cultural Heritage:

UBC is working to raise awareness and supports of the arts, and is working to foster a cultural climate that supports a full range of creative expression, artistic experience, and recreational opportunity. UBC also acknowledges the role of aboriginal people and their historical cultural traditions, and is working to retain those traditions and to transmit those cultural traditions, as well as current cultural traditions, to future generations.

Appendix A - Annotated Bibliography

Events

London 2012 Olympics

Sustainability plan: <http://www.london2012.com/plans/sustainability/index.php>

The London Olympics Sustainability plan focuses on five themes for sustainability. These are: climate change; waste; biodiversity; Inclusion; and Healthy Living. The first three fall under the 'environment' leg of sustainability, while the last two fall under social sustainability. Inclusion focuses on promoting inclusion, celebrating diversity, and contributing to economic and social regeneration of communities. Healthy living focuses on using the Olympics to inspire people to live active, healthy, and sustainable lifestyles.

Keywords: **inclusion, diversity, communities, healthy living**

Vancouver 2010 Olympics

Sustainability plan: <http://www.vancouver2010.com/en/sustainability-and-br-aboriginal-pa/-/31640/toq5zj/index.html>

The Vancouver Olympics Sustainability plan has six main themes of sustainability. These are: accountability; environmental stewardship and impact reduction; social inclusion and responsibility; aboriginal participation and collaboration; economic benefits; and sport for sustainable living. Of these, accountability, social inclusion and responsibility, aboriginal participation and collaboration, and sport for sustainable living could all conceivably be linked to social sustainability. These focus on the accessibility of the Games, especially for the socially and economically disadvantaged, and also to care for their workforce and promote health and safety.

Keywords: **Accessibility, health and safety**

Governments

City of Vancouver

Sustainability: City of Vancouver: <http://vancouver.ca/sustainability>

The City of Vancouver has defined defines social sustainability, saying, "For a community to function and be sustainable, the basic needs of its residents must be met. A socially sustainable community must have the ability to maintain and build on its own resources and have the resiliency to prevent and/or address problems in the future." The definition breaks social sustainability into two sections, human capacity and community capacity and highlights

four guiding principles for social sustainability: equity, social inclusion and interaction, security, adaptability.

Keywords: **equity, social inclusion and interaction, security, adaptability**

City of Portland

Office of Sustainable Development: <http://www.portlandonline.com/osd/>

The City of Portland breaks down sustainability into three categories looking at Watershed and Ecosystem Health, Human/Community Health, and Social/Economic Health. For each category it looks at a number of indicators to measure their progress towards their goals. Indicators under Social/Economic Health focus on issues of civic engagement, social welfare, diversity, and social connections. Human/Community Health focuses on issues concerning air and water quality, but does also include indicators concerning civic and community engagement.

Keywords: **civic engagement, social welfare, diversity, connection**

Universities

Yale

Office of Sustainability: <http://www.yale.edu/sustainability/index.html>

Yale has a three-pronged approach to sustainability which are their use of natural resources, systems and processes, and culture – which relates most closely to social sustainability. Culture focuses on curriculum, research, human health, and governance. They aim to have more sustainability focussed courses, a higher student graduation rate, more funds for research, more financial aid offered for students, and fewer workdays lost to illness by the staff.

Keywords: **education, accessibility, health and safety**

University of Alberta

Office of Sustainability: <http://www.sustainability.ualberta.ca/>

The University of Alberta believes that, “A comprehensive approach to sustainability focuses on the interdependent nature of a robust natural environment, fiscally responsible economy, and vibrant, equitable community.” They feel that the role of the university is to lead by education, research, installing public awareness and a culture of sustainability, and developing the capacity of a society.

Keywords: **equity, education, research**

University of Victoria

Office of Planning and Sustainability: <http://web.uvic.ca/sustainability/>

The University has eight guiding principles of sustainability. Four relate to social sustainability, these are: Respect for History and Culture, Respect for People, Respect for Collaboration, and Respect for Transparency and Accountability. These principles stress the need for openness, equity, accessibility, and diversity.

Keywords: **equity, diversity, accessibility, cultural heritage**

University of Arizona

Campus Sustainability: <http://www.sustainability.arizona.edu/>

The University of Arizona considers eight broad themes of sustainability, seven of which refer to environmental concerns and one of which, “Social equity” that refers to social sustainability. This theme stresses the need for future generations to have the same opportunities as the current one, as well as the need for a quality education to be provided, research opportunities to be provided, and social equity and justice to be promoted on campus but also to the surrounding community and state.

Keywords: **Future Generations, education, research, equity, justice**

University of New Hampshire

Office of Sustainability: <http://www.sustainableunh.unh.edu/>

The University of New Hampshire divides sustainability into four initiatives. These are: biodiversity education initiative, climate education initiatives, food & society initiatives, and culture and sustainability initiatives. The ‘Food & Society’ theme largely looks at local agricultural practices, but does include aspects of social justice and health & wellness. The ‘Culture and Sustainability’ theme commits the university to promoting a creative campus, democratic participation, vibrant communities, social justice, and cultural heritage. They state that they consider “culture and the arts as fundamental to sustainability as clean air and water.” They seek to increase public awareness of arts and cultural heritage.

Keywords: **Social justice, health & wellness, community, cultural heritage**

University of Florida

Office of Sustainability: <http://www.sustainable.ufl.edu/>

The University of Florida’s considers that “to be sustainable, therefore, a practice must preserve rather than destroy its ecological base, ensure rather than undermine long-term economic benefits, and advance rather than retard matters of fairness, equity and diversity.” With this in mind their Sustainability mission is to “integrat[e] the goals of ecological restoration, economic development, and social equity.” To this end they list fourteen guiding principles of sustainability. The ones referring to their goal of social equity are: service and outreach, health, equity, and cultural climate. These goals stress the need to promote diversity

and equity, and to support a vibrant cultural community at the university, while reaching out into the greater community.

Keywords: **Equity, fairness, diversity, cultural community**

Corporations

BC Hydro

BC Hydro Sustainability: http://www.bchydro.com/about/our_commitment/sustainability.html

BC Hydro embraces the idea of the ‘triple-bottom line’ as including economic, environmental, and social components. Their social bottom “includes how we ensure the safety and well-being of people—our employees, customers and the general public—and the health of the communities in which we live and work.” They also feel that it is their social responsibility to provide reliable and low-cost electricity to their customers, as well as to build and maintain healthy relationships with their stakeholders, customers, aboriginal communities, and their employees, and to act in an ethical manner.

Keywords: **Ethical, safety, relationships, accountability, respect**

Telus

Telus Sustainability: <http://about.telus.com/csr2006/csr/en/commitment/2007-sustainability-targets.html>

Telus has set out five sustainability targets to match for each year. These are economic growth, environmental sustainability, community welfare, workplace well-being, and governance, integrity and transparency. These last three can be linked to ideas of social sustainability. Community welfare is about funding local community initiatives with a focus on arts and culture, education and sport, and health and well-being. Workplace Wellbeing aims to increase “team member engagement” and promote diversity in the workplace. ‘Governance, integrity and transparency’ deals with issues of accountability and transparency through the use of oversight boards.

Keywords: **Community, arts and culture, health and well-being, diversity, engagement**

Bombardier

On Track to Sustainability:

<http://www.bombardier.com/en/transportation/sustainability?docID=0901260d80008ea4>

Bombardier’s sustainability report focuses heavily on its environmental impact, both the cost of producing vehicles and their efficiency while moving. On a more social side they look at reducing workplace injuries in their plants, and in providing equal opportunities for their employees. They also stress the need for integrity in the sustainability process.

Keywords: **Health and Safety, equity, integrity**

Suncor

Suncor Sustainability: <http://www.suncor.com/default.aspx?cid=15&lang=1>

Suncor also supports the idea of the ‘triple-bottom line’ accounting. They view the key to fulfilling their social commitments is by “helping to build strong and vibrant communities and working to ensure our business doesn’t place undue stress on the places where our employees live and work.” To this end they have set definite sustainability goals, the most prominent of which is to reduce workplace injuries to zero. They also pledge to maintain good relations with their stake-holders, including local communities, non-government organizations (NGOs), and aboriginal groups, and to invest in the local communities. They also stress a commitment to diversity in their workforce.

Keywords: **Health and Safety, vibrant communities, diversity, strong relationships**

Nortel

Nortel and the Environment: <http://www.nortel.com/corporate/community/environment/>

Nortel views sustainability as being about the environment and about the health and safety of their employees. To this end they measure their sustainability progress by reducing travel, construction costs, office space, and energy consumption, and by increasing the life of their products. The only social aspect they consider is the health and safety of their employees.

Keywords: **Health and Safety**

Papers

Working Paper – University of South Australia

McKenzie, Stephen. “Social Sustainability: Towards Some Definitions.” *Working Paper Series No 27*. Hawke Research Institute, University of South Australia. 2004.

This paper charts the emergence of sustainability as a concept, and the corresponding rise of the ‘triple-bottom line’ concept and the now wide-spread Venn diagram concept of sustainability. However, the author says, the social aspect is often not given equal attention, or is often viewed as a means to advance the message of environmental or economic sustainability. McKenzie looks at some existing definitions, and notes that social sustainability can either be described as a set of best practices, a process to be undertaken, or a condition valid only within the existing community. With this in mind he identifies some of the main aspects of social sustainability in existing definitions which are; equity, diversity, interconnectedness, quality of life, and democracy and governance. His own features of social sustainability closely follow this list, with focuses on equality, sense of community, participation, and protection of cultural values.

Keywords: **Equity, diversity, community, participation, cultural cohesion**

Social Sustainability Metrics

Colantonio, Andrea. "Social Sustainability: An Exploratory Analysis of its Definition, Assessment Methods, Metrics and Tools." *Measuring Social Sustainability: Best Practice from Urban Renewal in the EU. 2007/01: EIBURS Working Paper Series*. Oxford Institute for Sustainable Development (OISD) - International Land Markets Group. Oxford Brookes University. July 2007.

This paper recognizes the relative lack of focus on social sustainability, compared with economic and environmental sustainability, and so undertakes to review the current understanding of social sustainability and to look at metrics used to measure it. In looking at existing definitions of social sustainability Colantonio produces twenty-five key theme areas under the umbrella of social sustainability and highlights the concepts of civil society, cultural diversity and social integration, as key components. She recognizes the difficulty of making metrics of social sustainability that are broad based and easily quantifiable, without suggesting any solutions to the problem.

Keywords: **Civil Society, cultural diversity, social integration**

Housing and Sustainable Communities Indicators Project

Barron, Leanne, and Erin Gauntlett. *Stage 1 Report – Model of Social Sustainability*. Housing and Sustainable Communities Indicators Project. Western Australian Council of Social Service (WACOSS). April 2002. Accessed online Jan 10, 2009 at http://wacoss.org.au/images/assets/SP_Sustainability/HSCIP%20Stage%201%20Report.pdf

This report was prepared for an Australian non-profit organization concerned with improving the quality of life for the marginalized in society. It outlines what sustainability is, and the need for triple-bottom line reporting to convey the true health of an organization. It defines social sustainability in the following way:

Social sustainability occurs when the formal and informal: Processes; Systems; Structures; and Relationships, actively support the capacity of current and future generations to create healthy and livable communities. Socially sustainable communities are equitable, diverse, connected and democratic and provide a good quality of life.

It then breaks down that definition to go into more depth for each of the five items listed in the final sentence of the definition, and gives thirty-six characteristics of socially sustainable communities. These thirty-six characteristics are then defined by whether they relate to just social sustainability, or whether they also relate to either environmental sustainability and/or economical sustainability.

Keywords: **Equity, diversity, interconnectedness, quality of life, democracy and governance**

Appendix B – Reporting Metrics

Global Reporting Index (GRI)

The GRI outlines a framework for corporations to report their sustainability outcomes. The goal is to make reporting sustainability outcomes as common as reporting financial outcomes, and as uniform. To this end the GRI has produced a series of Sustainability Reporting Guidelines that organizations can use to assess their sustainability progress. The Guidelines are broken down into Environmental, Economical, and Social Performance Indicators, of which the Social Performance Indicators are relevant in this discussion. These Indicators are further divided into four sections which are labor practices, human rights, society, and product responsibility. Each of these has a series of aspects that must be reported on by the organization, as outline below.

- Labor Practices and Decent Work Performance Indicators look at: employment figures, benefits, male/female ratios, diversity; Labor/Management Relation; Occupational Health and Safety; and Employee Training
- Human Rights Performance Indicators look at: non-discrimination policies; percentage of investment policies that include human rights agreements; collective bargaining agreements; presence of child labour polices; security practices; and indigenous rights
- Social Performance Indicators look at: Community practices; corruption; public policy; anti-competitive behavior; and compliance with regulations
- Product Responsibility Performance Indicators look at: customer health and safety; product and service labeling, marketing communications, and customer privacy

It becomes obvious reading this list that these indicators are for corporations producing goods or services, and that not all of the indicators are relevant to a University located in Canada, and also there are not indicators that deal with specific issues at hand for universities.

Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS)

STARS is a program that was devised specifically to deal with universities, and so avoid some of the problems of relevance inherent in the GRI system. The project was coordinated by the

Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE). STARS is a self-reporting system for universities where they are awarded credits based on meeting defined criteria. These are divided into three categories: Education and Research, Operations, and Administration and Finance, each of which is further sub-divided into multiple categories, and finally into the individual credits. While these categories are not explicitly labeled as social, economical, or environmental sustainability, it is possible to lump the categories into rough sections of the three aspects of sustainability. The STARS categories are outlined below, with those I grouped as being related specifically to social sustainability marked in **bold**:

- **Education and Research**
 - **Co-Curricular Education**
 - **Curriculum**
 - **Faculty and Staff Development and Training**
 - **Research**
- Operations
 - Buildings
 - Dining Services
 - Energy and Climate
 - Grounds
 - Materials, Recycling and Waste Minimization
 - Purchasing
 - Transportation
- Administration and Finance
 - Investment
 - Planning
 - Sustainability Infrastructure
 - **Community Relations and Partnerships**
 - **Diversity, Access, and Affordability**