

## Defining “Social Sustainability” at UBC

In 1996, Environment Canada’s report, “The State of Canada’s Environment” explained that social sustainability should reflect “the relationship between development and current social norms.” Whereby, “an activity is socially sustainable if it conforms with social norms or does not stretch them beyond the community’s tolerance for change.” Today, the concept of social sustainability has evolved beyond the concept of falling within social norms; however, a precise definition still remains elusive (Foot & Ross: 108). This is because social sustainability represents a personal ideology, as much as it represents social progress.

For example, some hold that sustainability, in its entirety, “must be conceptualized” within a “hierarchy of considerations, with the biophysical limits of the Earth setting the ultimate boundaries within which social and economic goals must be achieved” (Fischer et al.: 621). To support this, some believe that an “ecologically sustainable community is also inherently a socially sustainable community” (Sarkissian et al.: 26). Conversely, others believe sustainability has always been linked to a core concept of human need, therefore it is a fundamental contradiction to believe any kind of sustainability can be achieved without improved social equity and social progress (Adebowale 2001: 5 in University of Technology Sydney). Furthermore, in October of 2008, the Government of Canada noted that social sustainability had “emerged as a fundamental component of sustainability with the recognition that environmental sustainability was unattainable without accompanying social justice” (Western Economic Diversification Canada). While social sustainability’s position in the hierarchy of sustainability can be contested, its importance seems to be universally accepted, wherever it is applied.

This is because social sustainability can be used in any context, whether it be in the university, city, globally, or even in the corporate community. For example, the concept of social sustainability can be used as a business tool; for corporations interested in favourable public relations, social sustainability “has emerged as the third ingredient of a successful business strategy” (Foot & Ross: 108). This means that looking at how social sustainability is defined may say more about who is defining it, than what the term represents. Moreover, socially sustainable values can be applied, even without the mention of the term. The Talloires Declaration on September 17, 2005 does not mention the term “social sustainability” once in the document, but much of its goals are consistent with the concept. It aims to promote engagement by institutions with communities and global neighbours, strengthen the surrounding society, foster a sense of social responsibility among faculty, staff, and students, expand access to education, and empower those who are less privileged. These are fundamental characteristics of many of the definitions of social sustainability listed in the following section.

## **Defining “Social Sustainability”**

Suncor Energy, Inc., a Canadian oil sands developer, defines social sustainability broadly and concisely, as “social well-being” (Seppala). Similarly, Wikipedia defines social sustainability as achieving well-being for people, but also mentions that it must achieve well-being for surrounding ecosystems. In the meantime, Metro Vancouver defines social sustainability in a local context, as community capacity and social cohesion (Seppala), and the City of Vancouver defines a socially sustainable community as one that has the ability to maintain and build upon its own resources, and have the resiliency address problems in the future. On the other hand, Interface, Inc. defines social sustainability in a global context, as programs and processes that promote social interaction and cultural enrichment, meeting the human needs in our society as well as worldwide. Further, Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) defines social sustainability as being able to maintain and build on its own resources, have the resiliency to address future problems, while meeting the basic needs of its residents; “basic needs” include a variety of things, like housing, healthcare, food, jobs, decent income, and safety (CPRN).

In the healthcare realm, social sustainability is described in accordance with sustainable development, as defined in the Brundtland Report; It enables a response “to the needs of long term care without compromising the welfare of future generations” (Garces et al.: 201). In the corporate sector, TransAlta defines social sustainability as something that includes investing in and supporting the local communities in which they operate, public policy participation, safe working conditions, fair wages, opportunities for growth, respecting human rights, and banning discrimination. It is clear, that TransAlta’s vision of social sustainability is framed within the context of workers’ rights and legal work practices. For CNRG International, an organization that provides solutions for environmental, social, and economic sustainability, social sustainability involves integrating local communities, governments, industry, and First Nations; they believe social sustainability is something that is “necessary for improving the quality of life of the most valuable resource: the people” (CNRG). Likewise, the City of North Vancouver believes that the city’s true wealth lies in its citizens, and social sustainability means the basic needs of their residents must be met. The City of North Vancouver describes basic needs as good quality of life, health, equity, livability and inclusion.

On a different note, Western Economic Diversification Canada defines social sustainability in the context of “urban social sustainability;” this involves harmonious social relations, social integration, and improved living conditions for everyone. Like CPRN and the City of North Vancouver, they also believe that basic needs should be fulfilled; for Western Economic Diversification Canada, basic needs include housing, employment, public facilities, and services. Additionally, their definition of social sustainability involves responding to the polarizing and marginalizing effects of globalization at the levels of community, family, and individual (Western Economic

Diversification Canada). In addition, the University of Canterbury's Students' Association defines social sustainability in terms of "ethical and social sustainability." For them, rather than responding to the effects of globalization, it means looking at their own actions by "[r]educing outcomes that result in people being subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to meet their needs." As well, ethical and social sustainability "discourages engagement with companies and financial institutions that fail to meet the ethical or social responsibility expectations of the UCSA;" they are "committed to buying fair-trade products."

It is important to look at the scale each definition is framed in, when trying to understand the stakeholders' motive behind it. Strathcona County's "Social Sustainability Framework" describes a social sustainability strictly from the community's point of view, as one that "offers a sense of community, tolerance and respect for cultural diversity, opportunities for cultural, community and civic activities for all residents, a strong sense of safety and security and a socially inclusive environment with life opportunities for all" (Strathcona 9). Engagement with neighbours, partnerships between government, community, and business, civic values, and community pride are also mentioned in the framework. In a similar vein, a socially sustainable Surrey would be safe, inclusive, responsive to everyone's needs, providing economic opportunity for all (SFU Social Sustainability Fair). Lastly, the University of Technology, Sydney, does not feel the need to mention scale when they define a hypothetical, socially sustainable society, as just, equitable, inclusive, democratic, providing a good quality of life for current and future generations (University of Technology Sydney).

Finally, two definitions of social sustainability emerged from Geog. 446's Jan. 28, 2009 in-class discussion. The first was the "effort to foster a stable community through the integration of ethics by setting an example and using our position as a learning institute." The second was "caring for the changing individual needs of our community so they can be well and productive and able to foster to future imaginations of productive communities" (Seppala). While both these definitions contain elements of what social sustainability should represent, they are also, like many of the definitions above, incomplete. For example, in Robert Goodland's article, "Sustainability: Human, Social, Economic and Environmental," social sustainability is defined in terms of inclusiveness, and maintaining a sense of community. Goodland says that social sustainability means maintaining social capital, cohesion of community, connectedness between different groups, reciprocity, tolerance, compassion, patience, forbearance, fellowship, love, honesty, discipline, and ethics (Goodland). While all of these represent characteristics of a community many people would love to be a part of, Goodland fails to mention elements of social sustainability that would be important at UBC, like health, well-being, safety, and security. Therefore, because UBC's version of social sustainability will incorporate elements from many of the previous definitions, we must first look UBC's specific needs, and then determine which characteristics of social sustainability apply to UBC, and which "clusters" or goals these characteristics fall into.

## The Four to Five “Clusters” or Goals

UBC, through its “Inspirations and Aspirations” sustainability strategy in 2007, already has three social sustainability goals: improving health and safety, making UBC a sustainable community, and increasing the understanding of sustainability inside and outside the university. I will leave out “making UBC a sustainable community” and sum up these goals as: health and safety, and increasing the understanding on campus and beyond. Even though the four “clusters” I will attempt to develop are meant to replace the previous three, I will still consider them in this analysis, along with the following goals that other organizations and governments have come up with.

The City of Vancouver’s four guiding principles are equity, social inclusion and interaction, security, and adaptability. Similarly, CPRN’s four goals are also equity, social inclusion and interaction, security, and adaptability. As well, the City of Vancouver’s Policy Report on May 10 2005 indicated the same four goals: equity, social inclusion and interaction, security, and adaptability (City of Vancouver Policy Report: 2, appendix A). Meanwhile, Strathcona County, a community in Alberta, has four guiding principles: social inclusion, community connectedness and services, social responsibility, and health and well-being. And, SFU’s “Social Sustainability Workshop” for Surrey came up with four principles: equity, safety, diversity/variety, and adaptability. Finally, the University of Technology, Sydney’s four dimensions of social sustainability are equity, inclusion, access, and quality of life. Below, these goals are summed up and integrated, in order of popularity.

1. **(Social) Inclusion (and Interaction):** University of Technology Sydney, City of Vancouver and their Policy Report, CPRN, Strathcona County, SFU’s Social Sustainability Fair (**diversity and variety**), University of Technology Sydney (**access**), Strathcona County (**community connectedness and services**).
2. **Equity:** SFU’s Sustainability Fair, University of Technology Sydney, City of Vancouver and their Policy Report, CPRN, Strathcona County (**social responsibility**)
3. **Health & Well-being/Safety:** University of Technology Sydney (**quality of life**), Strathcona County, UBC’s Inspirations and Aspirations, SFU’s Social Sustainability Workshop.
4. **Security:** City of Vancouver and Policy Report, CPRN.
5. **Adaptability:** City of Vancouver and Policy Report, CPRN.
6. **Increase Understanding on Campus and Beyond:** UBC’s Inspirations and Aspirations.

First off, it should be noted that CPRN, the City of Vancouver, and the City of Vancouver’s policy report have the same set of goals, as well as identical visions of what social sustainability is. It can be assumed, therefore, that these three sources originated from one viewpoint rather than from three independent sources. Moreover, because these groups define the goal of **security** as: economic security, safety, and supportive and healthy environments, this goal can be put into the same “cluster” as **health and well-**

**being** which is defined similarly as a state of physical, emotional, mental and social wellness (Strathcona County). I feel that the term **health and well-being better** reflects the goals of this “cluster,” even though Strathcona’s definition does not mention economic security. This is because you could argue that economic security is irrelevant when all other aspects of health and well-being have been satisfied.

Clearly, inclusion, equity, and health and well-being (including security) are universally accepted goals when creating a socially sustainable community. The challenge now, is to add one or two more goals, while keeping UBC’s specific needs in mind. For this, I will turn to our in-class discussion on Jan 28, 2009, on what geography students thought would be characteristics of “social sustainability” at UBC. I will then attempt to categorize the class’ thoughts within the main clusters:

1. **Inclusion:** equality, multiculturalism, cultural sensitivity, involving all age groups, community feel, community as an entity
2. **Equity:** affordability, student access to housing, equal access, social justice and access to amenities, rights, incorporating people into economy and society
3. **Health & Well-being:**
4. **Adaptability:** longevity of programs implemented by education, within limits of social norms to make changes
5. **Increase Understanding on Campus and Beyond:** decision making processes, consolidation of committee structures, creating a forum where people can understand, education factor

Interestingly, the class did not mention any characteristics of social sustainability that fell into the health and well-being cluster. This is most likely due to the fact that these are not pressing issues for students at UBC, not because health and well-being shouldn’t be part of a socially sustainable UBC. I, for one, would like good health and well-being to continue at UBC, so I will choose not remove this cluster. Further, the class seems to feel that increasing the understanding of social sustainability is important, and this cannot be ignored. In this case, UBC would be responsible for projecting the values of social sustainability into the surrounding communities by educating the public and involving them in the processes. Curiously, none of the organizations and governments, other than UBC, mentioned this as one of their four main goals. For this reason, I believe that increasing the understanding of social sustainability on campus and beyond can be done within the cluster of adaptability, and doesn’t necessarily require its own category. Therefore, the four goals for social sustainability at UBC – by process of elimination and consolidation – are: Inclusion, Equity, Health and Well-being, and Adaptability. They will be defined as follows:

**Inclusion:** The right for all people to participate in and enjoy all aspects of life within the UBC community. Every person should have access to necessary services, education, employment, recreation, and culture.

**Equity:** The fair distribution of resources and facilities among all people within the UBC community. The community should be socially responsible, and aware of UBC's global and local influence and impact.

**Health & Well-being:** UBC should be a healthy, safe, secure, and supportive community that provides physical, spiritual, emotional, mental and social well-being.

**Adaptability:** The ability for UBC to adapt and respond to social change. This is strengthened by education, outreach, and community connectedness.

## **Key Indicators of Social Sustainability**

### **SFU's Sustainability Fair:**

35 social potential sustainability indicators were devised at SFU's Sustainability Fair on June 9, 2007. I have selected the ones that I feel are relevant, and divided them into which of my four "clusters" I feel each indicator would represent. Some indicators could fall into any of the clusters, and they are in no particular order.

#### **Inclusion:**

1. Attendance at cultural events (numbers, who is attending)
2. Measure number of cultural events
3. Measure youth involvement at recreation centres
4. Measurement of diversity of representation at the political and board level
5. Measure voter turnout
6. Accessibility to facilities: wheelchair etc.

#### **Equity:**

1. Unemployment stats.
2. Measure social vulnerability, i.e. price of food, consumer price index
3. Measure community ownership; people staying or living in the city/campus/community
4. Housing prices and affordability, rental stock
5. Physical infrastructure: facilities etc.

#### **Health & Well-being:**

1. Use official measures (crime rates, census data, visits to Emergency) and nonofficial measures (what non-profits record, numbers of crisis calls and visits to homeless shelter. needs to be regionally-consistent measures).
2. How much food is produced locally
3. Measure pedestrian activity.

#### **Adaptability:**

1. Volunteering: facilitating, coordinating and matching of volunteer opportunities
2. Positive image of community

## **Global Reporting Initiative (GRI):**

GRI has pioneered the world's most widely used sustainability reporting framework, this framework sets out indicators that organizations can use to measure and report on their economic, environmental, and social sustainability (GRI). Core indicators are those identified in the Guidelines to be of interest to most stakeholders and are assumed to be material unless deemed otherwise on the basis of applying the GRI Reporting Principles (GRI). Additional indicators are those identified in the Guidelines that represent emerging practice, or address topics that may be material to some organizations but not generally for a majority (GRI). I have selected the indicators that I feel are relevant, and divided them into which of my four "clusters" I feel each indicator would represent. Some indicators could fall into any of the clusters/goals, and they are in no particular order.

### **Inclusion:**

1. Diversity and Equal Opportunity (2 core indicators)
2. Community (1 core indicator)
3. Non-discrimination (1 core indicator)
4. Indigenous Rights (1 additional indicator)

### **Equity:**

1. Labour Management Relations (2 core indicators)
2. Training and Education (1 core indicator, 2 additional)
3. Corruption (3 core indicators)
4. Anti-Competitive Behaviour (1 additional indicator)

### **Health & Well-being:**

1. Employment (2 core indicators, 1 additional)
2. Customer Health and Safety (1 core indicator)
3. Occupational Health and Safety (2 core indicators, 2 additional)
4. Security Practices (1 additional indicator)

### **Adaptability:**

1. Public Policy (1 core indicator, 1 additional)
2. Marketing Communications (1 core indicator, 1 additional)

## **Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS):**

Developed by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), STARS is a voluntary, self-reporting framework for recognizing and gauging relative progress toward sustainability by colleges and universities (STARS: 4). STARS attempts to translate sustainability into measurable objectives, and rather than indicators, it includes 'credits' that are gained from economic, environmental, and social performance (STARS: 7). I have selected the credits that I feel are the most relevant, and divided them into which of my four "clusters" I feel each indicator would represent. Once again, some credits could fall into any of the clusters/goals, and they are in no particular

order. STARS divides its credits into three subsets: Educations and Research (ER), Operations (OP), and Administration and Finance (AF).

**Inclusion:**

1. AF: Community Relations and Partnerships (credits 13-18)
2. AF: Diversity, Access, and Affordability (credits 19-25)

**Equity:**

1. OP: Buildings (credits 1, 2)
2. OP: Dining Services (credit 7)
3. OP: Transportation (credit 27)
4. OP: Purchasing (credit 24)
5. AF: Diversity, Access, and Affordability (credit 26)

**Health & Well-being:**

1. OP: Dining Services (credits 5, 6)
2. OP: Energy and Climate (credits 8-11)
3. OP: Grounds (credit 12)
4. AF: Human Resources (credits 27-32)

**Adaptability:**

1. ER: Sustainability Outreach Program/Co-Curricular Education (credits 1-3)
2. ER: Sustainability Related Curriculum (credits 4-16)
3. ER: Research (credits 20-26)
4. ER: Faculty and Staff Development and Training (credits 17-19)
5. AF: Sustainability Infrastructure (credit 12)

However, despite numerous indicators that apply to social sustainability, the social dimension is often neglected in GRI's sustainability reporting, and in contrast to GRI environmental indicators, reporting on social sustainability occurs less frequently and more inconsistently across organizations (University of Technology, Sydney). In addition, GRI's indicators are designed for organizations, rather than specifically for educational institutions. SFU's indicators for social sustainability, like analyzing the crime rate, are relevant and qualitative, if the data is accessible. But there may be issues with establishing baselines for what specific value denotes social sustainability. As well, data can be obtained for something like the crime rate, but the issue is far more complex. Finally, STARS has many credits, but they are mostly framed as objectives rather than actual indicators of whether or not social sustainability exists. In theory, an educational institution can employ a number of these objectives, but social progress is only made through the effect these objectives have on the institution. This is what needs to be analyzed. In addition, another way of measuring social sustainability may be done by looking at indicators of "unsustainability." These are "social breakdown, cultural disconnection, few incentives for people to participate and lack of awareness and understanding of what constitutes unsustainable practice" (Sarkissian et al.: 26). In sum, STARS, GRI, and SFU's Sustainability Fair all provide a number of indicators for each cluster, but their applicability can be debated.



## Stakeholders and the University Context

All of the stakeholders must be taken into account when preparing to actively pursue social sustainability in the UBC community. The students, faculty, and staff of UBC are the most obvious stakeholders and members of the UBC community, but the population non-UBC affiliated residents and families has been growing lately, as more housing and apartment buildings are being built on the UBC lands. Additionally, the City of Vancouver's general public, as well as people from all over the globe, frequent the campus daily. Therefore, the stakeholders at UBC are the students, faculty, staff, residents, the general public, and citizens in the surrounding areas. On top of this, UBC must acknowledge the effect it has on the rest of the world, whether it be through the purchasing of products and services, giving financial support to certain corporations, or by influencing other academic institutions' policies through leadership and status.

## Conclusions

For UBC, **social sustainability** should mean **meeting the basic needs of every person – globally and locally – through health, well-being, safety, security, equity, and inclusiveness**. This is in accordance with the four clusters: **Inclusion, Equity, Health & Well-being, and Adaptability**. In the definition, however, health, well-being, safety, and security are all aspects of the Health & Well-being cluster, but they are all important enough to warrant being mentioned in the definition. Contrarily, adaptability is not mentioned in the definition of social sustainability, even though it is listed as one of the four clusters. This is because the goal of adaptability is to make UBC prepared, educated, and connected enough to respond and react to social change. Using the word “meeting” rather than “meet” in “meeting the basic needs...,” suggests a more dynamic approach to social sustainability; so, rather than working towards an end, social sustainability is viewed as a continuous commitment by the UBC community.

Further, it may seem, that meeting the basic needs of every person, both globally and locally, is a bit daunting. And, perhaps a better way to put it would have been: “meeting the basic needs of every person... while being aware of global impacts.” But some might feel that this is not enough, especially those in more marginalized parts of the globe. Therefore, there must be an emphasis on “globally” because UBC cannot exist in isolation from the global community. We need to understand that we are global citizens, and our actions have a global impact, both positive and negative. Moreover, one might say that this definition is not specific enough to UBC or to the university context. It clearly is not, but the definition is appropriate. Whether UBC likes it or not, it is connected globally as well as to its surrounding communities. This is because many of its stakeholders come from around the world, and many local students, staff, and faculty don't live on campus because they can't afford to. Therefore, “meeting the basic needs of

every person” is something that cannot be confined within UBC. Otherwise, the definition would have to be changed to “meeting the basic needs of every person, for the brief period of time they spend on campus.” This is why a definition of social sustainability that only applies to UBC cannot be justified. For example, does striving toward inclusiveness and equity mean that everyone should be entitled to a post-secondary education; or conversely, should inclusiveness and equity be limited to those who are fortunate enough to attend UBC. Should UBC be responsible to make itself more accessible to its surrounding communities, or just to those who can afford to live at UBC.

One way to understand the difficulty in attaining social sustainability in a specific context is to compare it to another sustainability issue: global warming. Emissions can be reduced, and environmental sustainability can be achieved at the local level, but the problem itself is not concerned with what is being done locally, it must be solved globally if it is going to be avoided. Similarly, social sustainability can potentially be attained at UBC, but how can you promote concepts like equity, and inclusion within the framework when they are only being applied at that scale. For instance, resources that are being used to improve well-being at UBC could otherwise be diverted towards meeting the basic needs of people in more marginalized areas. In that sense, increasing the well-being of people in one area is actually decreasing well-being in another. This is hardly equitable.

In sum, the length of this document is proof that defining a term like social sustainability is difficult, especially in the university context; however, implementing a concept like this may be even more challenging. Perhaps social sustainability should be approached as an ongoing process, something that may never be achieved, but where positive contributions can always be made, at every level, whether it is at the individual, community, or global scale.

## **Glossary of Key Terms**

**Adaptability:** The resiliency of communities and individuals to respond to change, and build upon what already exists (City of Vancouver Policy Report: 2, appendix A).

**Basic Needs:** Housing, healthcare, food, jobs, income, safety (CPRN). Good quality of life, health, equity, liveability and inclusion (City of North Vancouver). Housing, employment, public facilities, and services (Western Economic Diversification Canada).

**Cluster:** A broad grouping of goals and strategies that contribute to social sustainability.

**Community Connectedness:** A sense of belonging (Strathcona County).

**Equity:** The fair distribution of resources, longer life expectancies, less crime, more civic engagement (City of Vancouver Policy Report: 2, appendix A). It refers to the

- redistribution of resources as well as equal access to the means by which to fulfill basic human needs (Western Economic Diversification Canada).
- Health and Well-being: A state of physical, emotional, mental and social wellness (Strathcona County).
- Human/Individual Resources: Includes things like skills, health, values and leadership (City of Vancouver, City of North Vancouver, CPRN).
- Human Sustainability: “[I]nvesting in individuals through health, education, skills, knowledge, leadership, and access to services” (Goodland: 1).
- Inclusion: See “Social Inclusion”
- Security: Economic security, safety, and supportive and healthy environments (City of Vancouver Policy Report: 2, appendix A).
- Social Capital: Includes shared values, and requires maintenance and replenishment by shared values and equal rights, and community, religious, and cultural interactions. Western-style capitalism can weaken social capital by promoting competition and individualism rather than cooperation and community (Goodland).
- Social/Community Resources: Relationships, networks, and norms that facilitate collective action should be taken to improve upon quality of life, while ensuring that these improvements are sustainable (City of Vancouver, City of North Vancouver, CPRN).
- Social Inclusion (and interaction): The opportunity to access services, learning, employment, recreation, and culture (Strathcona County). The “rights and opportunity to participate in and enjoy all aspects of community life” (City of Vancouver Policy Report: 2, appendix A).
- Social Responsibility: Responsibility for actions, a caring attitude and acceptance of others, diversity, and human rights (Strathcona County).
- Social Sustainability: Meeting the basic needs of every person – globally and locally – through health, well-being, safety, security, equity, and inclusiveness.

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