

EIANZ Position Statement on Social Aspects of Sustainability

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Background

International concerns about the social, economic and environmental challenges facing the world and the need for improved quality of life, ecological protection, social justice and economic equity require an integrated and balanced response. Current Australian policy and statutory commitments to “ecologically sustainable development” do not adequately enable consideration of the social aspects of sustainability, contributing to sub optimal policy outcomes in areas such as climate change policy and water allocation.

Similarly, the EIANZ position statement on sustainability and other related position statements (such as that on climate change and public participation) are focused on ecologically sustainable development and do not include adequate consideration of social aspects of sustainability.

The EIANZ recognises that all interpretations of our environments are based on unique cultural constructs that structure the ways that we perceive environmental disadvantage and govern our environmental practices, which create this disadvantage. Such understanding requires environmental advisers to exercise consideration of their social context when observing, creating, commenting on and approving environmental practices. Environmental science and advice inform political and legal institutions. In turn, these frame the environmental laws and technical codes that govern most environmental practice.

Programs adequately addressing the social aspects of sustainability are often pursued in a cross-disciplinary manner, with the intention of integrating (otherwise formally distinct) disciplines and their methodology and theoretical frameworks. Cross-disciplinary studies have developed new approaches to add to the physical sciences in environmental practice.

There is no generally accepted definition of the social aspects of sustainability but various themes can be identified which include seeking to address peoples’ basic needs, overcoming disadvantage, equitably distributing development opportunities and fostering personal responsibility. Themes that are particular relevant to environmental practice are:

- The human right to a viable natural environment;
- Education and training in sustainability;
- Inter- and intra-generational equity;
- Valuing and protecting disparate cultures;
- Widespread participation of citizens in decision-making; and
- Social responsibility and assurance of organisations.

These themes have practical application in activities focused on fostering sustainable cities, sustainable rural communities, sustainable development and sustainable economics. Each of these themes is described further below.

Human Right to a Viable Natural Environment

Human societies depend on the natural environment for resources and ecological services. Hence any significant changes to the natural environment will affect the human society to some extent and hence the social aspects of sustainability. This intimate connection between human rights and the natural environment is recognised in a number of international agreements dealing with civil and political rights and discrimination.

Efforts by the international community to give some more concrete expression to the right to a viable natural environment are ongoing, building upon the 1972 Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, (‘Stockholm Declaration’), which states:

“Man has the fundamental right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life, in an environment of a quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being, and he bears a solemn responsibility to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations.”

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Similarly, the 1992 Declaration on Environment and Development ('Rio Declaration') recognises the right of humans to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature. The most comprehensive of the international texts on environmental rights is the 1994 United Nations Draft Principles on Human Rights and the Environment. Although this has never been formalised as an international instrument, it is an essential guide for environmental practitioners.

International commitments combining social and environmental aspects of sustainability are being progressively implemented through a program of works putting into action the commitments made in the Rio Declaration and international framework of Agenda 21. The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation was agreed in 2002 as a framework for action to implement these commitments. International efforts continued at the Rio+20 conference in 2012. Australia's priorities in this effort are: food security, gender equality, mining, disaster risk reduction, indigenous peoples, oceans issues and Sustainable Development Goals. New Zealand took a leadership role in two areas within the green economy (the blue economy and fuel subsidies) and supported an initiative for indigenous people to share experiences and learn from each other on managing natural resources (the International Indigenous Land and Sea Managers' Network).

The emerging link between human rights, social justice and the environment presents opportunities for innovative strategies in both advocacy and professional practice. An expression of this link in practice is the idea of a 'resilient community'. Resilient communities reflect the importance of social support systems, such as neighbourhoods, family and kinship networks, social cohesion and mutual interest groups in preparing for and responding to natural disasters.

Education and Training in Sustainability

In 2002, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the years 2005 to 2014, as the 'Decade of Education for Sustainable Development'. Governments around the world have been invited to strengthen their contribution to sustainability through a focus on education and learning. Education for sustainable development¹ recognises the relationship between social issues - such as poverty, health, education, security, human rights, economic development - and environmental issues - such as climate change, natural resource management and water and energy conservation.

Education for sustainable development in Australia and New Zealand builds on approaches used by environmental education over the past 30 years but its scope is more far-reaching. It also includes the built environment, social considerations and economic affordability. Australia and New Zealand both have strategies for the UN decade of Education for sustainable development and more recently Australia has released an action plan for education for sustainability.

Alongside programs to increase the sustainability of school buildings, sustainability has been integrated into the Australian national school curriculum and national vocational competency framework. Many universities in Australia and New Zealand are starting to take a whole of institution approach to sustainability. Partnerships to deliver professional development, such as that being rolled out by the EIANZ on climate change adaptation, are also being formed.

Inter- and Intra-generational Equity

Inter-generational equity requires the present generation to ensure that the health, diversity and productivity of the environment are maintained or enhanced for the benefit of future generations. It accounts for the needs of future generations and is a sustainability principle enshrined in Australian and New Zealand national and state laws, such as the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

Intra-generational equity promotes fairness within the current generation. It requires equal rights among current generations to benefit from natural resources and from enjoyment of a clean and healthy environment. Intra-generational equity is at the centre of international agreements on sustainable development and considers equity within the present generation. Each nation, sector or class needs to take account of the needs of others in its use of natural resources.

¹ *Education for sustainable development is commonly given the acronym 'ESD' in current international sustainability policy literature. There is potential for confusion with the use of the same acronym within Australian environmental policy literature to signify ecologically sustainable development. To avoid confusion EIANZ will not use the acronym.*

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The Millennium Development Goals are eight international development goals that all 192-member states of the United Nations and at least 23 international organisations have agreed to achieve for intra-generational equity by 2015. These Goals include eradicating extreme poverty, reducing child mortality rates, fighting disease epidemics and developing a global partnership for development.

Valuing and Protecting Disparate Cultures

People's attitudes and lifestyles, their responsiveness to educational programs, their sense of preserving a decent future for following generations, the reactions of national and local leaders to scientific and governance policy advice, are all intimately linked to cultural identities and values. Worldwide commitment to sustainable development is dependent on recognition of these attitudes and reactions.

In 2001, the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity was adopted by UNESCO. It considers cultural diversity to be as important as biological diversity in sustainability. Cultural diversity presupposes the existence of a process of exchanges, open to renewal and innovation but also committed to tradition, and does not aim at the preservation of a static set of behaviours, values and expressions.

Local languages and traditional cultures are rapidly disappearing around the world particularly as a consequence of economic globalisation. This dilutes the underlying spirituality and knowledge traded over generations, which is profoundly relevant for sustainability. Growing threats are particularly significant in indigenous peoples, which include some 350 million individuals representing over 5,000 languages and cultures in more than 70 countries on every continent. In Australia and New Zealand, disagreements occur over development proposals involving cultural issues important to Aboriginal peoples and Māori. For example, in Australia the social and economic benefits resulting from mining development are often seen to clash with associated loss of traditional lands and cultural practices.

New Zealand is unique in formally recognizing the rights of its indigenous people through the founding document of the country (The Treaty of Waitangi). The Treaty of Waitangi establishes a series of principles that were agreed between representatives of the Crown and Māori tribes and sub-tribes. The Treaty is specifically recognized by New Zealand's principal planning and environmental legislation (the Resource Management Act 1991).

Widespread Participation of Citizens in Decision-making

Sustainability can be achieved through the procedures of decision-making, which translates sustainability into social practice. An enormous amount of often highly technical information must be gathered to adequately support the complex decision-making processes required to maintain and develop contemporary societies.

The widespread participation of citizens creates opportunities for communities to meaningfully contribute to decision-making and broaden the range of people who have access to such opportunities. Participatory governance is becoming central to both national and international policy. However, in Australia and New Zealand proponents fund the bulk of studies that inform the evaluation of proposals by government decision-makers. Public participation in, and community engagement with, this process is often limited to consideration of formal written submissions.

Community engagement is a function not only of access to the information but access to appropriate technical tools and expert knowledge required to understand technical reports and provide the required technical responses. Formal consultation processes encourage an informational and communications asymmetry, discouraging the consideration of community narratives and local knowledge in decision-making. Collaboration and engagement that focuses on the particular and local is required to empower affected communities, for instance through their participation in decision making, monitoring and evaluation of outcomes.

Social Responsibility and Assurance of Organisations

Social responsibility contributes to sustainability and may be seen as a form of organisational self-regulation, when properly integrated into a business model. Organisations are increasingly being subject to scrutiny by their various stakeholders who are becoming aware of the need for, and benefits of, socially responsible behaviour.

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An organisation's performance in relation to the societies and environments in which it operates has become a part of measuring its overall performance. This recognises the need to ensure healthy ecosystems, social equity and good organisational governance.

ISO 26000 is the international standard for social responsibility. The United Nations has also set Principles for Responsible Investment to guide investing entities. In Australia there are laws governing the information that must be supplied in product disclosure statements relating to labour standards and to environmental, social and ethical factors for all socially responsible investment products. Many organisations use the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) guidelines to report sustainability performance. Some publicly listed companies are also ranked in corporate responsibility indices.

In supply chains, social assurance addresses child labour, forced labour, health and safety, freedom of association and collective bargaining, discrimination, disciplinary practices, working hours, remuneration and management systems. The relevant international standards are Accountability AA1000 and Social Assurance SA 8000. While compliance issues are generally well managed in Australia and New Zealand under existing industrial legislation, the situation is less clear in trading nations where manufacturing or importing for Australian or New Zealand businesses occurs.

The improvement of valuation, pricing and incentive mechanisms can promote both social and environmental sustainability. Examples of more sustainable economic practices are social and environmental assessment of supply chain inputs through procurement processes and using regulation to establish markets that price economic 'externalities' (for example a carbon price).

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Position Statement

The EIANZ encourages better implementation of the social aspects of sustainability in governance in Australia and New Zealand. The social aspects of sustainability encompass the interrelation of people and their social institutions with the natural environment. Human societies depend on the natural environment for resources and ecological services. Further details on the meaning of the social aspects of sustainability are provided in the Background section.

To ensure more balanced and informed decision-making by society while enhancing the social aspects of sustainability, the EIANZ strongly encourages all layers of government, business, the communications media, civil society and academia to work together to:

- Understand better the social aspects of sustainability;
- Improve means for enhancing the social aspects of sustainability through legislation and operations;
- Develop adequate ways of measuring the social aspects of sustainability; and
- Transparently report these alongside environmental and financial reporting.

The “precautionary principle” is a valuable tool to use in assessing sustainability of proposals where:

- There is an identified risk of serious and irreversible impacts, and
- The environmental and/or social science is inconclusive.

Its use should be encouraged and developed in assessing impacts of proposals on the social aspects of sustainability.

Social Obligations of Government

Governments have a responsibility to consider the social implications of their legislative and operational programs on their various constituents. As entities that wield considerable power and resources, governments have significant impacts within their jurisdictions, across international borders and involving culturally diverse groups and ecologically diverse environments. Therefore the EIANZ believes that:

- Public legislation and policy of governments need to balance and, preferably, enhance social well-being of the community through the socio-economic benefits sought by major legislative or development activities.
- Governments need to operate in a manner which protects environments for current and future generations and foster healthy and resilient communities;
- All jurisdictions need to review legislation and practices dealing with sustainability and sustainable development to ensure that the social aspects of sustainability are adequately considered, together with the economic and environmental aspects; and
- In particular, public policy needs to acknowledge the need for community participation early in strategic land use planning, with a strong focus on social issues, to provide a context for project focused approval processes.

Social Obligations of Business

The EIANZ considers that business shares a responsibility to consider the social implications of their actions as part of their corporate image and social right to operate in the community. As entities that wield considerable power and resources, businesses often have significant impacts in their areas of operation, including across international borders, and involve culturally diverse groups and ecologically diverse environments. Therefore the EIANZ believes that:

- Business policies, new projects and operations need to balance social well-being of the communities in which they operate and on which they impact against the economic benefits sought for the business;
- Businesses need to operate in a manner which protects environments for current and future generations; and

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- Businesses need to review continuously legislation and business practices dealing with social aspects of sustainability to ensure that these are adequately managed and that the social aspects of sustainability are preferably enhanced, together with the economic and environmental aspects.

Social Obligations of Environmental Practitioners²

The EIANZ expects every environmental practitioner to practice ethically within her or his discipline and also to ensure that the social implications of the activities to which their practices contribute are clearly communicated through a well integrated assessment process.

The EIANZ encourages certification of environmental professionals to ensure that environmental practice maintains high levels of performance on all aspects of sustainability.

The EIANZ advocates environmental practice that fully recognises the relevance of social aspects of sustainability, with particular attention to:

- Addressing the needs and interests of affected peoples
- Implementing community and stakeholder engagement processes which seek to empower affected communities; and
- Acknowledging cultural diversity and the heterogeneity of values in the community.

² Note that there are differences in environmental legislation between Australia and New Zealand which may affect how environmental practitioners approach consideration of the social aspects of sustainability.