This request complies with Copyright Act 1969
4. Should, Can and How Might Researchers Help to Integrate Social, Economic and Environmental Considerations into the Planning Process?

Andy Brown & Ian Gray

Introduction

This paper addresses the following questions: should, can and how might researchers help to integrate social, economic and environmental considerations into the planning process? These questions arise from the recognition that Triple Bottom Line reporting is not an end in itself. If reporting frameworks of this kind are to gain a practical credibility, they must be seen to effectively enhance the planning process. For this to occur Triple Bottom Line reporting needs to inform those involved in a manner whereby the purpose (enhancing prospects for sustainability) and principles of the framework (integrating social, economic and environmental elements within some sort of consultative process) are maintained and given an added focus. It follows then, that contributions to the planning process are themselves problematic and worthy of consideration. That is, do they actually inform and enhance integrated, consultative and negotiated attempts to address sustainability rather than contribute to the production of a sterile planning process and reporting document? These issues form the basis of our discussion.

Our questions are addressed in the first instance by considering the objective of the planning process. What are we planning for? In reaching for answers, we argue that social researchers should indeed assist due to particular abilities to handle the question of sustainable development. In the absence of this contribution, critical aspects of the objectives of triple bottom line reporting will be superficially considered at best, and more than likely, practically ignored. However, it is all very well arguing that we should assist, but we need to be reasonably sure that we can before venturing into the process of planning. We therefore discuss three examples that demonstrate the ability of social researchers to assist in integrating social, economic and environmental considerations and we maintain our focus on critical aspects of the planning objective raised in the preceding argument. The concluding question of how to assist is at least in part answered by bringing methodological and ethical issues to the fore associated with the examples discussed here.

Should social researchers assist in planning for sustainable development?

Should we, as social researchers, or triple bottom line reporters, assist with the planning process, as opposed to merely providing reports that document social issues? To answer this question we begin with a consideration of the objective of the planning process implied by the triple bottom line framework, namely, sustainable development.

Development can be conveniently understood as planned intervention in the process of social transformation to facilitate desired change (Long & van der Ploeg, 1989; den Ouden, 1997). This is a convenient understanding because development is an ideal so loaded with unsavoury connotations and unsatisfactory outcomes that some argue the idea should be abandoned altogether. Sachs for example, states that: 'The idea of development stands like a ruin on the intellectual landscape. Delusion and disappointment, failures and crimes have been the steady companions of development and they tell a common story: it did not work' (1992, cited in Gardner & Lewis, 1996: 1).
While Gardner and Lewis (1996) accept that post-modern dispositions have generated valid critiques of development, they argue that abandoning the concept is questionable, simply because development interventions persist. Analysing developmental failure contributes towards an understanding of flawed processes, and critique can be used for the purpose of improvement. Similarly, in the event of stumbling across examples where development intervention did succeed in reaching stated objectives, the analysis of factors contributing towards successful outcomes can generate insight that can be employed to inform policy and practice.

From this perspective, social researchers should assist in planning for development given their ability to provide constructive criticism. This can be considered as applied, rather than pure social research, and this engagement is not welcomed by all social scientists (Ferguson, 1996). Gardner and Lewis (1996) argue that the applied social researcher need not necessarily be compromised by an engagement with development interventions. The integrity of research can be maintained by applying more or less constant theoretical concerns with socio-cultural change and still make valid contributions to the unfolding development scenario in question. We might, for example, inform the design, monitoring and evaluation of projects, and add to assessments of the extent to which principles of participation and empowerment are practised by focusing on the heterogeneity of marginalised groups and their access to benefits arising from development interventions (ibid: 79-100).

The particular brand of development we must confront is that of sustainable development. The seminal and popular definition offered by the 1987 Brundtland Report is: ‘Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, cited in Elliot, 1999: 7). The downright ambiguity and appeal of the Brundtland definition have undoubtedly contributed to the scores of definitions that have subsequently emerged (see Holmberg & Sandbrook, 1992, cited in Elliot, 1999: 6). The sustainable development planning process is immediately challenged by this array of definitions. What exactly is it that we are planning for? How can we design appropriate research strategies if the objective is primarily characterised by an uncertainty over meaning?

A coherent approach to this uncertainty emerges from a recognition that the various definitions of sustainable development appear to be informed by an emphasis on ‘different values, priorities and goals’ (Pretty, 1998: 25). These drivers offer a starting point for the planning process capable of getting closer to the heart of the matter in a given socio-cultural context than variously universal or preordained definitions. However, in recognising this, we should heed the warning that ‘the attractiveness (and the ‘dangers’) of the concept of sustainable development may lie precisely in the varied ways in which it can be interpreted and used to support a whole range of interests or causes’ (Elliot, 1999: 6). Indeed, a more or less conventional approach to planning for sustainable development recognises the fundamental contestability of the concept. Planning begins with the notion that ‘securing agreement on what people shall take sustainability to mean for a given environment, is half the job of getting there’ (Röling & Wagemakers, 1998: 7).

Triple Bottom Line reporting can be envisaged as a means to manage the complex issues involved, and can be employed to begin addressing the arguments that are more or less apparent in a particular environment. The all-encompassing concept of sustainable development is sub-divided into more manageable parts, namely, social, economic and environmental. The provision of measures, generally recognised as objective, enables construction of baselines and indications of progress over time. This framework, while of
obvious potential, masks arguably the most important reason why social researchers should engage in the planning process. The reason is hidden because of the claim to objectivity. If the meaning of sustainable development essentially resides in a constellation of differing values, priorities, goals and interests, then there is a need for these to be taken into account. There is a role here for social research, for the interpretation of subjective standpoints is an established tradition within social science. Thus, social researchers (aside from economists) should engage with the planning process in order that a more adequate grasp of the meaning of sustainable development informs policy and practice.

We should, at this point, remind ourselves of the convenient understanding of development offered earlier. The ability to intervene in the ongoing and interrelated process of social transformation suggests an enhanced capacity to influence the nature and course of events. This capacity does not exclusively reside in the hands of professional developers. The process of securing agreement will also be influenced by the ‘to be developed’, often referred to as participants. Convention has it that triple bottom line reporting will be applied to the interests of this ‘target group’. Recognition and application of established community development procedures alongside the concept of social capital and the more recent notion of community capacity building, suggest that the people ‘to be developed’ have an important role to play in the development process. That is, they are regarded as active agents in their own right, rather than passive recipients. Whether this change in perception has occurred due to the influence of democratic ideals and recognition that ‘bottom-up’ planning is more effective and sustainable than alternatives, or because of a desire on the part of governments and development agencies to devolve responsibility to ease their own burdens, are moot points. In any case, the addition of social to economic and environmental analysis at least implies a greater involvement for the people who are ‘to be developed’; people are part of the ‘equation’.

Amongst ‘the developers’ and participants, recognisable parties on either side of the fence are likely to promote interpretations appropriate to their own interests, and to prosecute alternatives regarded as a threat. It follows from this point that at any time there can be a range of interpretations as well as of interests. It is also conceivable that people may fail to recognise and/or pursue their own interests (Gray, Phillips & Dunn, 1997). The notion that each individual has a clear interest in sustainable development, however sustainability is defined and interpreted, is unreliable. As Röling and Wagemakers (1998) would suggest, it is never necessarily clear to anyone what sustainability means, either in the abstract or in terms of how it impacts upon their own interests. Thus, the process by which sustainability is interpreted in both abstract and concrete terms is an important concern for all involved in the planning effort. This is because sustainability is not an absolute value, but rather, only makes sense through processes of dialogue and negotiation. These processes will only work for the people involved in the arena if all interests and interpretations can at least potentially, be expressed, heard, and recognised as valid. Such an arena can be described as pluralistic, meaning that there are at least two actors involved and that no single actor is empowered to dominate the arena. There is, in other words, the need for a balancing of power.

We might at this point, before going any further, pose the following question. Why would, or should a social or any other kind of scientist, take on the task of overseeing the creation and maintenance of an arena of pluralism? Scientific knowledge can certainly not claim a monopoly on wisdom. Nor is it reasonable to privilege scientific knowledge over any other kind (see the discussion in Kloppenburg, 1992). However, social science does provide tools for the analysis of social relations, including the processes of dialogue and negotiation which take place as interests in sustainable development are perceived, discussed, and acted upon. The social researcher should, therefore, engage in the planning effort to provide a focus on the
extent to which the principle of pluralism is maintained in the interplay between variously powerful interests in the process of reaching an agreed, and dynamic version of sustainable development.

We have argued that social researchers should assist in the planning process given their ability to provide for constructive criticism and their capacity to analyse subjective standpoints informing the meaning of sustainable development. Furthermore we have argued for a research stance that defends the principle of pluralism. Can we conduct such research in a manner whereby we help to integrate the elements of triple bottom line reporting into the planning process?

Can social researchers integrate social, economic and environmental considerations into the planning process?

Here, we demonstrate that social researchers can assist in integrating social, economic and environmental considerations into the planning process. We base this contention on a discussion of the social assessment projects undertaken as part of the process of reaching Regional Forest Agreements in Australia. Fisher (2001) argues these projects are the best current example we have of social research contributing to the integration of Triple Bottom Line elements for the purpose of planning for sustainable development. In fact, it could be argued that the triple bottom line metaphor is inadequate here, given the attempt to incorporate cultural aspects into the framework. The inclusion of cultural analysis is pertinent to the notion that the meaning of sustainability resides in subjective standpoints. Furthermore, differing worldviews will influence the process by which the elements of triple bottom line reporting are integrated. As such, it can be argued that the analysis of culture should be recognised as a necessary task for the planning sustainable development process. In any case, the following story of how social assessment emerged as a contribution to reaching Regional Forest Agreements emphasises the presence of differing values, goals, priorities and interests in the sustainable forest management debate (Fisher, 2001: 234).

The Forest Protection Society (FPS) emerged in 1987 in response to a perceived need to represent the households, families and communities whose livelihoods were intimately connected to exploitation of the forest resource in an increasingly polarised debate concerning forest management. It was felt that forest industry groups were able to articulate economic arguments, but unable to represent the concerns of community voices. Environmentalists were adept at putting their case by providing images of despoilment. If it wasn’t enough to get upset about the felling of a majestic canopy, you might start supporting their cause due to images of endangered cuddly animals. The FPS provided images of alternative dangers posed by wanton conservation, namely, the closure of entire towns and attendant suffering of women and children.

The inaugural director of the FPS, Robyn Liddell, noted that despite (others might say, because of) the presence of scientists and economists ‘all over the place’, the social implications of what was in the air, as outlined in the National Forestry Policy Statements (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992) was being ignored. According to Fisher (ibid.), Liddell’s personal intervention into government circles significantly contributed towards social assessments being placed on the agenda. Two streams of assessment work were consequently undertaken in the process of reaching Regional Forest Agreements: ‘those to ensure that environmental and heritage obligations were met; those to ensure that the social and economic implications of forest decisions were fully considered’ (Coakes & Fenton, 2001: 257). Rather than discussing a detailed account of what these assessments involved, we think it important
to highlight the following points pertaining to this particular framework of inquiry and planning process.

As previously stated, Fisher (2001) argues that Social Assessments or Social Impact Assessments represent the ‘best bet’ social science approach to informing decision-making processes. They offer the best chance that social research can be established in triple bottom line reporting alongside economic and environmental science, thus moving towards the integration of the elements of sustainability in planning for development. This argument is made with reference to the following:

(a) the social assessments conducted for the RFA process represent a watershed in Federal rural policy making;

(b) the projects were allocated scarce resources that signify a genuine intent to incorporate findings (ibid. 234).

However, despite these positive statements, we note that with these social assessments, much as with previous social impact assessments elsewhere, “there is little evidence that [they] influenced policy outcome” (ibid.). It is obviously important to consider why these assessments failed to influence policy, particularly given the argument that they represent the most credible approach for social researchers to assist in the planning for a sustainable development process. There appears to be a lack of credibility here, and we can refer to an explanation as to why this was the case. According to a senior official involved in the RFA process (who had some familiarity with social research):

‘I agree that understanding the social side of industry issues is important but at the end of the day there is no black box that we can feed social, economic and biophysical information into in order to get the right answer out at the other end. The real technology used to determine policy is round: it’s called a table. The decision makers gather around a table and although they use the evidence provided by the experts, decisions are arrived at through a process of bargaining. The fact of the matter is that people at this table are familiar and comfortable with economic and biophysical data but do not quite know what to do with social information … and so it tends to get put to one side’ (ibid).

In highlighting this statement, we do not mean to imply that in every case, decision-makers (e.g. industry, community and government representatives) gather around a table to wilfully ignore information generated by social research. We do not, however, intend to shy away from the uncomfortable fact that such information was ultimately marginalised in this particular instance, within a supposedly ‘cutting edge’ process. This is unlikely to be a unique case. Indeed, “there are few documented cases where [Social Impact Assessments have] actually made a difference in the decision process” (Burdge & Vanclay, 1995: 36).

How can social researchers involved in social assessments respond to statements of this kind? Coakes & Fenton (2001) argue that we make the data generated by this line of inquiry more accessible to those predisposed towards economic and environmental science, and advocate the enhancement of multi-disciplinary and participatory procedures within a process that facilitates community development as a matter of course. These responses are not unreasonable, and may succeed in bridging the credibility gap.
Of more relevance to our argument is the recommendation that we move beyond the comfort zone created by the notion that planning processes are rational, and acknowledge the empirical studies that demonstrate planning is characterised by ‘competition, negotiation, and compromise between different interests in arriving at an outcome. These competing interests may have unequal power, differing worldviews, and inconsistent preferences, values and expectations’ (Fisher, 2001: 235). This response is pertinent to our earlier discussion of sustainable development and pluralism. It suggests that we conduct research that explicitly focuses on the interaction of all the actors involved in the planning process rather than confining ourselves to researching or facilitating the ‘to be developed’ and the conditions which confront them. A long history of local community power studies, many of which analysed planning issues demonstrate that such research is possible and has been done before. (These studies include Wild, 1978; 1983; Gray, 1991 [in Australia] and Flyvbjerg, 1998 [in Denmark].) The engineering-dominated field of transport planning has recently seen the application of cultural analysis with a focus on social interaction and power relations (Kane & Del Mistro, 2003). How might we do this, and at the same time integrate the elements of the triple bottom line?

**How might social researchers integrate social, economic and environmental considerations into the planning process?**

Our second research example, the actor-oriented perspective on rural development, provides a coherent method for integration. This approach is concerned with the analysis of how ‘rural development interventions and livelihoods are materialised and socially constructed through the interplay, contestation and negotiation of values and interests within specific domains and arenas of social action’ (Long, 1997: 2).

The research objective of the actor-oriented perspective appears appropriate to our task. Firstly, intervention processes are themselves a focus for analysis. These can be regarded as sources of data much as with other socio-cultural events, and as such, can be documented and analysed. If, and we stress if, planning procedures bring forth unsubstantiated assertions or the denial of important but inconvenient data due to the promotion of particular values, goals, priorities and interests, and subsequently undermine alternative standpoints, then this requires understanding and documentation. This research goal is more likely to be achieved satisfactorily if the intervention process is recognised as an object of study from the outset of the research endeavour. Secondly, the notion that developmental outcomes emerge from the interplay between variously powerful interests comprised of competing worldviews sits comfortably with the understanding of sustainable development and planning processes discussed earlier.

The actor-oriented perspective has generated insights into rural development processes unfolding in peasant agricultural environments. However, we should not imagine that this perspective is unsuited to the study of rural development in industrialised agricultural environments. For example, the perspective has informed a social learning approach to facilitating sustainable agriculture, as evidenced by case studies from Europe, the United States, and Australia (Röling & Wagemakers, 1998). There appears to be no theoretical or methodological constraint to employing the actor-oriented perspective to address the questions addressed by this paper, unless, of course, we are averse to studying the developers themselves. This is a call to study up, and it presents its own research dilemmas. Will, for example, ‘the developers’ be as accessible to the researcher as the ‘to be developed’? Calls to ‘study up’ are not new but are critical. Indeed, it has been argued that social science is inadequate if it fails to ‘study up’ (Bell, 1978).
The actor-oriented perspective can move research in this direction. It can be described as case-study research informed by participant-observation, looking as Bell (1978) advocates, at the detail of interpersonal relations as well as at the structural conditions which people negotiate. This type of research draws upon more or less traditional anthropological methodologies. Research is grounded in the everyday practices of planners, scientists, extension agents, farmers, foresters, activists, and so on. In this way, we can come to grips with the various values, priorities, goals and interests competing for attention in the sustainable development debate.

In a research standpoint also focusing upon the intervention process itself, the following strategies can be pursued. ‘Studying up’ can involve observation of the planning meetings conducted behind closed doors, and reading internal reports. We can interview the developers throughout the planning process, and analyse available documents and media releases in relation to data gathered in the field. We can research those moments in time when distinct actors interact in formal and informal political arenas to negotiate the meaning of sustainable development. Thus, we can research the strategies employed to promote and prosecute variously contrasting and conflicting standpoints, and assess the extent to which all relevant interests are being pursued and acknowledged. Ethnographic methods provide the basis for interpreting the meanings which social actors give to their own circumstances and the processes of dialogue and negotiation.

Such methodological guidelines bring with them the potential ethical problems that accompany participant observation methods. The extent to which the researcher is a participant as well as an observer raises questions over more than the usual ethical obligations. As a participant, the researcher has obligations to co-participants, who have an interest in the outcomes as well as the processes of dialogue and negotiation. In such situations the researcher as participant may have privileged information obtained as observer which is not available to other participants. If there is any risk of ‘going native’ and acting as anything but a disinterested observer, it may be necessary to retreat from participation and forgo the opportunities for observation which participation provides. Maintaining the ethnographer’s detachment is essential and sufficient if the ethical obligations of ethnography are respected.

We argue that it is possible to extend our ethnographic ethics to adapt this research standpoint to safeguard the principle of pluralism. This unashamedly principled stance is advocated by Flyvbjerg (2001), whose experience with planning for sustainable development processes illustrates that agendas can be prefabricated rather than constructed. His work illustrates how objective statistical data, painstakingly gathered and accurately presented, can be brushed aside if it cannot be tailored to fit the concerns of those gathered around the decision making table. It forms our third example.

Flyvbjerg (1998) analyses planning procedures in a way that illuminates the two kinds of contribution which research can make to planning for sustainability through involvement in the integration of the ‘three bottom lines’. Social science research can contribute directly, through providing social analysis to participants in the planning process as occurred in the Regional Forest Agreement processes. Social science can also contribute by helping participants reflect on their participation, on the rationalities which they adopt and bring into the planning arena. These two processes are related and they both involve social researchers taking an active but neutral role. The aim of both contributions is to create dialogue that moves planning towards reconciling triple (or quadruple) bottom line criteria. This dialogue may grow out of confrontation among interested parties, or it may be a product of pluralistic
debate without confrontation. Flyvbjerg's approach is to focus on how data generated by triple bottom line reporting are interpreted by interest groups, including scientists, bureaucrats and politicians. The researcher can study the ways in which all such interest groups interpret research results in order to further their own values, priorities and goals. We do not intend to imply that any 'manipulation' which might become apparent need be either direct, deliberate or self-interested. The interpretation and representation of research can often be seen as manipulative to either good or bad effect in the context of planning processes.

Flyvbjerg (1998) examines how interest groups perceive their interests, how values influence their interpretations, and how they use and interpret information relevant to their interests. He is able to illuminate different 'rationalities' leading to confrontation and unintended consequences rather than sustainable solutions. Flyvbjerg (2001) builds an agenda for social science which complements the other sciences in its endeavours to collect and analyse 'hard' data relevant to planning. That is the first task of the planning researcher. Flyvbjerg argues for the adoption of a second task. That involves studying the ways in which research results are interpreted and applied in debate, looking for ways that pluralism can be maintained (that is, 'Triple Bottom Line' reporting applied effectively) by providing 'mirrors' in which participants can reflect on their own rationalities. Obviously construction of these 'mirrors' takes time, but they would enable constant review of reporting and planning systems so that systemic faults can be identified and repaired.

Subsequent documentation can be employed as a resource for reflection. By persistently reminding interest groups of the principle of plurality and providing case study material of the valid claims of competing interests, the researcher can encourage a convergence of interests. The assumption here is that we all benefit from healthy planning and consultative processes. These arguments for interpretive case study research do not deny the importance of social assessment research in triple bottom line reporting. But they do highlight additional and alternative research frameworks with a demonstrated capacity to integrate social, economic and environmental considerations into planning processes oriented towards sustainable development.

Conclusion

We have argued that triple bottom line reporting is not an end in itself; it is potentially at least, part of the process of planning for sustainable development. Recognition that triple bottom line reporting does not end with data collection and analysis but extends into the planning process arises from the straightforward observation that planning sustainable development is a process, not a singular event. It is a process not just because it happens over time, but rather because it involves a range of interests and a range of possible interpretations of those interests. This process is open to research that in turn offers the prospect of facilitating the integration of social, environmental and economic reporting. Such research should be undertaken because without it, the outcomes may be remote from anything that could be described as a collective interest. In other words, the process of planning may lead toward sustainability, or away from it, regardless of whose interpretation of sustainability is applied.

Analytical tools are available to allow social scientists to take on a much larger task in the conduct and application of triple bottom line reporting than just collecting and analysing data on the social circumstances of those whose sustainable development is being planned for. Social researchers have a dual role in the process – as contributors of the social dimension of triple bottom line reporting, but also as analysts of the processes of planning for sustainable development which interpret and apply triple bottom line reports. They have conducted
research in the past which, while not always directed at sustainability problems, at least illustrates how social and cultural research methods, like those associated with the actor-oriented perspective, might be applied. The required analytical tools are readily available. It remains for us to demonstrate how they can be applied and the kind of results that can be obtained.
References


