Foreword from the Editors

Sustainable development or sustainability is increasingly accepted as a normative goal locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. Many see it as having potential to address current and future basic human needs, reconcile conflicting agendas, and achieve greater social justice. However, people differ greatly on how these terms are interpreted and applied, and wrestle with their meanings in a range of different forms and forums. Their diverse use and contestability suggest the need for ongoing dialogue within academia, among other practitioners, and in society more generally. In December 2003 the Institute for Sustainable Futures (ISF) at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), together with CSIRO Minerals Division hosted a 'Round Table' conference on Sustainability and Social Sciences.

The Round Table had two main aims. The first was a scoping exercise aimed at bringing together social scientists working within the field of sustainability to exchange ideas and perspectives, and to get an overview of current thinking and activities. Sustainability encompasses diverse areas, as is apparent from the papers in this collection. This diversity may result in researchers feeling isolated, and not able to share experiences and thinking with colleagues with similar research interests.

Thus the second aim was to support those of us working in the area of sustainability research. Contemporary social science perspectives are underpinned by philosophical and epistemological viewpoints that often clash with perspectives from biophysical and technical sciences. Developing an understanding and appreciation of these differences will help foster supportive and meaningful dialogue about sustainability. Moreover, if we are clear about our own standpoints we are likely to communicate more effectively within and between the range of disciplinary perspectives necessary for discussions of this kind.

The social sciences encompass different disciplines, traditions and worldviews. There are well-developed bodies of literature, for example, on power relations, participatory democracy, society and culture, community, social change, government and public policy. Very few scholars in our age of specialisation can be cognizant of them all. Nonetheless, providing the opportunity, space and time for researchers from social sciences such as sociology, political science, anthropology, economics, human geography, psychology, management, and development studies can mean reaching a different kind of conceptual discussion and engagement than is the case elsewhere. In such a forum there is more freedom to use familiar language, and to debate and discuss the theory and methods associated with social capital, social impact assessment, social values, post-modern society, economic rationalism and action research.

This collection is organised into a number of thematic areas, with both national and international relevance. For example, the 'Triple Bottom Line' framework and the concept of 'Social Capital' are increasingly used internationally to guide policy and action on sustainability including notions of social sustainability. There appears to be a growing acceptance within corporations to address both environmental and social concerns in their operations. This is significant given that so much of development decision-making resides in corporations with a global outlook and reach. Other questions raised in this collection include the relationship between the 'social' and the 'natural', and the study of society and social change. Each of the papers considers the theoretical and/or empirical dimensions of at least one of these themes, however it is

usually the case that each will address the same concept or theme from a very different angle. Within each thematic area there is at least one paper concerned with a localised empirical study and at least one other with a more conceptual or comparative focus.

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) is used primarily as a planning and reporting framework in both public and private organisations. Local government has a critical role to play in implementing policies and programs that support sustainable practices and development. Potts' paper looks at TBL reporting as a useful tool for measuring, communicating and facilitating change in local communities. In contrast, Vanclay critiques the current use of TBL, and argues that the history of Social Impact Assessment (SIA) as a field of theory and practice provides valuable learning. He argues that with TBL the social dimension is not well understood by its proponents and consequently is seen as subordinate to environment and economic concerns. SIA has also faced this dilemma, but has managed to achieve credibility and acceptance in more recent years.

Social capital is the topic of two papers. The 'problem of the commons' and barriers to cooperation is the subject of Onyx's paper. The Landcare movement is used to illustrate the potential for society to simultaneously develop social capital and environmental sustainability. Patulny's paper evaluates the World Values Survey which measures trust on an international scale His cross-country comparison explores the relationship of materialism and social capital. Here, Australian studies appear to have contradictory findings that question the equivalence and validity of certain indices used in the measurement of social capital.

The methods and criteria for evaluating change within corporations is a key question. An integrated management agenda for firms to move towards corporate sustainability is the subject of the paper by Benn and Dunphy. Based on a number of organisational case studies their findings suggest that firms that progress toward ecological sustainability are the ones investing in the development of their employees. The car industry forms the basis of another example seen to have enormous impact on people and resources. If this industry is changing its norms so that environmental issues are regarded as central to its business interests, as Mikler's paper argues, then this is bound to reverberate and have significant implications for national and international institutions.

Sustainability is often concerned with tensions, conceptual and actual, between the social and natural worlds. Goodall et al provide insight into diverse cultural values toward the recreational use of rivers and parklands. This case study in southwestern Sydney examines the perspectives of Indigenous people, Anglo Australians and immigrant groups including Vietnamese, Lebanese and Palestinians. The role of scientific knowledge in what Healy calls 'our current unsustainable predicament' is of concern to many. Healy calls for attention to the social, material and institutionally-based practices of knowledge production that question and challenge more dominant technocratic and instrumental perspectives. Using a local case study he argues that sustainability is less likely to occur in practice when it is treated primarily as a technical project. Hill's paper uses a social ecology framework to broaden, deepen and improve the theories and practices associated with sustainability. He contends that our understanding of ecology can be applied to lifestyle change.

Sustainability is primarily a process of social change and broader societal choices around different paths of action. Often these relate to government decision-making and policy formulation. One of Australia's national science priorities is the reduction of emissions of greenhouse gases emitted by the mining of coal. Several CSIRO research projects have adopted the sustainability lens in natural resource management and technology development. Looking at the social, economic and environmental contexts of new technology development that addresses greenhouse emissions in coal mining is the subject of the paper by Katz and Solomon. Another national priority is water – its quality and management. The paper by Cheney, Nheu and Vecellio describes a number of research projects recently conducted by the Institute for Sustainable Futures. Two of these projects concern the perspectives of river users and other locals in relation to the New South Wales State Government plans to introduce releases of water from storage reservoirs, to restore the health of the Hawkesbury-Nepean River. They argue that authorities need to take account of the range of conflicting interests and power relations in these kinds of natural resource management decisions. Cox's paper argues that understanding social systems is central to any form of sustainability planning. She is critical of public debate that focuses predominantly on environmental issues, and argues that social sustainability is a more pressing concern. This emphasis is needed to create and manage the social and political circumstances and systems that encourage people to make hard decisions about environmental resources

This eclectic collection will provide the reader with a feel for the breadth and diversity of social science approaches and interests in the field of sustainability.

The peer-review process

Seventeen people attended the Round Table, and twelve papers were submitted for review and publication. A condition of participation was that participants agree to review at least one other paper. Early drafts of the papers were circulated to all participants prior to the Round Table. After the event authors were able to incorporate feedback from the Round Table discussion and then submit their revised papers for review. Papers were assessed in their entirety. A reviewer for each paper was selected from the group, all having an interest in sustainability as an interdisciplinary field of study, however taking into account wherever possible familiarity with the particular subject matter. Two of the papers required a second review and in both cases an independent, qualified reviewer who had not participated in the Round Table was chosen. The paper by Stuart B. Hill was not included in the peer review process for logistical reasons.

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