METHODS

The discursive community: evolving institutional structures for planning sustainability

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Abstract

Attempting to develop processes for the formulation of sustainable development policy is imperative in contemporary society. Ecological economics offers the opportunity to consider the integration of economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects of problems in sustainable development policy processes. Practical engagement in the integration of these various facets of a problem requires a release from disciplinary and institutional rigidity. To enable this release requires an enhanced understanding of our cultural referents that have historically promoted these divisions and hierarchies in knowledge claims. This paper proposes that more effective sustainable development processes can be sought by collectively considering the key ecological economic concepts of sustainability, transdisciplinary and methodological pluralism. These concepts facilitate the critique of conventional policy processes, which then give way to a reformulated sustainable development policy process, termed the 'discursive community'. Through genuine stakeholder collaboration, based on learning processes, the 'discursive community' is able to articulate strategy for sustainable development. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

If the conflicts of interpretations in sustainable development planning are a reflection of increasing diversity of people's interests and meanings attached to place and space, how are we to accommodate the politics of these divergent claims for attention? If the relations between citizens, companies, business and 'the state' are increasingly interdependent, diverse and unchartered, through what process and with what politics will various interests be asserted to arrive at the form and content of strategies for development? The diversity of discourses is not purely confined to conflicts over content, but is equally about the processes through which people, as citizens, are able to represent their divergent claims for attention in development decision-making that impacts on, and structures, their lived spaces.

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Working with sustainability means embracing ambiguity in dealing with an elusive and diverse array of societal values. Any attempt to define sustainability in a positive/normative sense neglects the complexity that sustainability implies. Rather, a more appropriate strategy would be to open out the debate between development and environmental integrity in particular contexts. Sustainability then becomes the pursuit of communicative praxis for collectively defining our development concerns (Meppem and Gill, 1998). This position accepts that particular formulations of environmental problems are discursive constructs. Within each sustainable development encounter, a process of subtle demarcation takes place, where some meaning of ‘positive’ progress is privileged, while others are marginalised. A transdisciplinary orientation aims to problematise ‘conventional wisdoms’ or disciplinary boundaries by promoting communicative strategies that recognise ‘different ways of knowing’ in sustainable policy development processes (Meppem and Bourke, 1999). Transdisciplinary orientations recognise that how problems are conceptualised will largely define the solutions sought. The institutional structures of this discourse will reflect the prevailing power relationships and this will determine the acceptability of various arguments in the developmental debate (Gale, 1998). In a critical account of the developments in environmental politics Hajer (1995) asserts “[W]e do not simply analyse what is being said, but also include the institutional context in which this is done and which co-determines what can be said meaningfully” (p. 2). The position being taken here, therefore, recommends attention to institutional arrangements for planning sustainable development. Rather than proposing a particular structure for institutions, it will be argued that this needs to be determined discursively and to be context specific.¹

Unless change strategies attempt to take a full accounting of how things are at present, and of the needs and values informing people’s behaviour, then they are merely reflecting the current power structures that resulted in the ‘desire’ for something different. In seeking to introduce change into any situation, it is therefore wise to attempt to identify and pay close attention to those factors that are structuring the present ways of operating. Attempting to be clear about what is happening before concentrating on what should happen, gives way to a structuring approach based on ‘listening’², not ‘telling’. A more complete understanding of the way our cultural interaction is structuring our problems, and presenting their solutions, is then a starting point for change.

This paper will explore further the implications of culture as an organising force in development planning. In so doing, this argument will seek to interpret how and to what degree culturally driven ‘norms’ have become embedded within the institutional arrangements that ‘drive’ public consultation and related sustainable development policy processes. Culture can variously be described as shared values and expectations, the resulting shared meanings are taken for granted and assigned as a filter to interpret social surroundings. These cultural understandings are historically transmitted and are embedded in the fabric of human communications and understandings. Thus, the cultural filter of a particular ‘community’ is the mosaic of traditions, values, policies, beliefs and attitudes that are constitutive of a ‘lifeworld’³ which forms the basis for the interaction of thinking and action in a ‘society’. Because our Western styles of communication do not explicitly deal with cultural underpinnings as a way of interpreting conflict, but rather present arguments in terms of supposedly clear dichotomies, the content and context of culture remain for most murky and ambiguous. This is not to say that it is possible to ‘define’ the cultural influences that shape various standpoints. Many of these will have common influences and, additionally, it is not possible to ‘escape’ our own processes of

¹ This is basically the position taken by the High Court of Australia in December 1996 in allowing Aboriginal Native Title to co-exist with pastoral leases, known as the ‘Wik Decision’.

² For a more comprehensive insight into what is meant here by ‘listening’, see Levin (1989).

³ ‘Lifeworld’ is a concept articulated by Habermas (1984).
thinking in appealing to this cultural orientation. Processes for development planning, which reflect an altered communicative style that recognises the existence of culture, aim to shift the ‘conflict of interpretations’ regarding what constitutes ‘positive’ progress away from the articulation and defence of self-interest. A better understanding of cultural influences helps to illuminate factors that underpin and shape the structure of arguments and the persistence of dichotomies, leading to a more complete understanding of the ‘public good’ that underpins complex problems like planning for sustainable development.

Culture is the living embodiment of the way things are done now; the actions, the practices, the conventions, are articulations of the acquired learning transmitted in the complex non-scientific way of human communication. These self-perpetuating understandings change slowly without explicit attention to their make-up. This is increasingly resulting in analytical problem approaches being formulated independently of understanding the wider meanings divergent groups of people may attach to the objects, places or events under consideration. Instead, analytical approaches presume that meaning resides outside people in some ‘objective’ realm, without recognising that this ‘objective approach’ encompasses a particular value set which necessarily involves the privileging of a particular stance over all others (Meppem and Gill, 1998). Clearly, it is in the interests of the beneficiaries of this current cultural order to block the broadening of the argument that proposes an orientation to understanding the motivations, the guiding principles, the assumptions of cause and effect, and the beliefs about social structure; namely, the culture that is operating in these decision frameworks.

These decision frameworks for development planning therefore embody the contested nature of planning for sustainability. Determining which interpretations of ‘positive’ progress are privileged and why lies at the heart of the sustainable development debate (Bourke and Meppem, 1999). There are a number of important issues that render sustainable development as being particularly unsuited to exclusively rational planning approaches: (i) the lack of a clearly defined goal for strategy; (ii) the value-based nature of defining strategy goals; and (iii) diverse and unclear stakeholder interest, in terms of power, representation and organisation (Meppem and Bourke, 1999).

Orientations for planning that question values, motivations, and assumptions in an attempt to understand what thinking informs current approaches to development planning aim to do so through considering these nuances of sustainability. This focus allows the consideration of culture as a structuring process. Without the promotion of communicative strategies to interpret cultural influences and thus enable learning, something that profoundly affects our actions is hidden from us. Planning for sustainability as a learning concept allows us to question the objectives and the entrenched ways of doing things, and to question these in the light of their relevance to changing circumstance (Meppem and Gill, 1998). The aim is to better understand how ‘communities’ function and interact at present, as well as the values and motivations that are informing this behaviour. Understanding cultural change is therefore not a prescriptive, but primarily a descriptive approach that allows new ways of seeing problems and new functional coalitions to emerge, without pre-determined value-laden constraints acting as a barrier to this evolution.

The legislative structure surrounding development planning is loosening the ability of ‘expert’ development planners to contain the monological interpretation of development traditionally adhered to by this group. Much of this is occurring in response to Agenda 21 (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 1992) policy formulated at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held at Rio de Janeiro in 1992. This international agreement, signed by 183 world governments, calls for building participatory decision-making structures and capacity, institutional flexibility and improved co-ordination of information as a means for promoting sustainability (Lovett, 1993). While ‘expert’ planners usually had a ‘social consensus’

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4 For a comprehensive account of planning histories, see Sandercock (1998).
that business or economic activity could be interpreted independently of their cultural and environmental context, a broadening array of concerns accompanied by broadly based legisla
tive support is dismantling this consensus. When this 'truth' is questioned, the sense of certainty that this shared understanding imparts within a 'community' is undermined. A critical approach aims to recognise the tensions and contradictions that are part of planning for sustainable development and that are inevitably glossed over or assumed away by an emphasis on technical rationality. Critical theoretical approaches explicitly recognise the contextual contingency of knowledge and, therefore, the necessity to recognise and explore diverse knowledge meanings, to help interpret and develop sustainable planning practice (Meppem and Bourke, 1999). The notions of 'well-being' or 'public good' or 'common property resource' sought in planning for sustainable development actually represent a continually contested terrain where context-de
dependent meaning is articulated through participatory processes.

The 'discursive community' is proposed as a forum for considering participatory involvement in sustainable development planning. The Agenda 21 policy has prompted a widespread trend to include 'community' concerns in sustainable development decision-making. However, a closer examination of the thinking that predominantly informs these attempts at 'community consultation' reveals that without close attention to communicative practice, these strategies are merely used to ratify pre-determined solutions. The 'discursive community' is proposed as a process to open the sustainable development planning debate to a much broader array of concerns. The notion of a 'discursive community' as a sustainable development policy 'vehicle' has been proposed in the ecological economics discourse by Norgaard (1994, p. 166). Norgaard's 'vision' recognises the importance of institutional flexibility in planning for sustainable development and this approach will extend these arguments for contemporary socio-cultural contexts. To realise this objective, this articulation of the 'discursive community' will be fash
toned after the seminal 'transactive style of planning' of Friedmann (1973) with its emphasis on dialogue and process for mutual learning. The 'discursive community' is an attempt to dis
trupt the self-reinforcing cycle of hegemonic planning, to disturb the 'harmonious' inequality of power relations and to do this by attempting to disentangle the veneer of 'affirmative' progress by promoting alternative styles of communicative interaction in planning for sustainability.

In proposing a 'discursive community' as a process for articulating sustainable development strategy, I have simultaneously considered a number of related problems involving theoretical insights and practical action. These include the design of participatory processes; the advocacy of mediators to empower civil society; the forms of rationality used in deliberations; and the ethics of recognition or practices of the subject. These issues will be elaborated in the following sections.

2. Issues for participation

Participation implies a shift in the orientation of development planners and environmental policy analysts from 'future architect', 'expert', and 'enlightened one' to 'facilitator', 'mentor' or 'guide' (Sharan and Shachar, 1994). Some well-documented examples do exist of this style of planning.5 Most of the outcomes are ongoing, and development directions were unknown and unchartered at the outset of the development project. The institutional structures largely remained stable, but developed a shift in culture away from requiring predetermined remote goals to seeking the ongoing emergence of meaning through participatory interaction to provide strategic guidelines. These approaches 'assume neither that planning is participatory nor that it is democratic, just that deliberate conversations about value, about the interpretation and apt-

ness of goals and means are inescapable aspects of practical action’’ (Forester, 1996, p. 295).

However, participant involvement usually involves making ‘lists’ of various people’s ideas and wants, rather than facilitated processes to discuss how these were arrived at. Stakeholder participation is an ambiguous term with positive overtones, ideologically conferring a stamp of approval on whatever it names (Munro-Clark, 1992, p. 13). Strategies with the facade of inclusiveness are able to diffuse opposition and therefore enhance legitimacy of pre-determined and structured policy stances, and are increasingly used as a form of ‘safe politics’ (Miller, 1988). In a now classic article, Arnstein (1969) described public participation as instances of either ‘manipulation’ or ‘therapy’, representing opportunities for the powerholders to ‘educate’ or ‘placate’ the ‘community’. Such approaches allow only ‘legitimate’ groups to participate. The legitimacy is determined by their ‘representativeness’ and the ‘reasonableness’ of their argument (Selznick, 1949). The legitimacy embodies particular values and ways of knowing that include and exclude various arguments in the policy process, leading to the building of support for the various policies and programs already developed. “As such, community affirms itself by exclusion, defining itself by what it refuses to admit rather than by a conscious knowledge of what it includes” (Bourke, 1998, p. 33). Gittell (1983) observes that numerous cases of ‘mandatory participation’ in the United States has led to interest and community groups becoming involved in the process, leading to a loss of power and position to influence policy. In a review of case studies of participatory decision-making for public planning in Australia, Syme (1992) concludes that the rational planning process used neglects the complexity of environmental planning by relying on the bargaining strategies of traditional dispute resolution approaches. Participants are forced to argue within a too narrow and too technical a brief, that purposefully excludes a broader range of more fundamental issues that planning for sustainability implies.

Beyond legitimising pre-determined positions, ‘‘the delays, costs and risks of public participation, rather than its benefits as an end in itself or as a management strategy, seem to be the prominent considerations’’ (Painter, 1992, p. 21). In these processes, stakeholders will attempt to manipulate the system in the service of their individual interests if decision structures do not take account of social complexity (Long and Long, 1992). This is demonstrated in the public choice literature, which predicts that public organisations will try to expand their size and budget to the exclusion of all other concerns (Niskanen, 1971; Harvey, 1989; Pusey, 1991). Additionally, there is a growing literature that is attempting to expose the ability of global corporatism to externalise environmental and social costs, and internalise only benefits to maximise profits (Daly and Cobb, 1989; Korten, 1997; Rafton Saul, 1997; Gray, 1998). There is also a growing literature in participatory decision-making that seeks ‘power neutrality’, ‘equality of validity claims’, ‘goal elucidation’ and ‘effective inclusion’ (Dryzek, 1990; Healey, 1992; Forester, 1993; Innes, 1995; Hillier, 1997; Douglas and Friedmann, 1998; Sandercock, 1998; Meppem and Bourke, 1999). The communicative processes advocated to achieve these ‘utopian’ goals in participatory decision-making will be argued here as representing the contested terrain of the ‘discursive community’. The understanding of the roles and relationships between corporate business, politics and ‘the state’, and civil society in development planning require participatory process to interpret and develop meaning so as to articulate sustainable development policy. Sandercock (1998, p. 123) describes this as a transition from “a specific identity politics to a progressive politics of difference”. This position highlights the importance of more closely considering the role of institutional structures (communicative arrangements) in participatory strategies for sustainable development planning. The next section will consider the importance of rethinking ‘community’ as a way of assisting in interpreting an altered approach for institutional design in planning for sustainable development.
3. Community as an instrument of power

Community has traditionally been seen as a group with strong commonality, or an essential essence, aligned with Platonic and Kantian notions of ‘Being’ and consequent instrumentally rational ideas about ‘truth’. Contemporary thinkers on community have sought to identify its attraction in its tragic presentment of an ‘otherness’, an unrealised ideal that is always the expression of its own absence. Notions of community have represented a longing for an idealised past, now long gone, a collective appeal or ‘desire’ for cooperative efforts to release us from our atomistic, individuated and narcissistic notions of ‘self’. This collective ‘desire’ is frustrated in its attempts to bring forth its utopian imagery by knowledge that relies on this utopia reflecting a consensus on the essential or foundational principles from which to build, so what is occurring in response to this modernist imperative for a collective identity is a visible fracturing and splintering of society that was once popularly portrayed as a unified front marching down the road toward ‘progress’. This disintegration of our once homogenous imagery is occurring as people assert their claims or ‘desires’ for the local, particular ethnicity, cultural identity and environmental integrity. These ‘desires’ seek collective recognition of their difference. This is occurring in a society that is structured through relations of power which rely on the continuation of domination through continually reasserting their rejection of difference, as portrayed by a preferred ‘objectified’ notion of what is the ‘public good’.

This style of ‘community’, with its common essential foundations, forms the basis for communities (disciplines) in branches of science with their unified theories as well as numerous other communities of special interest groups of citizens with their varied ‘selection criteria’ for non-exclusion. This way of conceiving community defines the charter for the formation of coalitions. This pervasive foundationalism of ‘community’ leads to attempts at community consultation in sustainable development decision-making being based on listing the variety of static desires, attributed to each ‘community’, as a means of demonstrating its effectiveness as a ‘listening’ medium. These interests are usually so divergent and context free that they cannot be used in planning and policy development processes. Policy analysts therefore rely on technical rationality, with its foundations in instrumental rationality, as the essential arbiter of these claims for attention (Meppem and Bourke, 1999). This acts against the legitimisation and therefore empowerment of coalitions of difference. In so doing, this simulacrum of ‘community’ hinders the prospect of an emerging commonality of difference becoming the platform for an evolving coalition to assault the hegemonic thinking pervading the sustainable development agenda.

The rising popularity of referring to ‘community’ as a panacea to social and environmental ills is fulfilling a political ideological function that glosses over the complexity of variety in human relationships. “Community becomes a political resource, and social groups may conflict in the struggle to be the legitimate representatives of the ‘community’ so that they can pursue their own representation of what might constitute ‘community interests’” (Evans, 1994, p. 107). This ability to strongly influence the perception of a broadly publicised version of ‘reality’ becomes an important realm of power. However, multiple ‘realities’ exist along with people’s membership of multiple and overlapping social networks that can be competitive and complementary. Attempts to present a ‘community’ position represent an abstraction from the complex interdependency of lived issues.

An issue of paramount importance in the planning and sustainable development agenda, therefore, is to deconstruct this naïve, ideologically loaded and utopian view of ‘community’ and reconstruct a more sophisticated understanding of the need to work together while recognising our differences. These conditions call forth the ‘discursive community’. Before considering this potential, the next section will briefly allude to the philosophical terrain that the ‘dis-
4. Some philosophical insights: practices of the subject

To say that environmentalism can be deconstructed is to say, no more or less, that it is the product of conceptual, discursive and social practices. It also opens the way for the elucidation of the power formulations at work in subjectivisation. Namely, the ‘how do I know what I know’ issue. Deconstruction allows the re-claiming and the revaluation of the ‘body’, which has been ignored or even suppressed in the elaboration of the rational subject of Enlightenment thought. The reclaiming of the body empowers ‘lived’ experience. This allows for the problematising of knowledge or ‘different ways of knowing’ in the sustainable development debate and can be interpreted as a transdisciplinary orientation (Meppem and Bourke, 1999). Alternatively, the knowledge of the Enlightenment, which has evolved into the dominating instrumental rationalism, owes everything to the operation of reason based on data gathered through the observation of empirical phenomena. Deconstruction reveals the discursive and conceptual nature of the subject, thus displacing the hegemony of the rational, unified and universal subject. Deconstruction as a way of thinking was inspired by Heidegger (1993), who was strongly influenced by his Romantic predecessors and has been extensively elaborated through the work of Derrida (1981).

Critics of this approach argue that this represents an abandonment of rational thinking. But are not attempts to recognise the discursivity of the subject, the historicity of discourse and the functions of power formulations, also rational procedures aimed to illuminate the nature of our problems based in observations and assessments of empirical phenomena? This alternative approach recognises that “the subject is not an entity that pre-exists thought and language and which thought must discover and language describe, but that it is produced, shaped and re-shaped by conceptual and discursive factors” (Helmy, 1998, p. 5). The subject can be interpreted here as a context-specific sustainable development issue. The decentering of the role of reason promoted by discursive approaches allows for a re-invigoration of lived experience, experience associated with an understanding of the ‘body’ in the way the subject is thought. This approach does not allow an obscure subject to exist outside our thinking, but rather actively seeks insights into the anatomy of the subject. By offering the possibility of a re-configuring of the subject through allowing alternative discursive relations, coalitions can evolve that are capable of identifying and countering repressive and oppressive powerformations, while allowing for the potential of a reconstruction of these relations based on altered coalitions that recognise and celebrate difference. Conceiving sustainable development as a discursive construct allows for the legitimate inclusion of experiential knowledge, difference or the ‘body’ into discursive practices aimed at developing a collective ethics for environmental care. These processes of transgression represent a permanent critique that is aimed at preventing the solidifying of subject-positions around which new forms of domination would coalesce. Therefore, the context for sustainable development becomes active politicised participatory processes of reflexive discursive engagement, which are always in the process of making and unmaking ‘community’.

This critical cultural recognition of the role of language in communication leads us away from searching for the discovery of ‘truth’ toward an understanding of ‘truth’ as a process of discursive ‘invention’. Jurgen Habermas argues, along with other critical theorists and American pragmatists (Light and Katz 1996), that it is through communicative reason that societal structures will form and evolve to address contemporary problems. Determining collectively what the issues are and how they are related, through communicative practices that recognise and celebrate diversity, is the ‘productive’ change-making process. Habermas (1984) proposes that “[T]he
utopian perspective of reconciliation and freedom is ingrained in the conditions for the communicative association of individuals; it is built into the linguistic mechanism of the reproduction of the species” (p. 398). This urge to communicatively associate is akin to Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘philosophy of desire’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984). These contemporary French philosophers enable thinking to become destabilised before promoting its productive reconstruction. As Sandercock (1998, p. 211) informs us, desire is much more than eros. In an introduction to the work of Deleuze and Guattari, Goodchild (1996, p. 11) proposes the philosophy of desire “as spontaneous, chaotic, and irreducible emergence”. This irreducible concept of difference is the transforming potential in the vitality of productive social relations. Its product is simulacra, in that everything happens in between, which I will elaborate as the learning of the ‘discursive community’. It is not possible to ‘get some learning’, it is something that happens through social formations. Armed with these potentials, the following section will elaborate the idea of a ‘discursive community’. The development of the ‘discursive community’ will engage these considerations, the context of which can be termed sustainable development.

5. The discursive community

The discursive community is dissonant, constituted from difference. The strength of the discursive community is in establishing relational connections. To assist in expanding insight into the accommodation of difference Deleuze and Guattari’s elements of the social unconscious, multiplicity, creation and desire will be brought in to serve the ‘discursive community’. Now, the seeking of heterogeneity in the discursive community can be described as multiplicity. To engage desire, multiplicity must be productive. The bringing together of diverse stakeholders is not sufficient for the discursive community. Participants are not only together alongside, but are allowing the ability to be affected by not privileging some knowledges. This can be interpreted as methodological pluralism, the ethos of ecological economics (Norgaard, 1989), and represents ‘listening’ or learning. This is not a repeatable production process; rather, each ‘revolution’ of the discursive community will produce new learning. Creation is the second element of immanent relations in Deleuze and Guattari’s social unconscious. Through this emergent innovating concept, we can interpret the social relations of the discursive community as producing learning that will reformulate social relations (institutional design), producing further learning and relational reformulations and so on; the process reproduces itself. Desire is the third element of the social unconscious, which is being claimed here as bringing forth the discursive community. Reflexive communication is the driving ‘forceless force’ that allows for the emergence of productive social relations, which is the discursive community. The reflexive communications allows for consistency to emerge from the diversity enabling learning, the real but imperceptible product of the process. These concepts of ‘learning’ (methodological pluralism), ‘process’ (transdisciplinary) and ‘communication’ (sustainability) are inseparable and must be grasped together to interpret the discursive community. These concepts are an attempt to highlight the significance of what happens ‘in between’ in the discursive community, as opposed to thinking that seeks a particular ‘outside’ goal to solve a particular sustainable development problem. These concepts are

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6 Some insight into what is meant here by ethos is provided by Michel Foucault in one of his last essays before he died, written in 1984, ‘What is Enlightenment’: “The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethics, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them”.

7 This is a reference to the conditions of Habermas (1984) for ‘an ideal speech situation’.
wrapped in social relations and cannot be ‘had’ or understood independent of vitality in social relations.

The discursive community recognises that sustainable policy development is imbued in a social/political/institutional setting that represents a plateau of conflict where discursive struggle evokes environmental strategy. More conventional conceptualisations of environmental policy making promote definitions that seek particular goals, this thinking is consistent with ‘truth’ seeking static notions of ‘community’. These definitions for sustainable development strategy rely on interpreting the environment as ‘out there’, something which can be cognitively grasped and melded to suit our purposes. Essentially, this thinking implies we cannot access this environment through our own sensory perceptions, but that it has to be ‘packaged’ through the data simulations of ‘experts’ (Hajer, 1995). This ‘other’ of the environment is typical of the Enlightenment thinking that excludes the ‘body’ as a legitimate knowledge, a position that has been extensively elaborated in feminist literature (Dietz, 1992; Sandercock and Forsyth, 1992; Sandercock, 1998). Williams (1973), in arguing against these approaches to environmentalism, posits that conventional approaches have mostly failed to address the social relations of which the very predicament was the result. In an insightful account of the environmental ramifications of not paying close attention to social relations, Ralston Saul (1997, p. 172) concedes that the antidote to the perceived escalating and interdependent nature of our development problems is to insert “the citizen as citizen into the system in whatever way we can”.

There is a growing recognition of the importance of considering the interrelations of economic competitiveness, environmental integrity and social cohesion, which forms the imprimatur for the ecological economics project. Amid this recognition of interdependence is a growing disquiet regarding the capacity of our institutional relations to consider problems in this way. Scratch the surface and we are confronted with our accepted communicative approaches in sustainable policy development that are not conducive to inter-subjective discursive practices, but instead rely on the pursuit of remote targets. Altered communicative practices are embodied in the ‘discursive community’ and are required if we are to think in terms of interdependence and co-evolution regarding complex sustainable development problems. In this way, “[R]eality lies before us as so many possibilities of apprehension and comprehension” (Lingis, 1994, p. 159). By embodying a diverse array of knowledge within the argumentative process, the emergent sustainable development strategy becomes a record of contested positions and how these were structured it will reveal why specific policy and criteria have been collectively selected, and it will provide detail on impacts and who bears them. So the emphasis in these coalitions is to build policy socially, recognising the importance of institutional flexibility to creatively address complex problems. Effort is now focused in developing communicative skills in constructive critique, in creative exploration, in respectful listening. These attributes are required to realise the potential of the ‘discursive community’, understood as collectively and inter-subjectively addressing and working out how to act in respect of our ‘common property resources’.

Such a participatory democracy as that proposed by the ‘discursive community’ will “always be a democracy ‘to come’ as conflict and antagonism are at the same time its condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of its full realisation” (Mouffe, 1993, p. 8). The convergence of postempiricist philosophy, the hermeneutics of critical theory and post-normal science into the terrain openly defined as the ‘discursive community’ make it necessary to politically problematise notions of ‘community’ as an effective medium for articulating sustainable development policy. This occurs because participation strategies that

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9 See Meppem and Bourke (1999).
11 This is a reference to the emotive and insightful work by Lingis (1994).
attempt to extend the interpretation of the ‘public good’ will always encounter obstacles, as existing rights have been predicated on the subordination of others who may now be invited to participate. This modification of communicative ‘lines of sight’ is the process for the reconstruction of the institutional infrastructure of society. The ‘discursive community’ is put forward as a response to citizens who are increasingly demanding “democracy in the place of discredited scientific authority” (Dryzek, 1996, p. 115). The key to sustainable policy development through the ‘discursive community’ is the “transformation of private interests into publicly defensible values in unrestricted debate” (Dryzek, 1990, p. 42). The regeneration of ‘community’ through the ‘discursive community’ seeks to fulfil the ‘desire’ for effective action to specific development problems. This context is what allows the evolution of this ‘community of those who have nothing in common’ into an empowered decision-making structure.

These altered arrangements specifically address the persistent tendency in planning for sustainable development that separate the understanding of economic and environmental changes from the political processes of governance through which problems are compartmentalised, and the subsequent policy formulation and implementation process undertaken. It is as much “about the process and form of engagement of citizens in the making of their world as it is about the ends they seek to achieve” (Friedmann, 1998, p. 2). Many of the confrontations about communicative approaches slip into conceptual simplicity by offering the traditional polarity of outcome: this polarity is the choice between relativism and foundationalism. Flyvbjerg (1998, p. 209) offers an insight, one that I have attempted to maintain throughout this argument, that “[P]erhaps the horns of the dualism can be avoided by contextualism”. No general principle exists, including the ‘force of the better argument’, by which all differences can be resolved. A strong civil society, as proposed through the ‘discursive community’, guarantees the existence of conflict and additionally allows for the resolution of this conflict. As Sandercock (1998, p. 64) so eloquently says, “deciding what road to build, where, is so much harder than deciding how best to build it”. So the social project of sustainable development will rely on close attention to institutional structures for decision-making, something that cannot be thought out of the context of communicative praxis provided for through the ‘discursive community’.

6. Institutional structures

Institutional structures and governance systems are emerging that are enabling the potential of more inclusive styles of decision-making. Much of this is occurring in response to the Agenda 21 (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 1992) action plan for sustainability. The language of Agenda 21 is supportive of communicative praxis by recommending the need for institutional flexibility with the implied evolution of democratic structures. The emphasis on local, participatory structures is consistent with an emphasis on defining context and collectively interpreting, and therefore developing, relationships. Additionally, Mayo (1994) asserts that government agencies in Britain and the United States are under pressure to be more responsive to citizens. This trend is also evident in Australia with the introduction of new integrated environmental planning legislation, which is explicit in its requirements for citizen participation in decision-making. Such a broadly based call for increased participation in development decision-making challenges politicians’ ability to interpret the

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11 New legislation has been enacted in most states of Australia that are explicit in their requirements for participation resulting from the Commonwealth of Australia (1992) Intergovernmental Agreement on the Environment, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra. In New South Wales, this legislation includes the Local Government Ammendment (Ecologically Sustainable Development) Act 1997 and the Environmental Planning and Assessment (Amendment) Act 1997.
'public good', as well as the roles of their bureaucratic representatives in this regard.

Sustainability efforts should therefore be judged by the quality of process, the ability to build relations between stakeholders that reflect trust, and enhanced learning and understanding of different values and meanings. Support of the policy and its capacity to endure over time is the material outcome. An important question then arises as to how development planning is to deal with an alternative inclusive way of thinking and still promote accountability? Can planners (policy analysts) be accountable for process rather than content? Currently ''political institutions are judged and justified according to how well they can generate and implement policies to resolve well-defined problems through the pursuit of clear goals'' (Dryzek, 1990, p. 32).

The emphasis in this argument on culture as socially derived systems of meaning presents the opportunity for social reflection on structuring processes that permeate and mould our everyday activity. Such an orientation emphasises context as a means of interpreting the particulars of a specific situation. An institutional theory is therefore developed out of an enhanced understanding of the social construction of practice (see Argyris and Schon, 1978; Schon, 1983).

Strategy-making that employs this interactive approach explicitly recognises and encourages the development of social relations as strategy-making. Habermas (1984, p. 1993) seeks a reconstruction of the public realm through a search for ways to hold public discussion for decision-making without being dominated by the interests and language of the powerful. The emphasis on communication "derives not only from the recognition of the linguistically mediated nature of social relations generally, but from its specific developmental aim to change patterns of communication in ways that lead to changes in organisational structure" (McCarthy, 1996, p. 159). Discursive approaches innovate by re-framing issues and, in the process of building meaning, develop new narratives through a recombination of social relations. Yet the classical analytical approach asserts that agreed organisational structures and objectives are required before analysis can start (Rosenhead, 1989). These conventional institutional arrangements are structured so as to deny or ignore the creative potential for policy, of mutual shaping of a problem definition. Alternative communicative approaches for planning sustainable development are proposed to operate beyond the borders of entrepreneurial, centralising, theoretically bounded, and politically imbued government agencies. Essential to this process is the recognition of diversity in knowledge styles and reasoning, which is accessed and interpreted through communicative approaches. Healey (1997, p. 268) emphasises that effective social ownership requires that new ideas and organising routines grow out of the specific concerns of stakeholders. Dialogue processes need to open out issues, to explore what they mean to different people, and whether they are really about what they superficially seem to be or something else. It also means recognising the, often deep, divisions among stakeholders and the cultural, economic and political bases for these.

The stance taken here in elucidating an understanding of flexible institutional structures is interdependent, with the idea that sustainable development problems are defined and therefore created discursively. The definition of problems will largely define the solutions sought. For these reasons, the institutional structures will reflect power relationships and this will determine the acceptability of arguments in the sustainable development debate. The recognition of this proclivity to privilege particular kinds of knowledge in discursive practices is interpreted here as methodological pluralism. As Crawford and Ostrom (1995) remind us, institutions are merely regular behaviour patterns sustained by mutual expectations and should not be anthropomorphised into something other than this process for shared understanding and behaviour of participants. To embrace these understandings, Hajer (1995, p. 282) recommends the avoidance of our current orientation on science as the universal discourse to "facilitate the institutionalisation of a public language that would
allow for productive inter-discursive debates"). This suggests a focus on facilitating empowered structures and relationships that permit real involvement of people, as stakeholders, in the problem definition stage of development planning and at the same time build capacity to make this involvement effective. It is this search for more broadly based democratic processes of deriving shared meaning that represents the critically difficult issue for contemporary societies seeking sustainable development. So the debate becomes not only about content, but also about how meanings are derived to formulate collectively agreed upon action. An undeniable theme of this communicative policy process is that the institutional structure of policy discourses have an immense influence on the construction of policy problems and the outcomes of implementation strategies. These are crucial issues that highlight the importance of reflexive, discursively determined, context-specific, institutional arrangements for sustainable development policy processes.

7. Conclusion

It has been argued in this paper that sustainable development processes have underdeveloped thinking and consequently lack strategy to address the integrated complexity of contemporary development concerns. The ecological economics framework described in this paper has sought to redress this shortcoming by gathering the three interrelated ecological economic concepts of sustainability, transdisciplinary and methodological pluralism into the process of the ‘discursive community’ as the avenue for the formulation and implementation of sustainable development policy. These intertwined concepts cannot be thought independently of each other, but define and invent each other in an ongoing way. It has been argued that sustainability is the articulation of reflexive communicative interaction for collectively defining the parameters of development concerns. This interaction requires a transdisciplinary orientation that seeks insights through discourses that problematise knowledge, rather than continually suggesting context-free solutions to predetermined problem definitions. Methodological pluralism is the guiding concept or ethos in this interaction that functions to anticipate the privileging of particular kinds of knowledge and reasoning in development planning, and therefore is enabling of learning in this communicative process. By deconstructing the conventional notion of community, the discursive community was allowed to emerge as the ‘vehicle’ for gathering up these relational concepts into a practical policy process that recognises the importance of incorporating diversity in planning for sustainable development. The gathering of these concepts into the ‘discursive community’ reflects a critical perspective, a cultural concept.

What has been specifically appropriated in this approach is a deconstructive and then reconstructive way of thinking that intertwines sustainability, transdisciplinary and methodological pluralism as a way of interpreting phenomena, and the proposal of a social project to address these concerns, through the ‘discursive community’. The discursive community allows for the reconfiguration of productive social relations (institutions). The concepts of sustainability, transdisciplinary and methodological pluralism invent and define each other, and are reflected within each other. These concepts cannot be understood independently of each other. Each concept is its own whole. Each concept lacks the essence of modernist thinking and cannot be termed postmodernist, in that these concepts seek the social project of sustainable development through the discursive community. These concepts are representative of things that happen in between in social relations, their product ‘learning’ is imperceptible in itself. This is the contested terrain of sustainable development, which seeks strategies to mediate the ‘conflicts of interpretations’ in development planning.

So the challenge in planning for complex problems, such as sustainable development, is to
enable ‘culturally’ cognisant dialogue that promotes reflection on what we mean by our assertions, and to provide a framework where this can be respectfully contested and defended. In this way, the ‘sum of the parts’, the various dimensions of a complex problem, produces a greater ‘whole’, namely an enhanced understanding of the interacting nature of the dimensions of a complex problem. This shared system of meaning is the avenue through which sustainable development strategy emerges. Essential to these processes is the recognition that to respond to the potential of a constructive re-configuration of our seemingly intractable environmental problems, posed by the potential of the ‘discursive community’, requires a release from disciplinary and institutional rigidity. In so doing, we may seemingly be cast adrift into uncertain and hostile territory; thrown into the abyss of relativity. However, recourse to the template of practices provided for through the ‘discursive community’ allows us to rebuild our understandings, based on strengthening our social relations, to collectively articulate context-dependent strategy for planning sustainable development. These strengthening social relations rely on communicative practice to expose power relations, to bring to the surface untested assumptions regarding the limits and hierarchy of our knowledge claims. and to do this by empowering stakeholder involvement in participatory decision-making partnerships. Learning is the product of these communicative partnerships, through which, emerge collectively, agreed strategies and actions for sustainable development.

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