

Sustainability Governance and Indicators

David V. J Bell

dvjbell@yorku.ca

Director, York Centre for Applied
Sustainability, York University

www.yorku.ca/ycas

A Presentation to
ISIN Conference

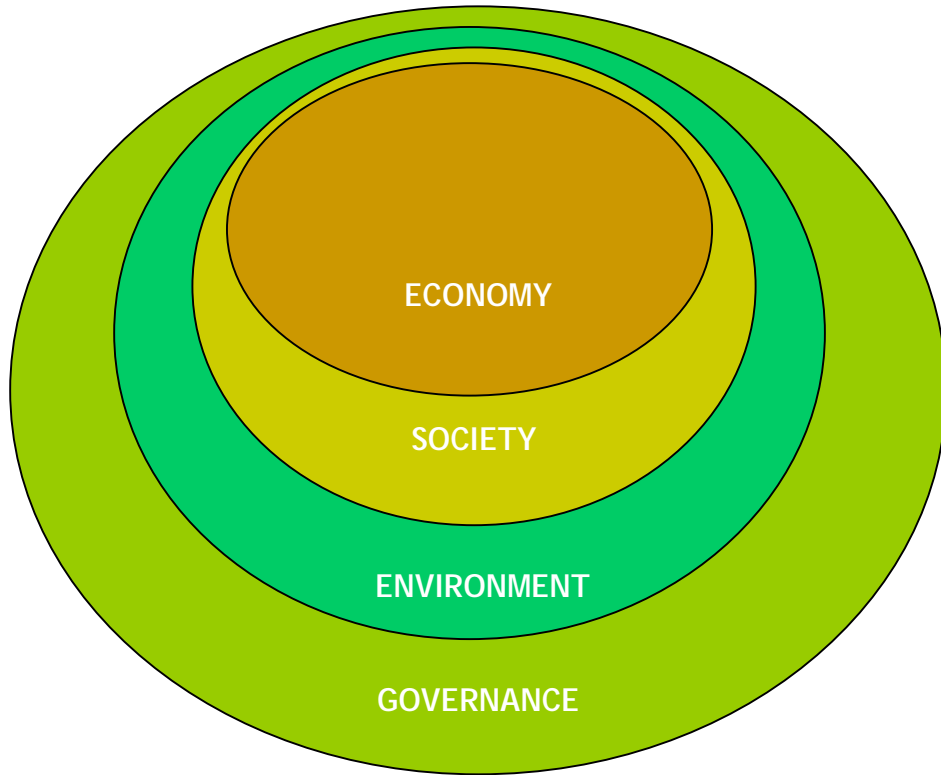
Toronto, March 14, 2003

“Government” has a Greek root

- (My Big Fat Greek Wedding is correct!)
- traces back through Latin (*gubernare*)
- to Greek (*kybernes*) which means “**helmsman**”
- English word “cybernetic” (which denotes self-steering systems) derives from same root
- so **government is about “steering”** (the “ship of state”?? Or more appropriately, “spaceship Earth”)
- note also the distinction between “steering” (government’s role) and “rowing” (business’ role)

Government vs Governance

- **Government** refers to particular kinds of “public” institutions (the “state”) vested with formal authority to take decisions on behalf of the entire community.
- **Governance** refers to the myriad other organizations and institutions, in addition to government, which take decisions affecting others.
- Governance encompasses **collective decisions made in the public sector, the private sector, and civil society.**
- It suggests the **need for collaboration** among these sectors to address the kinds of **broad, horizontal challenges** associated with sustainability.



Good Sustainability Governance Requires:

- ? **A Vision** of SD
- ? Appropriate **Structures** (stovepipes make it difficult)
- ? Appropriate **Processes** including
 - ? decision tools for “integrated decisions”
 - ? a “sustainability lens” to see the triple implications
 - ? a “sustainability screen” to assess policy proposals
 - ? “sustainability metrics” to measure the impacts/outcomes
 - ? mechanisms to allow transparency/reporting and participation
 - ? **a Sustainability Management System complete with targets, incentives, monitoring and reporting**
- ? **A Culture** of Sustainability (within the organization)
 - ? understanding, values, buy-in, “alignment”
 - ? conscious efforts to change the mindset and culture through professional development, education and awareness initiatives, etc
- ? **Time**
 - ? to apply these principles, make good decisions, learn continuously
 - ? planning for medium and long term, not just short term
- ? **Resources** (human and financial)
- ? **Champions**

“Supply” Indicators

- give a snapshot of how the community is doing in the hopes that this will engage the public and/or decision makers in discussions about the opportunities for action to improve the situation
- are typically produced by an NGO or group outside of government
- are not related to targets or goals
- face problems of funding, data sourcing, and impact
- may effectively engage the community in shaping the exercise but require expert assistance

“Demand” Indicators

- provide an “audit” of the community or of a set of policies
- are produced by or in partnership with government(s)
- are related to targets or goals (and therefore often become politically sensitive)
- require cooperation among government agencies and integration into a broader (sustainability) management system
- are often expert driven and may not engage the public sufficiently

Role of Indicators in Governance

- Part of the “feedback loop” in a system steered by various governance institutions (cybernetics again)
- helps measure progress toward the goal or vision (assuming one exists)
- Remember Yogi Berra: “If you don’t know where you’re going you may never get there.”
- If you don’t have good sustainability metrics, you won’t know where you are!

Challenges/Opportunities for the Future

- How can we use advanced technologies (e.g. geomatics) to enhance cybernetic capabilities?
- can we connect measurement more effectively with action?
- Do any of you have examples of this to share with us?

Our Session:

“Sustainability Metrics and Community Governance -- The Use of Indicators in Decision Making”

- How important are sustainability metrics to effective governance?
- What kinds of decision-making "tools" are needed to ensure that indicators inform decisions?
- How can indicators be designed to track performance in relation to sustainability commitments by governments and other organizations?
- How can indicators be effectively embedded in community governance documents like Comprehensive Plans?
- What is the role of transparency and reporting?

The Presenters

- David Bell, York Centre for Applied Sustainability
- Linda Harvey, Vision 2020
- Martin Herzog and Meg Shields, City of Toronto
- Allison Quaid, International Center for Local Environmental Initiatives