

A Sustainable Future: Local Communities meeting the Challenge through Environmental, Social and Economic Initiatives

Erica Griffiths

*Program Manager Local Government
Institute for Sustainable Futures, UTS*

Introduction

Sustainability! What's is sustainability? Is it some new buzz-word of the decade or is it something more? What about Local Government or local communities and sustainability, what does that all mean to us? Well perhaps you're already familiar with the term "sustainability" but perhaps not. Some of you may already be implementing sustainable actions in your organisation. But for those of us who aren't, let's have a look at what it does mean.

Now defining 'sustainability' is a tricky business and we could get caught up in discussing the many and varied definitions of sustainability, but perhaps that's not so worthwhile. I think at last count there were about 360 definitions for 'sustainability', 'ecologically sustainable development' and 'sustainable development'. Simply put, sustainability is the combination of economic, social and environmental issues in planning, decision making and resource use. Or one definition that I particularly like is "sustainability requires the effective integration of economic, social and environmental considerations in decision making processes" (see *Figure 1* for some models of sustainability).

It's worthwhile having a quick look at the terminology. Although internationally the term 'sustainable development' is used, both the Federal and NSW State Governments use Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD). In our work with Councils we find that some Councils don't relate to the 'ecological' side of ESD while others shy away from the 'development' side. Hence we prefer to use 'sustainability'. Although as someone said to me – "doesn't that mean you can just define it to mean what you want". Well exactly!

Sustainability is the economic, social, natural environmental and probably also the spiritual aspects of our lives. Don't get too hung up on definitions. Just pick one to suit your cause, your Council and your motivation.

Importantly, 'sustainability' should also not be seen as a destination or goal. I would suggest that perhaps we don't yet know what the perfect 'sustainable place' will be like or look like, so we see sustainability as a pathway, a journey with many small steps, but not a destination.