
ARTICLE

Indicators for Change: taking a lead

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ABSTRACT *The authors argue that sustainable development is a political concept arising from interactions between socio-economic and physical systems. As such, political values are implicit in many qualitative aspects of sustainability and its communication through indicators. In Great Britain, local government has played the lead role in Local Agenda 21, involving interest groups and community organisations in varying degrees, through public participation. However, the need for local solutions to sustainability problems also exists in Northern Ireland, where governmental bodies are unwilling or unable to accept responsibility for Local Agenda 21. In the Northern Ireland context, the evolving role of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and the community sector in the indicators issue has been markedly different to that in the rest of the UK. There are potential problems concerning political values and mandates when the NGO/community sector assumes the lead in such tasks. The authors argue that, while criticisms of explicit and/or implied political values can be well grounded, addressing these must go beyond questions of objectivity in collection and presentation of indicators and projects must be understood by developing feedback and review mechanisms. The authors review the Northern Ireland sustainability indicators project and evaluate the feedback procedures in place. Lessons learnt from this exercise are explored with reference to (i) the current organisation of Local Agenda 21 within local government in Northern Ireland and (ii) national and international parallels.*

Making a Start

Gary Lawrence has a refreshingly honest understanding of sustainability as a 'muddled confusion' and a 'swirl of partial thoughts' (1996c, p.317) which reflects the complex issues and relationships underlying an apparently simple concept. The wide variety of working definitions in circulation demonstrate the dynamic and locality specific nature of sustainability. Every definition of sustainable development is necessarily endowed with value judgements, even the seminal formulations by Brundtland (WCED, 1987) and the United Nations

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(Quarrie, 1992) contain subjective concepts such as 'quality of life' and 'basic needs', espousing an implicit political agenda. However, both focus on the values underpinning economic systems and the reevaluation of 'progress' and 'development'—requiring a paradigm shift in our culture's belief system (Henderson, 1990)—'development' now has locally specific and divergent definitions relating to quality of life.

Political bias inevitably features in the most famous community-led sustainability indicators project, 'Sustainable Seattle' (Sustainable Seattle, 1993). 'Sustainable Seattle' used indicators to show direction and 'mirror the complexity' of societal relationships and dynamics (Mitchell *et al.*, 1995; Lawrence, 1996b, 1997) demonstrating an understanding of sustainability as a relative rather than an absolute concept and value judgements informed the selection of indicators expressing values and generating emotional response.

While some commentators stress the importance of a strong theoretical underpinning to give indicators processes creditability (Mitchell *et al.*, 1995; Scott *et al.*, 1996), in practice, pragmatism rules and the selection of one type of indicator over another is often determined by data availability.

Essentials for Indicators

While no indicators project suggests that it is perfect, or that data availability has not been a significant determinant on its contents, it is crucial that data availability should not become a major curtailing factor in indicator compilation, otherwise sustainable development will simply perpetuate the status quo. The selection of a set of indicators is a political process and political underpinning is even more crucial than a theoretical base, a notably weak feature of Local Agenda 21 in the UK to date (Riglar, 1998).

Indicator compilers generally aim for objectivity in data analysis and presentation (within limits of uncertainty) even though they may have an underlying agenda. This is reflected in the development of alternative social progress indicators by NGOs using indicators to identify "... the causes and the structural barriers to achieving ecologically sustainable, equitable human development" (Henderson, 1994, p.127). These are not value free but neither are traditional neo-classical economic indicators. Indicator consumers on the other hand are required to subjectively assess the information presented (Lawrence, 1997a).

NGO indicators are important in their own right, but they are also instrumental in generating the political will required to bridge the gap between government and community organisations which is central in progressing collective responsibility for sustainable development. Sustainability is a political not a technical issue, imbued with moral values that should reflect community aspirations in order to attain a common vision and shared responsibility and requires the devolution of power to and then through local government levels.

By empowering others you not only get community ownership of the problems and solutions, but you also increase the status of the local government as the source of empowerment (Lawrence, 1996b, p.120).

Local Government and the LGMB Sustainability Indicators Project

In Britain, the Local Government Management Board (LGMB) established an indicators project in November 1993 directly inspired by the 'Sustainable Seattle' project (LGMB, 1995). Its aim was to gather information on best practice and provide a framework and guidelines for UK local authorities. There was a practical focus throughout the pilot phases of the project and a deliberate move away from any complex theoretical underpinning.

'There is ... no real need to spend a great deal of time on theoretical considerations ... the important thing is to make a start, and to take advantage of the opportunities as they emerge.' (LGMB, 1995, p.3)

This pragmatic approach is consistent with reviews of current practice in environmental auditing that stress the need to avoid becoming "... tied up in terminology and typology" (Brunner, 1995, p.228). The result was the adoption of a variety of strategies by the 10 pilot local authorities, displaying varying levels of commitment by elected members, involvement with community groups, availability of resources, levels of data provision and statutory circumstances. Two examples of the wide range of initiatives currently operating in the UK (LGMB, 1998) are:

- Bedfordshire, where the revision of the structure plan coincided with the LGMB project and much of the community consultation, indicators selection and target setting was incorporated into a comprehensive review of strategic planning policy (Bedfordshire County Council 1994; Bedfordshire County Council & Luton Borough Council, 1997).
- Lancashire, where substantial resources were devoted to the production of a second 'Green Audit', allowing the investigation of distributional issues and the establishment of a GIS (Geographic Information System) database to show both geographical and temporal trends (Lancashire County Council, 1997).

The LGMB project addressed moral and political aspects of sustainable development by allowing local authorities to adapt, alter and develop their own set of indicators from an original 'shopping-list' of 101 prepared with consultants to reflect local factors. This allowed the indicators to be designed locally/regionally and be politically transparent, functioning in the relevant democratic sphere (Henderson, 1990). The need for transparency is also recognised in the ISEW (the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare) (Mayo *et al.*, 1997) and the Manchester 2020 initiative (Ravetz, 1996, 1999) which are taking a lead in producing aggregate figures reflecting overall trends in sustainability aimed at strategic policy-makers. However, composite indexes are unable to reflect the complexity of human systems and Ravetz (1997, p. 291) stresses the need to contextualise them within a wider set of environmental and socio-economic material. In any event, composite indexes generate problems of attribute selection and weighting (Fahey, 1995).

In contrast, the transparency and openness of non-technical and disaggregated indicators suggested by LGMB allows the public to understand the scope of sustainable development and linkage between issues.

...no single indicator is appropriate. A suite of indicators is required that attempts to cover comprehensively the most important concerns relevant to sustainability. (Mitchell *et al.*, 1995, p. 109)

Non-Governmental Organisations and the Voluntary Sector

Political debate surrounding indicators has spawned a number of grassroots projects (MacGillivray *et al.*, 1998) and a "... recent trend has been the development of local sustainability indicators either by community-based organisations or by local authorities in partnership with local communities" (Pinfield, 1996, p. 162). Community- and NGO-based projects lack a political mandate. However, this does not negate their benefits, provided that it is kept in mind and compromise and change are availed of to reflect shared political values. Local authority-led indicator projects are not immune from criticism and also raise questions of accountability and the legitimate role of government and NGOs (Pearce, 1997). In any event, in the absence of a lead from local authorities, it is valid for other interested bodies to place the issue on the agenda.

The compilation of local indicators should focus on achieving pragmatic solutions that improve our understanding of sustainability. An NGO-led approach to indicator projects can be legitimised by espousing the following key values:

- (i) *Presentation.* A first step in community empowerment is providing accessible and understandable information. Communities can be disenfranchised by lack of information and gaps in understanding or data poverty. NGOs communicate information to both the public and policy makers and must address the main requirements of indicators; namely measurability, meaningfulness, comprehensibility and resonance (Anderson, 1991; MacGillivray, 1994). They must match the format of the information to the needs of data users, through improved presentation and synthesis (for example, Green Gauge, 1996) in contrast with the massing of huge and irrelevant data sets by government as an end in itself, allowing the public to remain divorced from collective responsibility for sustainability.
- (ii) *Objectivity.* A further step towards empowering individuals involves allowing them to evaluate indicators for themselves, providing opportunities to suggest and take appropriate action. In this area, the independence of NGOs is advantageous, they are in a unique position to use information to raise awareness of issues as well as for campaign purposes.
- (iii) *Feedback.* Establishing effective community feedback mechanisms is critical. In contrast to public bodies, where feedback is used to affect policy and decision-making (for example, LPAC, 1995), community feedback focuses on education and common ownership of the local environment and the process of change. Feedback may even serve to build community by involvement in data collection and formulating a vision for the locality—this aspect of feedback and connections between community perceptions and behavioural change, has proved weak in the current LGMB project (Riglar, 1998). It has been noted that "... at the local level even the UK

Sustainability Indicators Project has yet to explore issues beyond simply measurement and recording" (Pinfield, 1996, p. 156) and so new methodologies and tools are being developed (LGMB, 1996; Brugmann, 1997b) by local authorities to link with communities and achieve effective feedback on indicators.

The Northern Ireland Context

Although described as a UK-wide study, the LGMB research project did not include pilot authorities from Northern Ireland, thus failing to assimilate the distinctive features of the Province and to provide an example for its Local Authorities. The idiosyncrasies of governance in Northern Ireland are the product of historical accident, compounded by institutionalised neglect of local democracy under devolved government and direct rule. Current arrangements are modelled on the 1970 *Report of the Review Body on Local Government in Northern Ireland*, which advocated reform to improve efficiency and decrease sectarianism in state services by aggressive centralisation (Turner & Morrow, 1997, pp. 20–23). The report was written during home rule but its recommendations were put into effect following the reintroduction of direct rule from Westminster in 1972. This resulted in a substantial, pervasive and complex democratic deficit where central government has become profoundly distanced from the people and local authorities. Despite fundamental constitutional change, the remit of local government remains limited, primarily comprising aspects of "... entertainment, culture and recreation, environmental health, cleansing and sanitation" (Morrow, 1996, p.36). Local authorities in the Province stand ill equipped by law to deliver modern local democracy and in particular to embrace Local Agenda 21.

Direct rule has placed the Northern Ireland civil service in a powerful position (Morrow & Turner 1998) rendering the delivery of most state services technocratic rather than democratic, (for example, House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 1996, para. 127–141; House of Commons Environment Committee, 1991). The liberation of the Northern Ireland departments from the usual constraints of democratic government has been the result of poor supervision by Westminster and of weak local institutions. Its power has been augmented by the realities of governing the Province—British ministers in the Northern Ireland Office divide their time between Westminster and Belfast, and are thus reliant on civil servants.

The problem of securing accountability has been aggravated by the extension of the Next Steps initiative to the Province, further weakening traditional parliamentary scrutiny mechanisms (Drewry, 1988) by transferring operational responsibility for state services to executive agencies, fragmenting local administration.

Northern Ireland is particularly vulnerable to government by quangocracy, with a proliferation of appointed bodies attempting to purchase 'neutrality' from sectarianism at the cost of democratic input and accountability. However, despite the changes introduced since 1972, political life in the Province remains deeply sectarian and ownership of political power still raises serious questions. Adverse

local democratic conditions in Northern Ireland have, ironically, had some positive impact on the public, with the mobilisation of community groups (Morison & Livingstone, 1996) attempting to influence the decisions and processes affecting them. Activism initially focused on community development but has extended to other sectors, notably the environment (House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 1996; Morrow, 1997) and Local Agenda 21 (for example, SNIP, 1998). Community groups have been keen to exploit opportunities to participate in public life, providing a valuable (if partial) representative aspect to otherwise technocratic decision making processes.

The peculiarities in local democracy which have left Northern Ireland lagging behind the rest of the UK, especially in the development of indicators for sustainable development, give Local Agenda 21 particular resonance. However, the issue is complicated by the fact that the Association of Local Authorities for Northern Ireland (ALANI) (loosely equivalent to the LGMB) does not, for political reasons, represent all of the Province's local authorities and, unlike the LGMB, has "... determined not to take a major role in Local Agenda 21" (Christie, 1996b, p.38).

Confusion over the allocation of national and local governmental functions has further inhibited the production of Local Agenda 21 strategies, necessitating a pragmatic approach, bypassing government, and establishing partnerships and other delivery mechanisms. While "partnerships ... are not a panacea for the 'democratic deficit'" (Knox, 1997, p.14) they do "... go some way towards representativeness and transparency in decision making" (Knox, 1997, p.15) and have the potential to improve accountability and ultimately subsidiarity.

Sustainable Northern Ireland Programme and Northern Ireland Sustainability Indicators

In order to tackle institutional limitations, the Sustainable Northern Ireland Project (SNIP) was set up and funded by the World Wildlife Fund UK, Shell and the European Peace and Reconciliation Fund in January 1997, as a bridge-builder between local authorities and communities in the implementation of Local Agenda 21. SNIP is an independent NGO with strong links to Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL), an established voluntary sector organisation which acts as a forum, an information resource and a link with government for NGOs and community groups. NIEL's *Environmental Strategy for Northern Ireland* (Christie, 1996a), highlighted the role of environmental information in changing public attitudes and behaviour resulting in more sustainable lifestyles.

SNIP is working on pilot projects covering networking, information provision and establishing Local Agenda 21 strategies. Spouncer (1996, p.60) recommended that SNIP support a sustainable development indicators project in tandem with the production of local state of the environment reports (to parallel GB experience). The Northern Ireland Sustainability Indicators project began as an informal partnership between NIEL, SNIP and the academic community (in consultation with Councils, NGOs and Community groups) reviewing relevant public-domain data sources, highlighting trends, links with other indicators,

areas of responsibility and potential implications for policy makers and the public. The project was loosely based on the LGMB framework but with presentation, objectivity and feedback playing a central role because of its NGO origins. The project provided a link between institutionalised data providers and information users residing outside central government. It was intended to act as a catalyst for action and address the concerns of the voluntary sector.

Presentation

The project borrowed from popularist and low-cost approaches (e.g. Durham County and Cardiff City) culminating in a reproducible (Black & White) report card format of 21 indicators and a summary sheet. The choice of 21 indicators was partly a gimmick to convey the Local Agenda 21 and 21st-century themes, and partly to allow a balanced set with seven environmental indicators complemented by seven economic and seven social measures. The presentation of indicators was in direct contrast to the statistical approach of government (Figure 1).

Objectivity

The institutional context in Northern Ireland has seen local authorities unable and central government unwilling to take a lead in developing sustainability indicators (Crilly & Mannis, 1997) necessitating NGO-initiated action which, though lacking a political mandate, has certain advantages in this area, including the ability to:

- highlight shared areas of responsibility;
- examine the scope of sustainability beyond statutory functions of central and local government;
- be viewed as independent by local authorities and the public; and
- make use of existing community and voluntary sector networks for publicising findings.

The need for objectivity was identified as a priority, data snapshots were avoided by the unweighted presentation of current data from clearly attributed sources, set against long-term trends (where available) in order to allow directional assessment of progress and local/national comparisons.

From the outset, the intention was to allow people to interpret and weight the relative importance of the indicators. The results show that, while the economy appears to be performing well and social equity is improving, environmental performance gives cause for concern. Seven indicators are moving towards sustainability, eight are uncertain/show no improvement and six are moving away from sustainability. Analysis of individual indicators was restricted to explanatory, descriptive and comparative issues.

The issue of setting targets was raised for discussion by the report, recognising the opportunities for utilising targets and standards as tools for community involvement in strategic and policy issues, but was not pursued in order to protect objectivity.

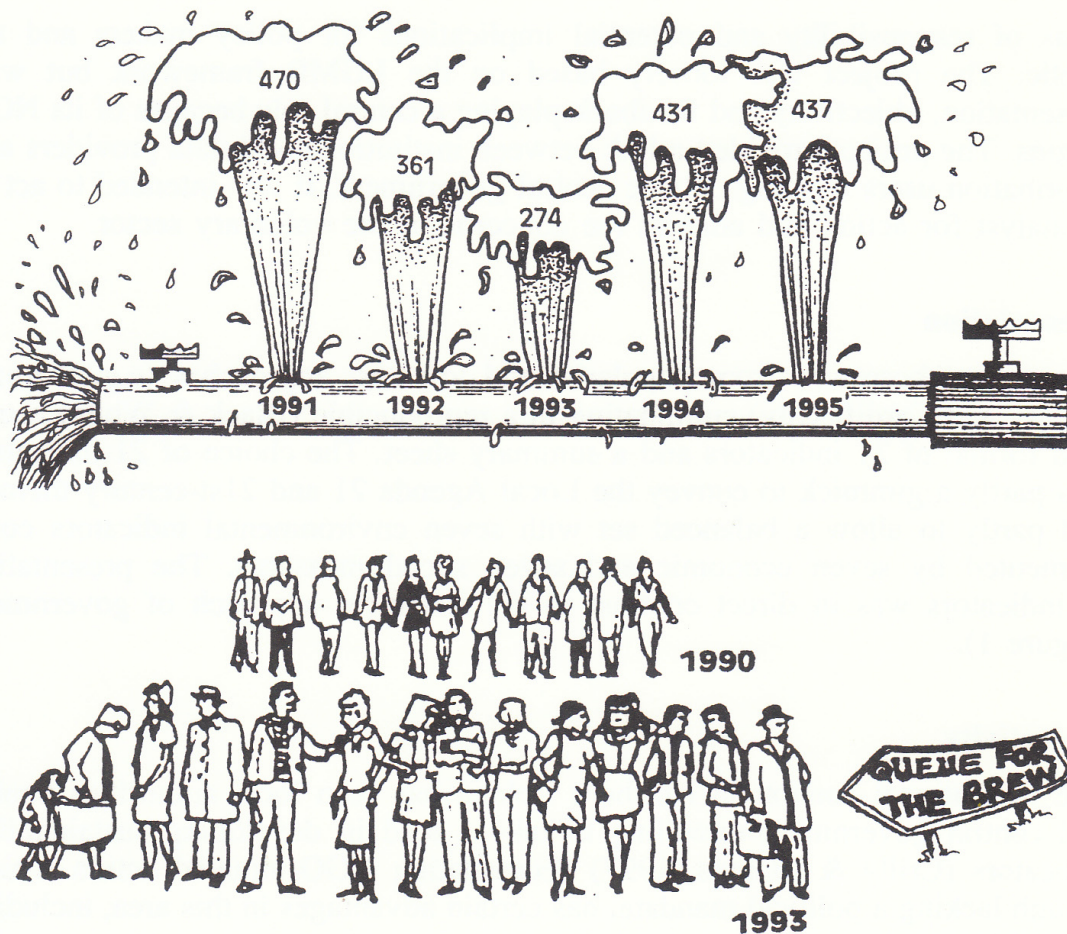


FIGURE 1. Two sample indicators from the SNIP project which contrast with the overly statistical presentation of similar issues by central government. The Government presentation of descriptive statistics is politically selective. For example on water quality, they state that "...45% of rivers are defined as having good or very good chemical water quality" (Department of the Environment (NI), 1997, p.92) but omit any trend information which would have highlighted a decline in this level over the previous three years and fail to link this decline with the number of pollution incidents (above, SNIP, 1997a). On the economy they present a positive picture by describing the falling unemployment rates (Department of the Environment (NI), 1997, p.91) while failing to link this to actual poverty levels, as observed in the number of people living on income support (above, SNIP, 1997a—the 'brew' is a Northern Irish phrase for income support).

Feedback Mechanisms and Review Procedures

Henderson (1990) argues that alternative indicators require additional feedback mechanisms since, to bring about change, checks on levels of influence and effectiveness are essential. As one aim of the NIEL/SNIP project was to act as a bridge between central government agencies and the voluntary/community sector, feedback procedures operated on two distinct levels—feedback to information providers (detailed in Crilly *et al.*, 1997) and feedback from information consumers.

The approach to feedback from 'consumers' utilised deliberative consultation with a sample set of individuals selected from responses to forms appended to the indicators report, who act as 'community champions' (Selman & Parker,

1997, p.180) within localities and organisations. A series of semi-structured interviews was conducted involving a set of open-ended questions in four key areas of information use and data collection (see below). Subjects were free to discuss their own areas of concern and interest—supplementary questions were confined to clarification and additional or background information. This approach prevented the questioners from leading subjects, facilitating a more accurate and unbiased account of how the various organisations used data (e.g. Eyles, 1985). The sample interviews did not produce empirical evidence but a qualitative and contextual overview of how a variety of groups use, respond and adapt to data, particularly sustainability indicators. The post survey analysis of the unstructured and complex results used discourse analysis techniques (Bryman & Burgess, 1994). The process was designed to contribute to debate on the appropriate function and adaptation of indicators, in response to action undertaken or feedback gained from information consumers.

1. Current practice. This component aims to provide an understanding of how organisations currently use information, what monitoring or data collection they undertake and what data they hold from secondary sources. The major determinants on information collected were the scale of the organisation and the scope of policy areas in which they were active.

Regional organisations tended to be issue specific and interested in the narrow policy concerns of their members and this was reflected in the data used. Targets and monitoring related to their own activities (policy performance or financial expenditure). Little analysis was undertaken of external data sources. In some instances, candidates stated that primary data collection was the responsibility of central government technical experts. There were, however, instances of organisations' memberships being used in survey work and data collection where central government failed to provide baseline information. These organisations tended to act as issue-specific databanks for public enquiries.

The approach adopted by local authorities involved in-house data generation based on statutory functions and limited to their own boundaries. Monitoring and recording tended to be compartmentalised, although one council set up a database of internal environmental performance in order to compile a state of the environment report and develop an environmental strategy (Belfast City Council, 1998). To date, primary data collection has related to environmental health, waste and limited research into community involvement and local economic regeneration. Councils relied heavily on data generated by central government, though they also made use of information contributed by community groups.

Community groups were information hungry demonstrating broad 'tastes' and huge 'appetites' and a willingness to use all available data sources for local management issues, defence against outside interests/threats and supporting and providing evidence in relation to local campaigns, e.g. planning applications/inquiries, crime, traffic, countryside access. Techniques included desk/library research, door-to-door surveys, commissioning ecological surveys, monitoring and recording of illegal dumping, and, in one case, research for a television documentary. Community groups proved to be experts in identifying local priorities, attitudes and perceptions. Although such groups focused on their

discrete areas, they were keen to address broader issues relating to 'quality of life', indicating willingness to adapt in response to data collected and analysed.

2. *Future developments.* This component of the interview aimed to identify gaps in the organisations' current information demands, understand their importance and anticipate how they could be filled.

The regional organisations stated that more research was required, particularly in their own areas of activity—their aspirations were informed by best practice in regional and national/international monitoring and suggestions focused on improvements to other organisations' surveys and influencing census questions. They emphasised empirical data, rather than observational or anecdotal evidence, for strengthening policy, lobbying, advocacy, and widening public debate. These groups expressed interest in gaining a better understanding of policy linkage to wider sustainability issues (e.g. between cycling, public health and air pollution), thus addressing a perceived weakness of NGOs, and willingness to improve collaborative research and monitoring in partnership with communities, school groups and similar NGOs.

Local authorities desired improved public consultation and debate on environmental issues and public service provision, e.g. utilising 'customer' surveys. They recognised that information 'gaps' related primarily to community groups and local businesses and some councils expressed a wish to work with such groups, through community relations and/or economic development staff, to collect information and assess needs. Such activities require change in corporate culture and a multi-disciplinary approach, going beyond statutory functions and historical working practices.

Community groups aspired to shift from a reactive position (collecting information from scratch on *ad hoc* complaints) to a pro-active role informing policy. This requires the establishment and maintenance of locally accessible databases of pooled information. Communities wanted to achieve a more policy-orientated, strategic approach, enabling them to make a sustained impact on decision-makers by raising awareness of local issues.

3. *Technical requirements and constraints.* The aim of this line of questioning was to understand the methodology behind information gathering and data collection, identifying the barriers to organisations fully meeting their own data requirements.

The biggest constraint on data collection and monitoring is resources—time, skills and financial. Voluntary sector staff tended to concentrate on policy initiatives rather than environmental baselines and trends informing policy. They operated under technical constraints on the adoption of consistent and accurate monitoring methodology, e.g. the use of IT in this sector is restricted and organisations lack appropriate computer skills for improved analysis. Additionally, the absence of strategic co-ordination between data collectors poses a major problem. A central government focus on 'means' monitoring (response indicators) differs from the voluntary sector 'ends' objectives (state indicators)—this disparity is the basis for incompatible monitoring strategies. It is felt that the lack of local accountability of governmental agencies within Northern Ireland dis-

tances them from elected bodies and the general public perceived this as a barrier to meeting the data needs of voluntary organisations and local authorities.

Local authorities also suffer from lack of resources, although the uptake of ALANI supported IT provided an exception, presenting opportunities to utilise analytical tools such as GIS. An additional barrier is the prevalent council culture and structures militating against interdepartmental working-in some instances, this is aggravated by the absence of a corporate plan. For multi-disciplinary working arrangements to be successful it is necessary to formulate shared objectives and remove competitive elements linked to personal credit. Additional problems arise in relation to auditing beyond limited statutory functions. Statutory remit also creates confusion over council responsibility for change and concern about raising public expectations that councils could not fulfil. There is political unwillingness on the part of some councillors to make public, 'negative' trends for fear of damaging council's image. The current attitude of most Northern Ireland councils can be summarised as "... if it is measured you do it, if it is not measured then it is not part of your job".

At community level, lack of data and recognition for local groups led some to perceive a political agenda geared to suppress information, a view aggravated by poor feedback and explanation on local campaigns/issues by decision-making bodies. Lack of publicity for local groups is a limiting factor in raising awareness of local issues. Developments in IT were restricted because of reliance on voluntary contributions and *ad hoc* support.

4. Policy and practice feedback. The aim of this component was to identify the ultimate uses and users of information and how this impinges on policy and influences action.

Regional organisations tended to use available data selectively for policy justification and to back up current activities. In this context, new data would be unlikely to force change in organisational priorities, except in the longer-term, and alterations in strategy and monitoring would ultimately depend on members views. Information and monitoring data were used to build new partnerships and raise interest within the membership base. The primary information collected by the NGOs was made freely available to decision makers and the wider public.

Local authority officers were active in sharing information but had little knowledge of its ultimate effect, although a role was identified for environmental information in informing councillors—officers in one authority were "... working on influencing the members—until (it) comes to the point where the members will start asking what the environmental implications of their decisions are". Monitoring data had direct policy implications and impacted on internal resource allocation in respect of statutory functions. In some instances partial data raised problems resulting in additional resources being made available for detailed distributional analysis, signified in emerging spatial (including site-specific) environmental and socio-economic concerns and a growing role for GIS. With the exception of air pollution monitoring (a statutory responsibility), councils have yet to use information extensively to inform and raise public awareness.

Community groups were most open in making information available to the public (for example, leafleting) because their strength lies in local support and involvement. They are anxious to avoid the NIMBY label and accordingly seek to build wider links and alliances with other community groups. Their aim is to better inform the public and this shows in extensive media contacts. They also use information for liaison and co-operation with school groups.

Conclusions

Feedback and review from individual organisations identified political and data concerns that shape and influence understanding of sustainable development, evidenced by current use of and future aspirations for qualitative and empirical datasets relating to sustainability indicators. The impact of sustainability indicators can be viewed as a question of organisational dynamics and change, and the catalyst function of the NGO sector (exemplified by SNIP in Northern Ireland) helps other groups to overcome transitional barriers, from the concave to the convex model (Figure 2).

Selman & Parker (1996, 1997) argue that successful Local Agenda 21 strategies involve enhanced local democracy, with new relationships and roles for local authorities and community groups. They explore possible models of local governance and citizenship which would establish better 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' links, recognising that "... the reconciliation of 'expert-led top-down' with 'lay grass-roots' approaches is highly problematic, yet both are integral to the effective design and execution of local sustainability strategies" (Selman & Parker, 1997, p.173). One way of reconciling differential interests is through indicator projects, expanding the sustainability debate, improving information, encouraging local authorities to examine areas beyond their statutory remit (Pinfield, 1997) and community groups to adopt a comprehensive vision.

In this context, in an analysis of the 'bottom-up' approach, it is possible to counter Pinfield's (1996) assertion that community participation is one of the failures of government initiatives for sustainable development due to the lack of trust between public and political institutions (Pinfield, 1997). While the lack of trust experienced in, for example, Lancashire is similar to that in Northern Ireland (Hayes & McAllister, 1996) the democratic deficit (as described by Selman & Parker, 1997, p. 177) is clearly more extreme in the Province (Table 1).

Trust must be built through better connections between NGOs, community groups and local authorities—connections between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' layers in local governance and community. The SNIP sustainability indicators project has acted as a catalyst, altering groups' understanding of sustainable development. Its function has been similar to the LGMB initiative, encouraging local authorities to explore areas beyond their statutory remit, expanding the concerns of single issue pressure groups into quality of life matters, and helping local community groups think strategically (Figure 3).

The SNIP indicators project has been a force for organisational change and SNIP is already co-operating on a number of follow-up local authority audits (Carrickfergus Borough Council, 1999), based on this model, in partnership with

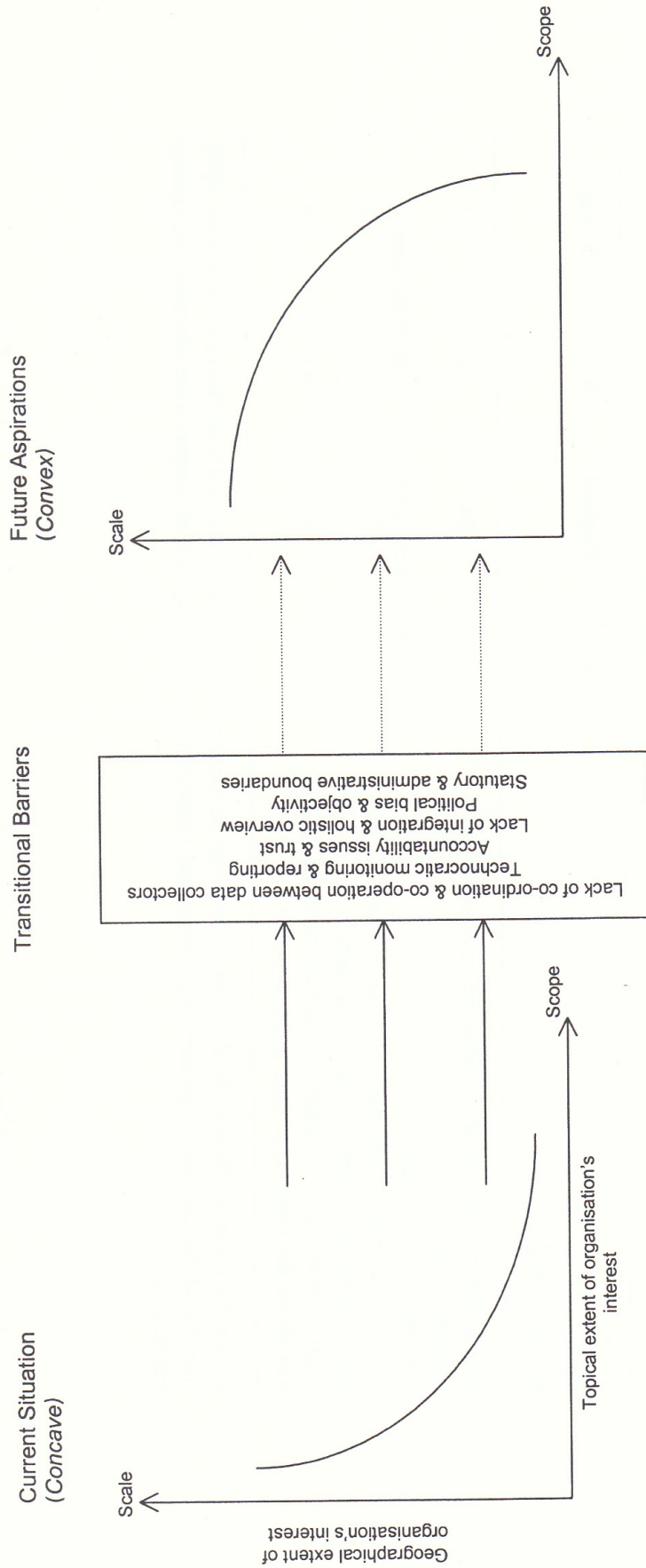


FIGURE 2. The link between the use of environmental and socio-economic information and the relationship between the scale of the organisation and the range of organisational concerns. The concave graph shows the current situation and the convex graph illustrates the aspirations of the sample organisations. To achieve this, different barriers and constraints will have to be addressed by the various groups. Regional organisations wish to become aware of the linkages between issues. Local authorities wish to be less restricted by both their boundaries and statutory functions. Community groups and residents' associations wish to have the ability to converse on and contribute to strategic and policy issues.

TABLE 1. Political efficacy and trust

Political efficacy	Northern Ireland (% disagree)	England	Wales	Scotland
People like me have no say in what the government does.	14	24	10	23
Political Trust				
<i>How much do you trust ...</i>				
A UK government of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own party?	22	25	15	32
Local councillors of any party to place the needs of their area above the interests of their political party?	34	33	43	19

Support for political efficacy, the ability to influence the political process, and trust—adapted from Hayes & McAllister, 1996. They found that the main dependent socio-economic variables influencing the level of support were education, occupation and religion.

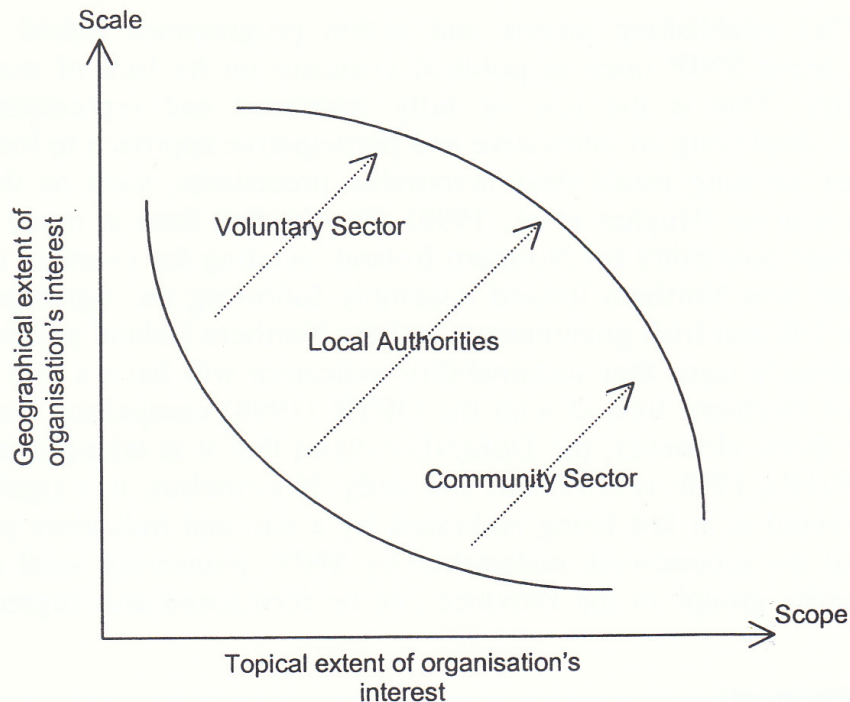


FIGURE 3. Concave to Convex shift in organisational use of environmental and socio-economic information.

community groups. The authors are aware that the SNIP project can be criticised in the same terms as Sustainable Seattle—each fails to provide a basis for policy performance monitoring of statutory plans and action programmes (Brugmann, 1997a and c)—in contrast to the LGMB pilot in Bedfordshire (Bedfordshire County Council, 1994; Barton, 1995, p.45). However, the SNIP initiative also shares many of the strengths of Sustainable Seattle. In addition, due to the unique nature of local government in Northern Ireland, it fills the “... urgent need for many more (cross-cultural) case studies” (Pinfield, 1997, p. 187);

- It is a credible local stakeholder organisation developing “... a public (*and public sector*) education and advocacy exercise” (Brugmann, 1997a, p.63).
- It is achieving attitude and behavioural change within local authorities and participating voluntary sector groups.
- It is building bridges between layers of stakeholders “... in a flexible and balanced approach sensitive to local circumstances” (Carley & Christie, 1992, p. 131).

Following analysis of the feedback exercise, the SNIP initiative is further investigating the differential levels of data abstraction required by different users, ranging from technical policy-based assessment, to helping communities understand, influence and manage change within their area. SNIP is piloting a GIS-based indicators project (with a local authority) to show how a common spatial and dynamic database can be used for a variety of purposes, helping to meet the data requirements of a range of end-users and thus optimise the benefits of an NGO-led indicator project. To step beyond this (as suggested by Brug-

mann, 1997a) establishing targets and action programmes linked to indicators would leave SNIP open to political criticism on its lack of mandate and accountability. This is the role of fully resourced and representative local government, displaying an innovative and participative approach to local democracy, further utilising established favourable precedents, such as the District Partnership scheme (Hughes *et al.*, 1998). For the first time in many years this is an imminent possibility for Northern Ireland, pending the eventual coming on stream of the new Northern Ireland Assembly following the Agreement (1998) between the UK and Irish governments and the Northern Ireland political parties. There are already signs that sustainability indicators will have a role to play in the future of Northern Ireland with the DETR (1998) compelling the DoE(NI) to consider them. However, the DoE(NI)'s claim that it is taking a lead in this matter (DoE(NI), 1998) is erroneous and tardy. Nonetheless, it is significant that Northern Ireland is at last being embraced by a national indicators project and pleasing that the groundwork undertaken by SNIP, pioneering local authorities and community groups in the Province can be formalised and augmented.

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