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## **Rounding the line: Delivering sustainability therapy in sustainable development projects**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the apparent contradiction between the ‘linearity’ of most Sustainable Development projects, with time-bound and defined outputs achieved at a fixed cost, and an implied ‘circularity’ of the theory whereby there is no ‘end’. Projects usually have clear parameters within which they are implemented, and the inclusion of elements such as the need for accountability, measurable impact and ‘value for money’ have grown in importance. It could be argued that we live in a ‘projectified’ and therefore linear world. The paper explores the potential contradiction between ‘linearity’ and ‘circularity’, and suggests that one way around this is to frame the project within a form of the Kolb Learning Cycle heuristic. This will facilitate a rationalisation from those implementing the sustainable development project as to why decisions are being made and for whom. If these questions are opened up to the project stakeholders, including beneficiaries, then the Kolb cycle could encourage learning and understanding by all involved. It could also provide Sustainability Therapy to those trapped in processes which they find orthogonal to their own perceptions. It is suggested that such learning, therapy and reflective practice should be a valid output of the sustainable development project, although typically the focus is only upon the final outputs and how they feed into policy. Ironically funders would be well advised to take a broader perspective in order to achieve true ‘value for money’ within such projects, even if

learning is not an easily measurable or tangible outcome. These points are explored within the context of the wider literature and experience with a sustainable development project undertaken in Malta.

Key words – sustainable development, projects, Malta

## **1. Introduction: The ‘doing’ of sustainability**

There are many appealing aspects to sustainable development as epitomised by the most commonly quoted definition from the Brundtland Commission “*Development that meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs and aspirations.*” (WCED, 1987). Aside from the key issues of equity, morality, theory and practice perhaps the aspect of sustainable development that is most striking is the symbolism and imagery employed by those that write about it. This is rich with interlocking circles, systems diagrams, AMOEBA, RADAR, KITE graphs and even ‘dashboards’. Perhaps no other sphere of environmental management has been presented so visually, and one can delight in the imagination taken to construct such images. Diagrams and images are able to show relationships and linkages which written words often fail to convey, and they highlight the very soul of sustainability – its vibrant embracing of multi-disciplinarity, richness and diversity in perspective. However, perhaps the essence that constantly emerges out of sustainability imagery is ‘circularity’. Circles express something inclusive and which never ends - there is no ‘closure’ to the process. People and society constantly change and what comprises sustainability inevitably reflects and evolves with this change (Bell and Morse, 2003).

Sustainability is also a highly-dimensional concept (Bell and Morse, 2001, 2003). As well as the conventional notion of embracing social, economic and environmental dimensions sustainability also has time and spatial dimensions, even if these are somewhat vaguely defined. However, in practice the implied boundlessness of the sustainable development imagery become firm, rigid and linear. It is here that the appealing philosophy of sustainability has to enter the often harsh and contradictory reality of application. After all, we live in a political-economic world where there is increasing competition for limited resources, greater demands for accountability and the

delivery of 'end products' along with an underlying emphasis on 'value for money'. The appealing circularity and richness of sustainability imagery has to survive this harsh environment, with the result perhaps something is lost in the compromise. Maybe this is inevitable given that 'sustainability' and 'accountability' are rooted in wholly different value systems.

The conventional means to achieve accountability and 'value for money' in sustainable development is typically via discrete, costed and closed periods of spend and exertion; the project. It is by the means of the project that agencies manage the vast majority of their work and appear credible to the donors (public and private) who make their interventions possible. In short, the environment in which researchers and practitioners are trying to achieve sustainability is typically linear and 'projectified'. The richness of sustainability transforms into a focus on just one component of a system, important perhaps to but a few people, for only three years at a fixed cost. Many dimensions become but a few. Maybe it is this translation from systemic and boundless to mechanical and limited that explains the contradiction with sustainability referred to time and time again: its popularity in theory yet comparative wretchedness in practice. The frustration amongst those who care about sustainability has been all too apparent. For example, there is the following quote from Meppam and Gill (1998):

*“Sustainability describes a state that is in transition continually:*

- 1) the objective of sustainability is not to win or lose and the intention is not to arrive at a particular point.*
- 2) planning for sustainability requires explicit accounting of perspective (world view or mindset) and must be involving of broadly representative stakeholder participation (through dialogue)*
- 3) success is determined retrospectively, so the emphasis in planning should be on process and collectively considered, context-related progress rather than on achieving remote targets. A key measure of progress is the maintenance of a creative learning framework for planning.*

4) *Institutional arrangements should be free to evolve in line with community learning.*

5) *the new role for policy makers is to facilitate learning and seek leverage points with which to direct progress towards integrated economic, ecological and sociocultural approaches for all human activity.*

*This describes a move away from a culturally inappropriate, exclusive epistemology of positive and normative definitions to a process that facilitates reflective insight and the genuine sharing of ideas.”*

This is where the issues of concern begin to manifest. The interplay between the circular and rich rhetoric of sustainable development as a theory and an appealing human concept with artistic, ethical and religious overtones (these arguments are set out more fully in Bell and Morse, 2005) and the compromises that exist in mundane and compromised practice.

This paper has emerged from a number of experiences the authors have had working in sustainable development projects in the Mediterranean and elsewhere – the practice of sustainability as distinct from theory. The first part of the paper will set out some of the issues that arose from this experience, while the second will put forward what the authors hope will be a positive suggestion for handling at least some of the more critical issues.

## **2. The problem: sustainability through projects?**

It first has to be said that the authors have much experience of working in a variety of development projects funded by a host of donors such as the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and other bilateral aid agencies, United Nations, World Bank and non-government organisations. Most of these have operated on the basis of the modernisation agenda in development (Cowen and Shenton, 1996). However, there are many different types of development ‘project’, and the term is usually applied to activities which are discrete in terms of time period, the people

involved, the desired outcomes and perhaps above all the resources required. Those providing the latter understandably want the most impact for the resources allocated, and as a result there has been an increase in the use of tools such as the logical framework (Logframe) to help set clearly defined goals and means of assessing whether they have been reached. Figure 1 provides an example of the conventional Logframe structure favoured by various funding agencies. The theory and practice behind the use of Logframes are described in great detail elsewhere and will not be covered here (PCI 1979; Coleman 1987; Cordingley 1995; Gasper 1997, 1999; Bell 1998, 2000). A summary of the Logframe structure is provided as Figure 1. There are four rows representing:

1. project goal
2. project purpose
3. project outputs
4. project activities needed to produce the outputs

<p><b>GOAL</b></p> <p>The higher-level objectives towards which the project is expected to contribute</p> <p>(Mention target groups)</p>	<p><b>VERIFIABLE INDICATORS</b></p> <p>Measures (direct or indirect) to verify to what extent the Goal is fulfilled</p> <p><b>StIs</b></p>	<p><b>MEANS OF VERIFICATION</b></p> <p>The sources of data necessary to verify status of Goal level indicators</p>	<p><b>ASSUMPTIONS</b></p> <p>Important events, conditions or decisions necessary for sustaining objectives in the long run</p>
<p><b>PURPOSE</b></p> <p>The effect which is expected to be achieved as the result of the project</p>	<p><b>VERIFIABLE INDICATOR</b></p> <p>Measures (direct or indirect) to verify to what extent the purpose is fulfilled</p> <p><b>SlIs</b></p>	<p><b>MEANS OF VERIFICATION</b></p> <p>The sources of data necessary to verify status of Purpose level indicators</p>	<p><b>ASSUMPTIONS</b></p> <p>Important events, conditions or decisions outside the control of the project which must prevail for the Goal to be obtained</p>
<p><b>OUTPUTS</b></p> <p>The results that the project management should be able to guarantee</p> <p>(Mention target groups)</p>	<p><b>VERIFIABLE INDICATOR</b></p> <p>Measures (direct or indirect) to verify to what extent the outputs are produced</p> <p><b>IIs</b></p>	<p><b>MEANS OF VERIFICATION</b></p> <p>The sources of data necessary to verify status of Activity level indicators</p>	<p><b>ASSUMPTIONS</b></p> <p>Important events, conditions or decisions outside the control of the project necessary for the achievement of the Purpose</p>
<p><b>ACTIVITIES</b></p> <p>The Activities which have to be undertaken by the project in order to produce the outputs</p>	<p><b>VERIFIABLE INDICATOR</b></p> <p>Goods and services necessary to undertake Activities</p> <p><b>PIs</b></p>	<p><b>MEANS OF VERIFICATION</b></p> <p>The sources of data necessary to verify status of Activity level indicators</p>	<p><b>ASSUMPTIONS</b></p> <p>Important events, conditions or decisions outside the control of the project necessary for the production of the Outputs</p>

Fig. 1. Outline of the conventional logical framework (Logframe) used in project planning.

The matrix in Figure 1 is very much a linear one: goal → purpose → activities → outputs. Once outputs have been delivered the project officially ends and resources may be deployed elsewhere (Morgan, 2002). It can also be seen that indicators play an important role. There are two columns for indicators – one which lists the indicators needed to verify achievement of goal, purpose, activities and outputs, and a second column which summarises the data necessary to arrive at the values for the indicators. For example, indicators at the activity level (row four of the Logframe) might be thought of as measures of performance, of things in process - Performance Indicators (PIs). For the project goals the strategic aims of the project in organisational terms are assessed and here there are Strategic Indicators (StIs). For project outputs the indicators are measures of finalised activities - Impact Indicators (IIs). The purpose of the project can be thought of in terms of an enduring achievement. Once the project ends it is usually required that the impacts will continue, and even intensify, rather than evaporate, and this can be equated with ‘sustainability’. Indicators of project purpose can be equated with Sustainability Indicators (SIs).

The sustainable development literature is increasingly replete with calls for SIs as tools for the measurement of progress towards attainment, and examples abound of all styles and approaches (Bell and Morse, 1999, 2003). SIs may or may not be formally organised into cause-effect (i.e. pressure-state-response) models such as Figure 2, and practitioners vary a great deal on what is the most suitable group to create the list and do the monitoring. Some favour a ‘top down’ or technocratic process with experts setting the agenda, while others favour a more ‘bottom’ up’ style with significant participation from stakeholders who will be affected by the application of the SIs as part of policy. Whether SIs are actually used or become an end in themselves has the subject of much debate (King et al., 2000), and their influence in helping to set policy is a relatively new area of research (Dhakal and Imura, 2003; Gudmundsson, 2003).

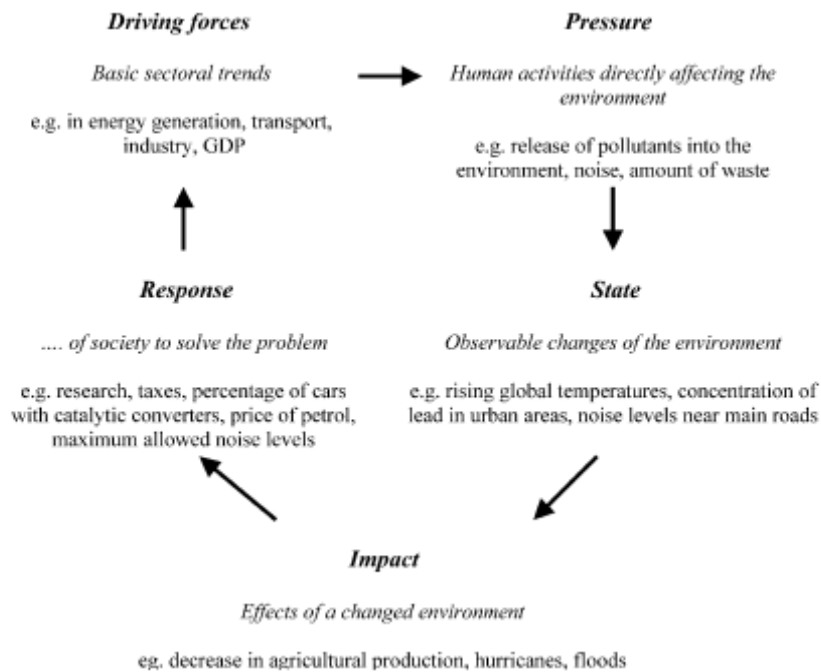


Fig 2. Pressure-state-impact-response (PSIR) model for indicators of sustainable development (after Jesinghaus, 1999)

The literature is rich with critical observations regarding the use of Logframes, and specifically their weaknesses in culturally and developmentally diverse contexts. Dale (2003) suggests that its ubiquitous use and sequential nature makes it almost too easy to use - it can become a potential straightjacket for projects of all kinds. Crawford (2003) argues that other information tools are needed if the Logframe is to be truly effective in any attempt at monitoring and evaluation whilst den Heyer (2002) suggests that other factors need to be incorporated into the Logframe if it is to enhance learning. Possibly more fundamentally Crawford (2003) sees Logframe as part of a threat to local participation and democracy in projects of all kinds and Kumar and Corbridge (2002) suggest that the framework can be part of a process which will see projects fail because of unrealistic assumptions built into the project management process. But all of this would appear to contradict the very soul of sustainability. Unfortunately there is a tendency in conventional 'blue print' project processes to require exact clarity on outputs before projects prior to inception (see Cusworth and Franks 1993, pp 8-11). This exactitude can militate against progressive learning processes within projects and for emergent outcomes to arise as projects progress. It can also inhibit local people



setting and changing agendas. At a basic level existing facilities may be used as a way of keeping down costs, and staff may be co-opted onto the project with minimal or perhaps no release from their usual duties. The result is that sustainable development activities may be layered onto the authority's other mandates.

The linearity and emphasis on defined end products (i.e. targets) in projects has contrasted in more recent years with a growing literature on the importance of learning within development projects and indeed within policy and politics (May, 1992, 1999; Busenberg, 2001). Here learning is seen not just as an intellectual and academic phenomenon linked to 'training' but as a process that facilitates a change of practice. Learning in this context is seen as more than just a means by which individuals can better understand the position they are in, but also doing something about it. However, despite this growing interest Carlsson and Wohlgemuth (2000) have been moved to stress that "*learning in development co-operation is more or less virgin territory for organisational research*". Indeed Brown (1998; page 62) points out that "*Although the term learning has become fashionable in the mainstream management literature in the 1990s, its application to the development arena is fairly limited and it is often used with an assumed rather than a defined meaning*". But who are these individuals? It is important to distinguish between organisation learning, learning that takes place within an organisation charged with funding or implementing projects, and learning which the project facilitates amongst those meant to benefit from the project. The former includes the Soft Systems Methodology of Peter Checkland (Checkland, 1981, 2001; Checkland and Scholes, 1990, Checkland and Jayastna, 2000) developed in the 1970s. While Soft Systems Methodology, and indeed all of the varied style of approaching organisational learning, have their critics Probert (1997, 1998) they do aim to help draw in the experiences of those working in organisations so as to arrive at a 'shared mental model' of how the organisation works and how improvements can be made (Senge, 1990).

The need for 'learning' is especially apparent in sustainable development projects, especially in contexts where those meant to benefit are those with the least power to influence the process. In the 1970s learning from intended beneficiaries was largely extractive in nature and often referred to as 'appraisal'. Those working in projects 'learnt' from those meant to benefit with an assumption that the former would then

make changes to improve the process and outputs. Since the 1980s such 'learning' has evolved into more inclusive approaches such as 'action research' and Participatory Learning and Action. While there are similarities between organisational and beneficiary learning, and indeed there can be overlap, it is as well to remember the polarities in power that exist here. For example, the donors of projects have the power to set the agenda for those to whom they provide resources and can, in effect, stipulate the form of any learning that takes place with those resources, or indeed ignore learning altogether as an outcome.

While 'learning', be it for the organisation, beneficiaries or both, has much appealing rhetoric, like sustainable development the practice may be far from perfect. A project would inevitably have to devote resources to the facilitation of learning, yet an evaluation of learning as a formal component of the 'blueprint' can be problematic. Brown (1998), for example, suggests a number of indicators that can be used to formally evaluate organisational learning:

1. time devoted to reflection and action
2. means by which the organisation deals with 'discordant information' (attitude towards learning)
3. organisational capacity to carry out and use the results of evaluations (predisposition to learning)

Even so there may be pressures to "*fiddle the data*" in order to make the organisation appear better than it is (Brown, 1998; page 65).

But how is learning to be handled within the mechanistic and linear format of Logframes? At a basic level, of course, it may be possible to count the number of workshops and participants who attended over the lifetime of the project and present these as PIs. Indeed in the authors experience this is the most common way of including indicators of learning. But can learning during the project also be thought of as an output? This may seem more radical, but is perfectly consistent with the notion of a project acting as a spark to providing a more enduring achievement. Indeed there are increasing calls for institutional learning within development projects to be seen as part of an evaluation process (Horton and Mackay, 2003). If learning is an important

element of sustainable development how can indicators of project purpose and output be created to reflect learning?

Working with the assumption that projects are here to stay the second part of the paper will seek to suggest ways in which some of the issues discussed above can be addressed within sustainable development projects. These ideas are explored and tested in the context of a Blue Plan<sup>1</sup> project in Malta. The project had elements of the 'blue print' mode with the end product (the 'deliverable') being a list of SIs. While the emphasis was on a participatory style in arriving at the list of SIs, learning *per se* was not defined as an outcome of the project. In effect the participation was a process designed to facilitate arrival at a good quality end product, and learning may take place as a part of this. Within this process there arose all sorts of contradictions and friction between the 'doing' of the project, measures of success (or failure) of the project, stakeholder participation and learning. Could this not be improved upon? Can the project line be curved into a circle while at the same time keeping all of the criteria for accountability, 'value for money' intact? These were but some of the questions the authors began to explore.

### **3. Blue Plan project in Malta**

Within the limits of this paper it is not possible or necessary to discuss the full background to the work of the Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP) and the series of Coastal Area Management Programmes (CAMPs) which are undertaken by the range of agencies and organisations associated with MAP. Suffice to say for the sake of the coherence of this paper that there are two main agencies which the authors worked with under the auspices of CAMP. The first and the direct contacting agency was the Mediterranean Blue Plan Regional Activity Centre. Blue Plan, with funding from UNEP, is concerned with systemic and prospective analysis and with developmental/environmental scenarios which are required by CAMPs. The Blue Plan regional activity centre is located on the French Riviera in Sophia-Antipolis, near Nice, and the organization works in partnership with projects in the Mediterranean, encouraging certain activities and facilitating processes. It is not in a position to dictate

to local agencies or to demand adherence to a top down policy, but it does help set out the form of the projects with which it is involved. Blue Plan has a tradition of focusing on holistic forms of enquiry and systemic development of sustainability indicators.

*“The image-rich term, ‘Plan Bleu’ (Blue Plan) has several meanings:*

- 1. A process of reflection on the Mediterranean region in all its vastness and complexity;*
- 2. a research centre where this reflective process is carried out;*
- 3. and the infrastructure of a non-profit organisation for management and operations.*

*Through its think-tank approach, the Blue Plan provides a package of data as well as systemic and prospective studies, combined in certain cases with proposals for action, which are intended to provide the Mediterranean countries with useful information for implementing sustainable socio-economic development that does not result in degradation of the environment”*

Extract from the Blue Plan website (<http://www.planbleu.org/indexa.htm>)

The second organisation involved in the CAMP programme is the Priority Actions Programme Regional Activity Centre (PAP RAC) which is based in Split in Croatia. PAP has developed a strong expertise in coastal area management and acts as the CAMP implementing centre.

At the time of the Malta CAMP, the first which the authors were involved in, there had already been several such projects in different parts of the Mediterranean including Greece, Tunisia and Egypt. Each CAMP has its own focus and central issues of concern but the overriding issue of sustainability has been constant throughout. The main variation with the Malta CAMP project was the inclusion of participatory techniques as the means selected to derive SIs that had local meaning and value.

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<sup>1</sup> Blue Plan for the Mediterranean, 15 Rue Beethoven, F-06560 Valbonne Sophia Antipolis, France.

The Malta CAMP was focused on the North West of the island. Within this geographic area it was further organised into five thematic sub-projects, and three cross cutting sub-projects. The five thematic areas were:

1. Sustainable Coastal Management
2. Marine Conservation Areas
3. Integrated Water Resource Management
4. Erosion / Desertification Control Management
5. Tourism: impacts on health

These five were devised from a separate process undertaken by the Maltese government working in liaison with members of PAP RAC. They were pre-selected prior to the indicator activity, and thereby formed the headings within which the SIs had to be developed.

The three cross cutting sub-projects (so named because they were seen as being support projects to the five thematic sub-projects) were:

1. Data Management
2. Participatory Programme
3. Systemic Sustainability Analysis (SSA)

These were seen as supporting the main CAMP activities by providing a central place for the establishment of all statistics, maps and other data required by the five thematic teams, a common set of participatory techniques for use in all stakeholder workshops throughout the CAMP and common indicator development and presentation methods. The SSA component was the one charged with delivering the list of SIs for each of the thematic areas, and was an extension of the Soft System Methodology. SSA had an overarching and inclusive role within the CAMP and to some extent had operational relations with all the other sub-projects. In the inception document prepared by PAP (2000), a document which sets out the nature of CAMP Malta, including time scale and main activities, the actions to be implemented by SSA were identified as:

- " - identification of and agreement on the system, stakeholders and main sustainability indicators*
- participatory development of the systemic sustainability analysis with description and assessment of the system by main indicators*

- *provision of inputs to final Project documents and post project activities, and*
- *proposal for dissemination of results for scientific and lay communities."*

For the purposes of this paper, however, SSA can be broadly divided into three stages that bring out the points relevant to this paper. In practice each of these corresponds to at least one visit to Malta by one or both of the authors.

- 1) workshops with the thematic teams
- 2) stakeholder workshops
- 3) an analysis of policy options and setting out the framework for future development and use of indicators

The first SSA workshop took the form of a one day event held in March 2000. Initially the stakeholders engaged in the SSA process comprised the internal, thematic teams and they worked together with the SSA team to define the key ideas behind sustainable development and the indicators that they were likely to want to develop. Hence a large part of the workshop was designed to allow teams to share thinking and gain an overview of the demands that the SSA process would put upon them. The teams were later encouraged to take their ideas out to stakeholders that they themselves identified as relevant for their particular theme.<sup>2</sup>

The outcomes of this first stage of SSA were rich pictures of the participants' perspective of the current situation, root definitions or visions for the way forward, conceptual or activity models of how to get there. In some cases Logical Frameworks for the setting of indicators emerged from this process. In terms of the overall SSA process, the Logframe can be made to emerge from the soft systems review and can then provide for the development of a formal project. A concern of many agencies relating to the use of soft systems is that the work is not easily reportable or demonstrable to auditing authorities. Similarly, in the experience of the authors there is often a worry in teams that the work which they have undertaken in soft systems will be seen as being non-rigorous or un-professional because of its use of diagrams and unfamiliar terms. The Logframe can be used as a means to express the soft work in a

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<sup>2</sup> For full details on the Maltese CAMP enter: <http://www.planbleu.org/indexa.htm>, then click on 'Coastal Regions' and then 'Publications'. See reports on Malta.

more structured and formal manner, and hence provide a useful bridge between conventional and less conventional project structures.

The second stage of SSA was centred on meetings with the stakeholder community. The main purpose of the stakeholder meetings was to discuss the work of the teams so far achieved, explain the nature of the SSA process and seek ideas and questions from the wider stakeholder group and specify indicators and reference conditions (what values of the indicators are needed for sustainability). Stakeholders included representatives of key industries like tourism and fisheries, concern groups like the Gaia foundation and official bodies such as local councils. The selection of stakeholder groups was left to the discretion of the Maltese SSA team. In all circumstances such selection is problematic. How representative is the sample? How many constituencies of interest are represented? Have some constituencies been excluded or overlooked? Such questions are valid, hard to check and a cause for concern for all participation projects.

Each of the thematic teams presented their indicators and explained why and how they had been selected. Often the natural instincts of teams in the context of stakeholder groups is to be defensive and even protective of the work undertaken and to deflect criticism as being either poorly conceived or maliciously devised. The understanding of the principles of active listening and the adoption of focus group methods were the means adopted to attempt to avoid these negatives. The overall impact of the presentations was to provoke a wide ranging conversation concerning the future of Malta and the need for sustainability planning.

The third stage of the SSA project was focussed on using the indicators collected so far to make different assumptions of evolution in the future, given various policy decisions, as to future scenarios. In the original SSA this issue of futurity and scenario investigation was included but no specific methodology was required. In the case of the Malta project this was modified, making use of the 'Prospective' approach as previously applied by Blue Plan<sup>3</sup>. This resulted in a changed name for the methodology - SPSA (Systemic and Prospective Sustainability Analysis) – in order to distinguish it from SSA. At this time the wider stakeholder views were again assessed. This was a

worrying time for the teams and yet, paradoxically, this can be a time of insight and reward. Teams were also asked to think about how they might engage the public more actively in the use of indicators. At this point the thematic teams began to consider a marketing strategy. This also involved active and purposeful reflection on what has been achieved and what has been problematic. Following this, it can be of great value to consider the meaning of the sustainability indicators and the possible scenarios for the future of Malta.

#### **4. Dimensions to sustainability: A new synthesis**

It must first be said that the authors do not want to make exaggerated claims for SSA, or its later variants, as undertaken in Malta. SPSA is not presented as finished, definitive or necessarily successful. However, some modest claims might be made for it. The SPSA did generate sustainability indicator frameworks, although where these fit into recent developments in Malta such as the Maltese Commission on Sustainable Development (MCSD) and the Sustainability Indicators Malta Observatory (SIMO) initiatives is not clear at the time of writing. By way of contrast with SPSA the SIMO initiative takes much more of a top-down approach by building upon the UNEP indicator sets. However, as one would expect there are similarities in SIs selected via SPSA and under SIMO.

It appears to the authors that the main benefit of SPSA in Malta has not so much been with the creation of the final SI lists (the desired outcome of the project) but in allowing the various teams and stakeholders some space to work together and share thinking. It became evident as the project progressed that many of the teams had never had an opportunity to really consider the tasks they had been asked to undertake, at least not in a systemic manner. Teams seemed keen to grasp the opportunity to think about their project from the widest angle. As a learning exercise for individuals it can be fairly claimed that SPSA succeeded. It was this learning experience that appeared to be the most valued element of the whole project process, yet it was not set explicitly as a primary, desired project outcome. This contradiction was very apparent to all involved in the project, and provided much food for thought. The project process did not

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<sup>3</sup> For more detail on this approach see Godet et al., (1999) and Godet (2000, 2001).



explicitly allow for learning and any insights that may emerge from this could not be adapted into on-going review, yet sustainable development should encourage such flexibility. Could it not be possible to adapt the Logframe style to include learning?

One way in which the Logframe could be modified is by including an additional learning zone to the framework based upon variants of the Kolb learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) which can be thought of as 'Sustainability Therapy'. Others have drawn a parallel between sustainable development and the Kolb Cycle (Hutchcroft, 1996) and explored sustainable development as an essentially learning process (Meppem and Gill, 1998). The Kolb approach has been widely applied in contexts defined as complex. For example, it has formed the backbone of the systemic approaches applied in undergraduate and postgraduate teaching in the Systems Department at the Open University in the UK for over twenty years. In this context it has been used as a comprehending heuristic in research and consultancy areas as diverse as environmental analysis, information systems analysis and organisational change. The Kolb approach can be seen as a sub-text for overlying problem solving methodology. It performs as a readily communicable - and therefore easily usable - tool for inclusive action research with stakeholders and it offers considerable benefits in terms of the structuring and reporting on learning interventions. It is suggested that the sub-routine learning zone will encourage reflection with regard to what the project is trying to achieve in the long and short-term. It will create space for reflection, and allow a rationalisation of the current format of the sustainable development project and suggest possible alternatives to practice. Progression through the cycle can be a formal project activity, and help all stakeholders appreciate the context of project goal and purpose even if there is little room for manoeuvre in terms of changing them. This may appear to be defeatist, but it is rationalised that the very process of Sustainability Therapy will allow stakeholders to learn from each other, appreciate the limits and potential of the project they are in and allow them to carry this learning forward into other activities (and projects) in which they may be involved.

The nature of the surface of reality for sustainability therapy can be undertaken in any project context. The term therapy implies that it would occur in a non-judgemental process, unearthing hidden assumptions and questioning current accepted realities at all

levels of the project. The questioning of assumptions is represented by a total of 12 mindsets existing at four different aspects (reflection, connection, modelling and doing) of the learning cycle (with three dimensions at each of these). The conceptual framework is represented in Figure 3. Please note that the four points of the cycle and the three dimensions within each of these are not exclusive, definitive or definite. Rather the aim is to demonstrate that SIs can arise from a range of different epistemological understandings of sustainable development and used as a means to represent ‘truth’. The device is being employed here to explore this diversity rather than seeking to set out any particular ‘truth’. The suggested three dimensions for each of the four nodes of the cycle will now be explored.

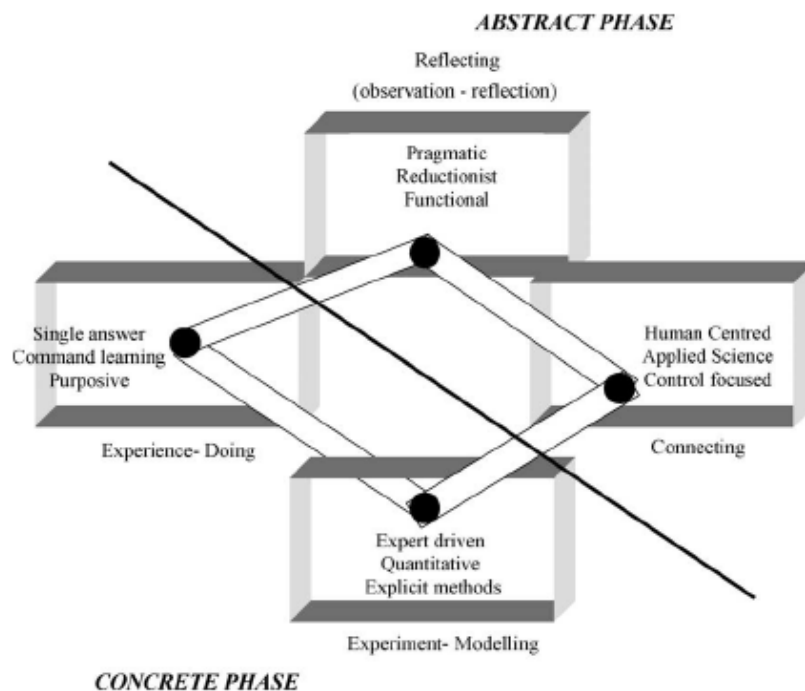


Fig 3. An activity sequence diagram of Kolb's learning cycle (building from Kolb, 1984). There are two phases and four elements of the cycle. The concrete phase represents the practice-the doing-while the abstract represents the 'thinking'. These have been expressed in conventional Sustainability Indicator experience within a typical project mindset (technocentric).

## 4.1 Reflection

Reflection is when the important aspects of learning are assimilated and either stored for subsequent action or dismissed as irrelevant. It can be considered in terms of the three continua of:

1. *Type of focus for any given project*: from the 'blue sky' ideal to the most grounded pragmatic.
2. *Approach to change*: seeking usable and functional change to being prepared to address and celebrate the reality of the dysfunctional in social life.
3. *Thinking*: 'in the box' reductionist to relationship focused systemic.

Traditionally sustainable development tends to be considered as a *pragmatic* process with *functional* approaches to aspects of *reductionist* elements of wider reality.

*Pragmatic* is represented by small step change rather than perhaps a more ideal but substantial change. Time and resources available could well be the limiting factor here.

The *functional* is seen in the focus on teams of applied 'experts' working to a project script. *Reductionist* refers to the way in which elements of sustainable development are often seen in relative isolation – pointing at specific isolated and of necessity, fragmented issues of concern - rather than consider in depth how they interact and influence each other. Even with SIs in a PSIR framework (Figure 2) there may be little consideration of such linkages (de Kruijf and van Vuuren 1998). Tendencies towards reducing complexity to a single index or category (e.g. the sustainability barometer) may be one extreme, while allowing for a host of individual indicators with a range of interpretation represents the other.

## 4.2 Connecting

In the second aspect of the Cycle there is a continuum relating to connecting.

Connecting means linking personal and team reflection on experience to experiences from related areas and from others working in the same field. In this case there are the three scales of:

1. *Relating to the world*: from the most anthropological focus on world needs to the most cosmological<sup>4</sup>
2. *Approach to science*: from the most pure to the most keenly applied
3. *Social interaction*: from control models to those more interested in inclusion and partnership

It can be argued that sustainable development tends to be a function of concern for mankind first (*anthropological*) and the environment second (i.e. weak sustainability). Sustainable development also tends to be an outcome of *applied* (rather than pure) *science* and an endeavour to allow experts, managers, politicians and others to *control* social processes rather than work in partnership. More recently there has been a move towards the use of indicators as learning tools (the ‘reactive’ indicators of Moffatt, 1994), but for the most part they have been seen in a proactive sense as aids to policy development.

### 4.3 Modelling

The third, modelling or experimenting aspect of the cycle relates more specifically to SIs. There are three dimensions:

1. *Indicator methodology*: explicit and expert driven or implicit - emergent from the actors engaged in the project
2. *Engagement with stakeholders*: inclusive and inviting or exclusive and partitioning
3. *Type of indicator*: qualitative (narrative, visual) or quantitative (numerical)

The conventional form of most SIs relates to a minimalist dialogue with stakeholders (*exclusive* = expert driven), seeking *quantification* and developing *explicit* indicators (defined and replicable methodology).

### 4.4 Doing

In considering the ‘doing’ or ‘acting’ aspect of the cycle there are the three scales of:

1. *Outcome*: single focus to the acceptance and even invitation of the most diverse and challenging

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<sup>4</sup> With growing recognition of the limitations of this duality, a third element - the spiritual - might be included at some point.

2. *Approach to learning*: command (characterised as: 'This is how it is!' to autonomy (characterised as: 'What do you think?')
3. *Project approach*: purposive (characterised as: 'This is what you do') to purposeful (characterised as: 'What do you think needs to be done?')

Conventional wisdom indicates that most projects are focused on single outcomes at any one point in space and time as specified by the Project Blueprint. Projects also tend towards instruction and command as outcomes of learning as opposed to emergence and autonomy. Key concerns are usually with achievement, accountability and getting the most impact from the resources allocated. That is, they are directive and purposive rather than self-organising and purposeful.

All sustainable development projects can be mapped through the four boxes of Figure 3, but the location through which the project 'passes' at each point may be different for different projects. In effect, certain combinations of the coordinates at each node can be joined to form a pathway or 'wormhole' through the cycle. In order to help map any particular sustainable development project onto Figure 3 a 12 point questionnaire linked to the 4 X 3 dimensions has been developed (Table 1). Depending on the outcomes of the questions, various project patterns arise which can be clustered into four distinct project types (Table 2):

- holistic
- technocentric
- organisational
- environmental

Table 1. Types of question that could be asked to identify a tendency towards the extremes within the four nodes of the Kolb Learning Cycle in Figure 3.

No.	Node	Dimension	Type of question that can be asked	If answer is:	
				Yes	No
1	Reflection	<i>Type of focus</i>	When I reflect on my experience I am interested in lessons that provide me with wide ranging and general guidance	ideal	pragmatic
2		<i>Approach to change</i>	I am only interested in change which arises from an obvious need	functional	dysfunctional
3		<i>Thinking</i>	My vision of sustainable development needs to reflect the whole and not just parts of the context	systemic	reductionist
4	Connecting	<i>Relating to the world</i>	My focus is determined by the needs of mankind first	anthropological	cosmological
5		<i>Approach to science</i>	I'm more interested in 'doing' sustainable development than questioning its meaning or understanding the context	applied science	pure science
6		<i>Social interaction</i>	We need to bring people together to consider how we will 'do' sustainable development and develop indicators	partnership	control
7	Modelling	<i>Indicator methodology</i>	Indicators can often arise from people's experiences rather than scientific observations	implicit	explicit
8		<i>Engagement with stakeholders</i>	I like to have a wide and diverse team to work with for all aspects of project work	inclusive	exclusive
9		<i>Type of indicator</i>	indicators are often unquantifiable but I consider them of equal value to those that are quantifiable	qualitative	quantitative
10	Doing	<i>Outcome</i>	Projects are at their best when they focus narrowly on limited outcomes	single	diverse
11		<i>Approach to learning</i>	Sustainable development projects should be based on command as opposed to autonomy	command	autonomy
12		<i>Project approach</i>	A project works best when its goals are set by the project team themselves	purposeful	purposive

Table 2. Tendencies and types in sustainable development indicator projects.

Shaded column represents what the authors perceive as the ‘typical’ sustainable development project

No.	Node	Type of question that can be asked	Type of sustainable development project			
			Holistic	Technocentric	Organisational	Environmental
1	Reflection	When I reflect on my experience I am interested in lessons that provide me with wide ranging and general guidance	Y (ideal)	N (pragmatic)	N (pragmatic)	Y (ideal)
2		I am only interested in change which arises from an obvious need	N (dysfunctional)	Y (functional)	Y (functional)	Y (functional)
3		My vision of sustainable development needs to reflect the whole and not just parts of the context	Y (systemic)	N (reductionist)	Y (systemic)	Y (systemic)
4	Connecting	My focus is determined by the needs of mankind first	N (cosmological)	Y (anthropological)	N (cosmological)	N (cosmological)
5		I'm more interested in 'doing' sustainable development than questioning its meaning or understanding the context	N (pure)	Y (applied)	N (pure)	N (pure)
6		We need to bring people together to consider how we will 'do' sustainable development and develop indicators	Y (partnership)	N (control)	Y (partnership)	N (control)
7	Modelling	Indicators can often arise from people's experiences rather than scientific observations	Y (implicit)	N (explicit)	N (explicit)	N (explicit)
8		I like to have a wide and diverse team to work with for all aspects of project work	Y (inclusive)	N (exclusive)	Y (inclusive)	N (exclusive)
9		indicators are often unquantifiable but I consider them of equal value to those that are quantifiable	Y (qualitative)	N (quantitative)	Y (qualitative)	N (quantitative)
10	Doing	Projects are at their best when they focus narrowly on limited outcomes	N (diverse)	Y (single)	Y (single)	N (diverse)
11		Sustainable development projects should be based on command as opposed to autonomy	N (autonomy)	Y (command)	N (autonomy)	Y (command)
12		A project works best when its goals are set by the project team themselves	Y (purposeful)	N (purposive)	Y (purposeful)	N (purposive)

Each of the columns in Table 2 is a wormhole through Figure 3, and in the authors view the shaded column (technocentric) represents the wormhole of the typical sustainable development project.

- (1) *Reflection*: pragmatic, functional, reductionist
- (2) *Connecting*: anthropological, applied, control
- (3) *Modeling*: explicit, exclusive, quantitative
- (4) *Doing*: single, command, purposive

This ‘technocentric’ wormhole is shown in Figure 3 as a tube through the multidimensional space.

The project typology of Table 2 is, of course, a subjective grouping reflecting the authors' perspective and no doubt other combinations and labels can be employed. Also, of course, simple 'yes' and 'no' answers may be too limiting in any practical context, hence strictly speaking all the axes in Figure 3 are continuous. After all, words such as 'partnership' and 'participation' can describe a wide range of different approaches rather than simply be a matter of presence or absence (Arnstein, 1969).

Nevertheless, the authors suggest that the types may be thought of as convenient lenses for viewing and understanding the world processes that projects engage with. Others, notably Richard Bawden (1997), have used similar devices, although in Bawden's case referring to them as a conceptual 'window on the world'. The 12 questions, or forms of them, could be asked of the project team members before the project begins and subsequently during its lifespan as an activity, and the definition of types could be informative in terms of indicating the manner in which the project might be originally conceived and process development. Alternatively, the questions (or variants) could be applied during the life of the project with stakeholders included throughout and reflective learning and practice a key outcome of the project and not just an emergent surprise.

It can also be suggested that movement through one set of coordinates at one point in Figure 3 will tend to predetermine the exact coordinates for movement through other nodes. Certain types of reflection may well prejudice resulting connection and this in effect will have impact on modeling and doing. For example, being pragmatic/functional/reductionist should predispose connecting to be anthropological/applied/control and modeling to be explicit/exclusive/quantitative. Similarly it could be argued that being ideal/dysfunctional/systemic at the 'reflection' node of Figure 3 implies that the project should pass through the implicit/inclusive/qualitative space of the 'modeling' node. If this implied progression from one point in the multidimensional space of Figure 3 to another does not happen then one can question why. What has happened to take the wormhole through a different path? Has it resulted from the intervention of an individual? All sorts of possibilities exist in Figure 3, and each point presents a set of issues for discussion. Why a particular set of coordinates in that space is selected above all other possibilities



could be analysed and reasoned rather than passing through a pre-determined wormhole at speed and without questioning.

## 5. Applying the new synthesis

The questionnaire in Table 1 along with the typology in Table 2 has been applied to the Blue Plan CAMP project in Malta (Table 3). This analysis is, of course, subjective, but the result is indicative of the authors' experience with the project.

Table 3. Observed tendencies and types in sustainable development indicator projects in Malta.

No.	Node	Type of question that can be asked	Type of sustainable development project			
			Holistic	Technocentric	Organisational	Environmental
1	Reflection	When I reflect on my experience I am interested in lessons that provide me with wide ranging and general guidance	<b>Y</b>	N	N	<b>Y</b>
2		I am only interested in change which arises from an obvious need	<b>N</b>	Y	Y	Y
3		My vision of sustainable development needs to reflect the whole and not just parts of the context	<b>Y</b>	N	<b>Y</b>	<b>Y</b>
4	Connecting	My focus is determined by the needs of mankind first	N	<b>Y</b>	N	N
5		I'm more interested in 'doing' sustainable development than questioning its meaning or understanding the context	<b>N</b>	Y	<b>N</b>	<b>N</b>
6		We need to bring people together to consider how we will 'do' sustainable development and develop indicators	<b>Y</b>	N	<b>Y</b>	N
7	Modelling	Indicators can often arise from people's experiences rather than scientific observations	<b>Y</b>	N	N	N
8		I like to have a wide and diverse team to work with for all aspects of project work	<b>Y</b>	N	<b>Y</b>	N
9		Indicators are often unquantifiable but I consider them of equal value to those that are quantifiable	<b>Y</b>	N	<b>Y</b>	N
10	Doing	Projects are at their best when they focus narrowly on limited outcomes	<b>N</b>	Y	Y	<b>N</b>
11		Sustainable development projects should be based on command as opposed to autonomy	<b>N</b>	Y	<b>N</b>	Y
12		A project works best when its goals are set by the project team themselves	<b>Y</b>	N	<b>Y</b>	N

In terms of the 'reflection' node the project via its thematic teams did attempt to address the 'whole' of sustainable development rather than just a few components. It also did aim to generate insights for general guidance not tied to any specific need. The latter

point is open to some dispute given the problems faced by the North-East of Malta with coastal development and pollution, but in fairness the project was geared towards handling these issues as interlinked facets of sustainability rather than addressing any one of them in isolation.

Under 'connecting' the focus was clearly on people (anthropological) but not solely on the practice of sustainable development without questioning meaning. While the ultimate objective of the project was to help provide guidance to 'make things better', there was considerable scope for stakeholders to question the meaning of sustainability and how best to achieve it. Allied to both these points was a perceived need to be inclusive – to bring different stakeholders together to share perspectives. It can certainly be questioned whether there was enough effort towards the latter, and whether the project was 'participatory' enough, but at least the intention was there.

It can be argued that the locus of the project within the 'modelling' part of the framework should be inevitable given the answers under 'reflection' and 'connecting'. People-centred and inclusive styles should imply modelling which is more implicit/inclusive/qualitative. Indeed, this is what was experienced by the authors in Malta. There was a tendency to derive SIs from people's experiences rather than apply a more technical and 'top down' suite as employed by SIMO. As a result diversity of perspective was embraced (with the proviso as to whether this was enough) and qualitative SIs (a 'feel' for something) were considered alongside the more 'traditional' quantitative type.

Finally, in terms of 'doing' the Blue Plan project in Malta did not focus narrowly on limited outcomes – such as the improvement of beach quality. It did try to address the totality of sustainable development and explore how aspects were inter-related. Blue Plan also encouraged autonomy and the local setting of goals rather than 'command' them.

Putting all of the above together the project has the following wormhole:

Reflection: ideal, dysfunctional, systemic.

Connecting: anthropological, pure, partnership

Modelling: implicit, internal, qualitative

Doing: diverse, autonomy, purposeful

This profile contrasts with that of the typical sustainable development project outlined earlier, but note how the presence at certain loci in the framework determine the presence at other loci. A desire for a people-centred approach and partnership will be incompatible with ‘top down’ and technocentric styles of SI development and a command project. There are loci here which condition where the project passes through the multidimensional space set out in Figure 3. If a ‘people focus’ through one of the dimensions is followed by an emphasis on top-down, explicit and quantitative indicators then one can ask why this should be so. What has intervened in the project to cause this apparent disjunction in what should be a logical wormhole? How can the project rationalise this mismatch?

It can also be seen from Table 3 that the Malta project was experienced by the authors as providing overarching tendencies to holism and an organisational focus.

Technocentric and environmentalist foci are far less evident. The implications are that the project was organised on wide ranging and diverse perceptions taking into account the multiple perspectives of stakeholders, towards organisational goals for developing the sustainability debate and its futurity in country and maybe less to do with what one might refer to as conventional and narrow environmental concerns.

But these are the views of the authors. As a next step it would be interesting to conduct wider Sustainability Therapy sessions with a range of project stakeholders, including those meant to ultimately benefit, to gain further inference of the overall tendencies of the project. They might, for example, argue that the project was not as participatory as it should have been. More widely it would be interesting to conduct a questionnaire analysis of the perceptions of stakeholders in a wide range of such projects. Such questionnaires might provide compelling information on the effectiveness of the sustainable development project globally – especially if related to a review of the published outcomes of these projects.

One means to facilitate the development of on-going project learning via Sustainability Therapy might be to make use of an adapted format for the Logical Framework (see

Table 4). A therapy format in this case would focus on non-judgmental and questioning approaches to understanding the expected and intended outputs of the project. Making use of the Logical Framework structure, a facilitator could work with the project team as a whole or in self-divided groups representing strategic, tactical and operational levels. The project process and output could be gently contested at all these levels - working along the guideline questions set out in Table 1. By questioning the project team assumptions the project explicit process and outcomes could be compared to the team-known and implicit processes and outcomes. We argue that such a therapy session would not only unlock a great deal of the sustainable development project learning but also act as a sustainable basis for ongoing and comparable evaluation of many sustainable development processes.

Table 4. A Learning Logical Framework

<b>Project Story Goal</b>	<b>Project accountability Indicators and the means to verify them</b>	<b>Project counter-story Assumption/ risk</b>	<b>The Learning Outcomes from the Project</b>
The strategic goal beyond the project but informing its development	<i>Strategic Indicators (StIs)</i>	The counter-story of the project expressed in the form of assumptions or risks	Learning at a strategic level relating to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflections on the project</li> <li>• Connections to other projects</li> </ul>
<b>Purpose</b> The sustainable purpose of the project - its root definition - contains in brief the key project Customer, Actors, Transformation, Assumption, Owner and Constraint	<i>Sustainability Indicators (SIs)</i>		Learning at a tactical level relating to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflections on the project</li> <li>• Connections to other projects</li> <li>• Modelling used in the project</li> <li>• Activity of the project</li> </ul>
<b>Outputs</b> The impact of the project in terms of a sequence of related outputs derived from the experience of the activities	<i>Impact Indicators (IIs)</i>		Learning at a tactical level relating to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Modelling used in the project</li> <li>• Activity of the project</li> </ul>
<b>Activities</b> The sequence of activities which are needed to achieve the project transformation set out in the Purpose	<i>Performance Indicators (PIs)</i>		Learning at an operational level relating to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activity of the project</li> </ul>

Note that the ‘Learning outcomes’ relate to answering the questions set out in Tables 1 and 2:

- at the strategic/ goal level these relate to reflection and connection
- at the purpose level, the project team refers to questions relating to all aspects of the learning cycle.
- at the output level the questions are more focused on modeling and activity issues.
- at the activity level the questions relate solely to activity.

## **6. Discussion**

All of the foregoing presents a picture of multiple-dimensionality in sustainable development, but how does this analytical framework help make sustainable development projects more ‘circular’? The most noticeable outcome of the work in Malta was the joy that the participants showed in learning about sustainable development through SIs. Others have had a similar experience (Kline, 2000). However, for donors it may be the end of the project process that matters and not any learning gained by stakeholders during the project itself. Even if learning is considered it may be recorded as nothing more than the number of workshops or training courses that were held and the number of participants who attended. It also has to be remembered that all projects have deeply embedded polarities of power such as:

- those with the funding, those without
- those charged with managing, those being managed
- different groups of beneficiary (men/women, rich/poor, old/young)

It is not hard to find these polarities, and SIs provide a lever by which important and contested issues can be discussed; they provide a valuable common currency of debate and exploration (Meter, 1999). Yet projects can smooth this landscape of power, or at least ignore significant dichotomies of thought, in order to get the job done. Pressure for accountability demands that the deliverables be delivered with the resources set out at the onset of the project, and debates may be seen as getting in the way of this delivery rather than being positive. But the project should encourage the involvement of all stakeholders as equals with insights to share and not to regard them as passive recipients of the privileged knowledge of experts. Neither would the community (or stakeholders)

be necessarily expected to use indicators in the sense that the project would mean the word, or indeed how an intended consumer (policy maker, manager) would use SIs as a project output. Yet while this may be appealing in theory, the authors argue that without a formal structure that facilitates debates and learning as a project output then they will not happen. The main point is that the learning framework helps keep “*contesting actors together*” and “*provides them with a platform for fruitful debate*” (Kasemir et al., 1999).

This may seem unpalatable for some funders as such discussions (let alone notions of Sustainability Therapy) may not appear to be productive in terms of generating tangible outcomes, and could perhaps even be seen as inimical in deflecting attention from the end point and maybe even call into question the project process. Does the expanded Logframe imply that ‘things won’t get done’? No, far from it, the learning is the doing. Hence the framework does not negate or diminish the desire of funders for the ‘end product’, and more discussion on the road to getting there could be highly advantageous. This is not to say that funders abandon a focus on eventual outcomes. It is important that project outcomes feed into sustainable development policy and this should include an assessment of performance on the part of implementing agencies (Brugmann, 1997b; Guy and Kibert, 1998). Learning in itself does not necessarily lead to change (Brugmann, 1997a), but it was noticeable in both the Malta and Lebanon projects that no frustration set in amongst participants, even though the eventual usage of the SIs generated as an output is, at the time of writing, uncertain.

What is suggested here is open to a host of potential criticisms that usually surround participative approaches in sustainable development. Unequal power relations still exist (Kasemir et al., 1999), and ultimately much depends upon the prevailing mindset of the funding agency and the skill of the facilitator and the specific tools he/she applies. Even so, the authors suggest that this analytical model will help in the infusion of richness back into sustainable development projects. By including an awareness of the journey through the project as part of the project planning rather than only thinking of arriving at the end participants can explore where they are within the dimensions and why they think they arrived there.

There is no doubt that despite their limitations projects will continue to dominate the practice, and indeed research, of sustainable development. While sustainability idealists may bemoan this reality with its apparent obsession with tangible outputs for a spend in resource, it is difficult to imagine any change. Some may see the suggestion made in this paper for working within projects as a distasteful compromise in the mode of accepting elements of weak instead of strong sustainability. However, the authors see no contradiction here as projects can exist with both weak and strong perspectives. Indeed if anything it can be argued that projects founded on strong sustainability should perhaps be more in need of a learning device to help counter the potential constraints of project linearity.

## **7. Conclusions**

In the view of the authors the apparent contradiction between the ‘linearity’ of most Sustainable Development projects, with time-bound and defined outputs achieved at a fixed cost, and an implied ‘circularity’ of the theory whereby there is no ‘end’ presents problems with the ‘doing’ of sustainability. It is suggested that one way around this is to frame the project within a form of the Kolb Learning Cycle heuristic, and to build this in as part of the project planning process. However, in order to succeed it is necessary to work within the tools (such as the Logframe) so beloved by those providing the project resources rather than try to supplant them. The authors suggest that a modification of the Kolb cycle could encourage learning and understanding by all involved. It could also provide Sustainability Therapy to those trapped in processes which they find orthogonal to their own perceptions. It is suggested that such learning, therapy and reflective practice should be a valid output of the sustainable development project. Ironically funders would be well advised to take a broader perspective in order to achieve true ‘value for money’ within such projects, even if learning is not an easily measurable or tangible outcome.

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