Open Research Online

Citation

Bell, Simon and Morse, Stephen (2005). Sustainable development projects: explicit and acroamatic story telling as part of a new 'project ethnography'. In: 11th Annual International Sustainable Development Research Conference, 2005, Helsinki, Finland.

URL

https://oro.open.ac.uk/112/

License

None Specified

Policy

Versions

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding

Sustainable development projects: explicit and acroamatic story telling as part of a new 'project ethnography'

Simon Bell[1] and Stephen Morse[2]

[1] Open Systems Research Group,
Systems Department,
Open University, Milton Keynes
email s.g.bell@open.ac.uk
Telephone and Fax: +44 (0)1953 604594

[2] Department of Geography,
University of Reading, Reading
Email: s.morse@reading.ac.uk
Telephone +44 (0)118 3788736
Fax +44 (0) 118 9755865

ABSTRACT

This paper constitutes an attempt to find a means to represent multiple stories in the strong narrative of conventional sustainable development (SD) projects. The author's experience of such projects in various parts of the world indicates that they have a tendency to arise from and reflect a dominant mindset, placing the SD project in what can be a working environment which is inimical to the very ideals which SD is supposed to represent. Short termism and value for money drive project formats and objectives whilst counter narratives and alternative stories arising from stakeholders in such projects are often ignored. Yet these alternative threads often contain strong SD messages of their own and could, if effectively utilised, enhance the SD project process. This paper sets out the case for a new field – 'project ethnography' – allied with the growing use of meta-analysis to compare project 'stories'. The paper presents preliminary findings using an analytical framework to facilitate an ethnographic analysis and draw out the stories that those working in such projects can tell. The analysis focuses on some SD projects in the Mediterranean which reinforces the view of the authors that the conventional model of SD project organisation and delivery often contains within itself alternative understandings – understandings which the authors regard as stories in collision with the presenting and accepted project narrative, but at the same time valuable in richness of experience and perspective which can be drawn upon for informing SD project design and implementation.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, projects, ethnography, case studies

Introduction

This paper is concerned with some critical reflections on the functioning of sustainable development (SD) projects - both at the level of explicit actions and expectations, but also at what we refer to as the acroamatic (or spoken) level of the dialogue behind the explicit[1] (see also: Bell and Wood-Harper 2005). Whether we like it or not, the practice of SD is typically through the medium of projects:

> *Defined activities carried out by defined people with a defined end point in mind at a defined cost and over a defined period of time.*

Sustainable development is more than just projects for sure, but Figure 1 shows how for many of us who work in the field it is through projects that we engage with the subject on a professional basis. Some of us are donors who controls resource allocation for sustainable development – others are in the category of being 'do-ers'. All of us are intended beneficiaries. The arrows in the diagram representing flow of resource, information or influence are quantumised (packaged). In earlier works we have referred to this project process – applied for all manner of purposeful activity - as the Projectified World Order (Bell and Morse 2004; Bell and Morse 2005). While the diagram is circular in the sense that what the projects set out to do should have an impact in wider society, and society provides the funding, the circularity does not necessarily imply a continuation or longevity of the benefits that should accrue from the projects existence. Indeed, of especial concern to us in this paper is the space that extends out from the 'doing' of the project to the realisation (or not) of lasting change in the context with which the project attempts to engage. Arising from this is the observation that the Projectified World Order significantly fails to meet long term needs and goals.

Critically the 'defining' is carried out *a priori* and suitable answers will determine whether the project is successful in terms of obtaining support (mostly realised as funding). There is an element of discourse between those who are promoting the project and those who control the allocation of resources – but it can be the discourse of buyer and seller. Those who 'believe' in the project will attempt to 'sell' it while those with the resources can act as 'buyers' – it is they who need to be convinced of the projects value.

Sustainable development projects may be research or practice-focussed or an element of both (action research). Even if perceived solely by the 'owners' of the project as the former the aim will typically be to generate knowledge that ultimately aids practice. Here the deliverables may be publications – but they are publications meant to make a difference (even if expressed in more rarefied terms of 'adding to human knowledge').

Projects are popular with those responsible for spending money. They embrace a targeted set of activities with a clear aim (and hence cost), and hence accountability

---

[1] The notion of an oral, insider story, not openly available to the public record has a long tradition. It is understood that Plato in his academy provided a written teaching (his Dialogues) which were supported and guided by the acroamatic teaching (see, for example the commentary of Szlezak 1999). The unpacking of the acroamatic story within sustainable development projects we argue, goes beyond the conventional notion of the "message" of the project.

can be maximised. Limited time-horizons for 'spend' and the achievement of targets also allows a long-term commitment to be circumvented or even negated altogether. This fits neatly into the short-term time-frames which politicians inhabit.

Yet, as we have already implied, the Projectified World Order has problems! By definition projects are born – live – and die, yet do the outputs from the project make a lasting contribution to sustainability? The answer, of course, depends upon the project, but unfortunately the answer can all too often be a rather stark 'no'. Assuming that the project approach in sustainable development is here to stay how can we best ensure their success? Given the problems we face on a global scale and the (always) limited resources available this question has taken on even greater urgency.

Let it be said before we progress further that we don't have 'an' answer – but we do have some reflections gleaned from our work in sustainable development (and other) projects. Based on our experience there are, we would argue, two elements to the question we pose. First how can those working within a project be encouraged to analyse their experience and highlight how improvements may be made? Second there is the wider story – how the experiences of one project can inform the experiences of many others.

The paper will begin with a brief review of the contested terrain of sustainable development and set out why it is so 'messy', particularly when implemented through resource and time-bound projects. We will follow this with a proposal for introducing an element of 'questioning', seeking stories within the conventional project story, looking within the project process as an element of problem solving. In effect the paper seeks to set out an analytical framework for understanding the stories which make up sustainable development projects. We will illustrate how the framework can be applied, using case studies from Mediterranean Blue Plan projects, to catalyse learning. We accept that while the example is a specific one we would suggest that it all too clearly sets out the problems that many Problem Structuring Methods (or PSMs) (for example see: Rosenhead and Mingers 2001) face in such contexts and perhaps helps to explain the failures of the Projectified World Order. The paper will end with a discussion of the application of our analytical framework and the difficulties it would face in practice.

Sustainable Development; working in a 'mess'

The term 'sustainable' (= sustainability) is applied to a host of human activities and structures to imply that they can continue into the future without detriment to either people or their environment. It has been used as an adjective for activities such as agriculture, water supply, resource management and development, as well as the institutions charged with supporting them. We often forget that it is the activities which are the important elements (and generally well defined) and the adjective is added to ensure that the activities will continue into the future (for how long and to the benefit of whom being less well defined). As a result there is some plasticity as to the meaning of 'sustainable' (Mitcham, 1995). The evolution of sustainability has been long and complex, with rich intersections to economics and politics (Kidd 1992; Moffat 1992; Castro 2004; Robinson 2004)

While many disagreements exist as to what sustainable development means in practice, there is no doubt as to its popularity. Typically sustainable development is conventionally promoted through the use of time and resource-bounded projects (Bell and Morse 2005) where the deliverables – the tangible outputs – are established in the form of a 'blue print' before the onset of the project and included in devices such as Planning Frameworks.

Planning frameworks set out a clear progression from an ultimate strategic goal and set of purposes down to a tactical set of outputs and activities to generate the outputs. The framework identifies a set of indicators in order to measure attainment of all levels – strategic and tactical. Thus the framework if set out correctly seeks to ensure that activities match the goal with clear means of ensuring that the linkage is maintained during the life of the project. Some have likened the chain:

Activities → outputs → purpose → goal

to practice within deductive science:

Methodology → results → hypothesis (Y/N) → theory

A theory is built from numerous experiments just as a set of projects would address a strategic goal. Also, just as goals exist within a wider context of society so theories exist within paradigms. In both models the activities/methodology and outputs/results are relatively easy to express and understand. Problems can often arise with the linkage of these to purpose (hypotheses) and goal (theory) – are the activities/methods employed the most appropriate?

As can perhaps be imagined planning frameworks are favoured devices amongst project funders (owners) for much the same reasons as the deductive approach is popular amongst scientists. An example of a SD project set out in a more mechanistic style is presented as Figure 2. Note the difference compared to the fuzziness of Figure 1 Planning frameworks allow a transparent and accountable thread between what the project is trying to achieve and the activities and outputs to achieve those ends - this constitutes the dominant narrative of the project (in Logical Framework Planning, the first column of the plan is even called the 'narrative summary'). However, there are often problems with this logical progression in practice. To begin with it is typically the case that different individuals or groups are responsible for different levels within the framework - and they will have their own take on the narrative and its implications. Towards the top end, the 'planners' (or 'visioners') may be senior managers, civil servants or policy makers taking their lead from politicians, opinion leaders or others. They believe they are acting on behalf of a group in wider society, the 'wanters', who want the project to succeed in bringing about a desirable change. Those towards the bottom (the 'do-ers') are practitioners in direct contact with the project context. They are paid to carry out the activities and may or may not believe that the project is worthwhile in terms of addressing real issues or whether the activities and outputs are necessarily the best ones.

In previous publications we have argued for a greater emphasis on learning and participating within the project as a valuable output in itself. Given that sustainability

is in a sense a 'mess' which is constantly moving (societies values, after all, change constantly and what might be acceptable 50 years ago may not be now) then people have questioned whether such normative stances represented by 'blue print' projects have any real value. Even if such projects 'deliver' what the blueprint states that they should (i.e. the project was successful) do the deliverables improve matters from the point of view of those intended to benefit? The dangers of a mismatch between what a project attempts to achieve and the priorities of those meant to benefit are particularly acute when the projects are planned with little, if any, participation from potential beneficiaries. Different perceptions of projects abound and, as Chambers noted (Chambers 1997), the accepted story and presenting reality of such projects is often determined by 'whose reality counts'. Some have even questioned whether SD is just a technological fix which fails to treat more serious underlying issues (Robinson, 2004)?

The obvious question to ask at this point is whether there is scope for introducing a stronger interpretation of stories and resulting learning dimension to projects? This would (in theory) combine a healthy deconstruction and reflection with resources to bring about change – and would need to include some willingness to engage with the multiple perspectives of all those involved in the project process. This is not to say that learning is ignored in project planning. Projects can, of course, include an educational dimension and indicators such as number of workshops held, attendance at workshops and evaluation reports of workshops (where participants rank or score the performance of facilitators) are all acceptable. Similarly reflection during projects is not a new concept (it is well reported across the literature, for example - Stowell, Holland et al. 1990; Bell 1992; Mingers 1995; Ulrich 1996; Armson 1997; Flood, Weil et al. 1997; Gasper 1997; Esperjo and Stewart 1998; Maiteny and Ison 2000). However, traditionally project monitoring is more concerned with whether the project is on target in terms of delivering intended outputs. Flexibility to change the outputs once the project has been planned and started may be very limited or even non-existent and attention to (and therefore the potential for learning from) alternative project stories is often completely lacking.

Both authors have much experience with projects, sustainable development and otherwise, and the dominance of sustainability as an end point to be achieved through projects with tangible outputs has not abated. Indeed with the increasing popularity of planning frameworks as devices it can be argued that the momentum has increased rather than diminished. By way of contrast our assumption is that a greater emphasis on learning and refection within the project would enable a questioning of project activities (and even goals) while the project was ongoing rather than waiting till its completion. Also, the learning concerning the dominant story within the project becomes a valued output in itself rather than just being seen as a stepping stone.

The notion of learning allied to deconstruction within organisations is not a new concept. The growing field institutional ethnography (IE) combines both theory and method and seeks to make connections among the situations of everyday life experienced by individuals in working within institutions (Smith 1987; Townsend 1996; O'Neill 1998; Grahame 1998). Some of the classic examples of IE are within community health care projects, yet perhaps surprisingly although IE has increased in popularity there are few (if any) examples within a SD context. IE encourages analysis and self-reflection (learning) on the part of personnel in institutions hereby

generating "*knowledge which can inform practice*" (O'Neill 1998). What contributes to the strengthening or the straining of relationships? IE encompasses participant observation (needed for "*disclosing social processes from within or from a basis of experience*"; Hick, undated) and an encouragement of people to 'tell their story' (a major theme of this paper). It can generate rich insights into the nuances of institutional functionality, but it is almost by definition time consuming and hence expensive. There is also the issue of positionality to consider. Ironically, as Grahame (1998) comments the "*scenes of everyday life are shaped by forms of social organization which cannot be fully grasped from within those scenes.*"

Thus while everyone may have their own story they are also embedded in the matrix of the institution and been influenced by and probably taken part in various struggles, conflicts and disputes that any institution experiences. Their stories are their experiences of these interactions, and others may (or may not) have quite different perspectives.

Herein lies the conundrum. IE could be applied in SD projects but it would be expensive and is hardly likely to be attractive to funders. Nevertheless, is it possible to develop a more rapid PSM in the format of an analytical framework for projects so that those involved could understand why the project was taking a particular path - and, resulting from this, to track the pathway of the project, discerning the dominant story it is telling. Like IE, the analytical framework aims to facilitate a reflective deconstruction of sustainability, and hence learning, within a defined space of power. After all the project does have resources to bring about change and while there are inevitably inequalities of power within the project it nonetheless can be reasonably assumed that participants will continue to be engaged.

We hesitate to call this 'ethnography' in the mode of true IE given that we acknowledge the time and resource-bound nature of projects and hence the severe limitations with applying real ethnography, but nevertheless there is an ethnographic 'feel' to what we are proposing in the sense that it is far more than just monitoring. We tentatively suggest the generic term 'project ethnography' to cover what we have in mind. As far as we are aware we are the first to coin this term and approach for SD projects.

Project ethnography: Deconstructing the story of the sustainable development project

In order to facilitate deconstruction of the SD project we suggest using a derivative of the Kolb Learning Cycle (Kolb 1984) as a starting point. The device is designed to obtain some quick answers to important dimensions of the project's form, origin and intention, which in turn provide the basis for a more qualitative deconstruction. We assume that the SD project, like all purposive action, moves through four nodes: reflection, connecting, modelling and doing. At each node we suggest a 3 dimensional conceptual space through which any project can pass. Our choice of 3 dimensions at each node as distinct from 4, 5 or more can certainly be questioned (and we encourage and welcome such a debate) and is only meant here as an illustration. The four nodes are

1. **Reflection.** Reflection is when the important aspects of learning from previous action are assimilated and either stored for subsequent action or dismissed as irrelevant.

2. **Connecting.** Connecting means linking personal and team reflection on experience to experiences from related areas and from others working in the same field.

3. **Modelling.** The third, modelling or experimenting aspect of the cycle relates to how the implementation of sustainable development is gauged (modelled). Typically this is through the use of indicators (Sustainability Indicators, SIs).

4. **Doing (acting).** This node is concerned with the implementation of sustainable development via the project.

These four nodes and the 3 continua within each of them are set out in Table 1a. In order to illustrate how the analysis could be implemented in practice we have designed a simple questionnaire (Table 1b) that sets out our 4 X 3 space in terms that actors could use to quickly establish their points of passage. It is important to note here that Table 1b is a simplified questionnaire and is only meant to provide an illustration of an entrance point into a more extensive analysis. Even for an individual actor their responses to these questions are highly unlikely to be an unambiguous 'yes' or 'no' but more likely to somewhere between the extremes. We have allowed for this by transforming the categorical response into a continuous scale between 0 (unambiguous no) to 1 (unambiguous yes). As an illustrative device the questionnaire can be set out conceptually as a 4 X 3 matrix, with the four nodes as rows and three continua at each node as columns:

Sustainability matrix =

Nodes	Continua		
	Focus	Approach to change	Thinking
Reflection	a_{11}	a_{12}	a_{13}
	Relating	Approach to science	Social interaction
Connecting	a_{21}	a_{22}	a_{23}
	SI methodology	Stakeholder engagement	Type of SI
Modelling	a_{31}	a_{32}	a_{33}
	Outcome	Approach to learning	Project approach
Doing	a_{41}	a_{42}	a_{43}

The letters and subscripts (a_{11}, a_{12} etc.) represent numerical coding of answers to the questions of Table 1b. The first number of each subscript is the node and the second number is the continua, and values of 'a' have to be between 0 (representing an unambiguous 'no') and 1 (representing an unambiguous 'yes'). In essence values such as 0.1 or 0.2 could equate to a response such as '*probably not*' or '*I don't think so*' while 0.8 and 0.9 could equate to responses such as '*I think so*' or '*more than likely*'. A carefully crafted questionnaire would perhaps have four or five cross-checking questions for each of the continua rather than the single ones of Table 1b. One could also envisage a need to collect other evidence (e.g. project documents and correspondence, semi-structured interviews, observation) rather than rely solely on a structured questionnaire. The reader should note that while we have used a quantitative approach for illustration the main value of the framework rests with a qualitative analysis. Questions can be asked as to why respondents feel that they have answered a question the way they have and what are the repercussions?

Putting these practical issues to one side for the remainder of this paper, the key point is that we suggest that perceptions of projects vary in the pathways they take through this multi-dimensional, conceptual space, and indeed a single project could conceivably be perceived by its various actors in quite different ways - constituting different stories. The project passes through one point in the space at each of the four nodes for a reason or set of reasons – not because of chance. Someone or a group have made the decisions. Indeed, passage through one point at one node could pre-determine passage through a point at the second node – *we assume this here therefore we must do this when we get to that point*. In effect, there are human as well as

resource-induced constraints on project degrees of freedom which tramline passage through the matrix. For example, it may be argued that conventional SD projects typically move through the following mapped space:

(1) *Reflection*: pragmatic, functional, reductionist. *Pragmatic* is represented by small step incremental change rather than a more ideal but substantial (quantum jump) change. For example, targets may be to set to reduce pollution gradually over years rather than introduce substantial change in months. The *functional* is seen in the focus on teams of applied 'experts' working to a project script rather than embracing multiple perspectives and diversity. *Reductionist* refers to the way in which elements of sustainable development are often seen in relative isolation rather than deal with complex interactions between many components.

(2) *Connecting*: anthropological, applied, control. Sustainable development projects tend to take a weak sustainability perspective, with trade-offs between a sustainability gain and an economic cost (*anthropological*). 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.

(3) *Modelling*: explicit, exclusive, quantitative. 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) *Doing*: single, command, purposive. 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.

These answers - the conventional story - are highlighted by the shaded cells of table 1b. We can also represent this conventional project profile by a matrix of '0' (no) and 'yes' (1) values:

$$\text{Conventional Project matrix} = \begin{vmatrix} 0 & 1 & 0 \\ 1 & 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 1 & 1 & 0 \end{vmatrix}$$

There may be 'tramlining' in here which limit degrees of freedom. For example, a pragmatic/functional/reductionist point for reflection would imply that the project is likely to be biased towards an anthropological/applied/control point for connecting.

The point which needs to be reinforced here is that this is a conceptual device. Actors engaging with the same project may have quite different experiences and hence perceptions - this is where other, possible acroamatic and hidden stories may emerge. Passage through each point of the matrix is, in essence, a subjective experience rather than being measurable in any absolute or positivist sense. Individuals will no doubt be able to make a case as to why they feel the project has passed through (or likely to pass through) a point defined by single/command/purposive in the 'doing' node but this case is difficult if not impossible to 'prove' in any objective way. While extremes are easier to identify, in the middle of the range there is no doubt that one persons view of limited (single) focus could well be someone else's embrace of the 'diverse and challenging'. But is this multiplicity of perspective a bad thing? We would argue not. Indeed it forms the basis for discussion and debate that leads to a deconstruction of '*why are we here?*' and '*do we want to be here?*' That in turn will facilitate sharing of insights and learning.

A further advantage of our analytical model as a starting point in project ethnography is that it allows a classification of project perceptions and hence facilitates an extraction of commonalities and differences. For example, we can imagine an 'holistic' project as the exact opposite of the conventional (Table 2) - this would certainly constitute the discovery of an alternative and acroamatic story as opposed to the conventional, dominant project narrative. The matrix of experiences / responses which would define an acroamatic, holistic project is as follows:

$$\text{Acroamatic Holistic Project matrix} = \begin{vmatrix} 1 & 0 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 \\ 1 & 1 & 1 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 \end{vmatrix}$$

It should be noted that we are certainly not implying that these two categories (holistic and conventional projects) are the only ones that may exist. They are stereotypes, and in practice projects may well have facets of both. However, aspects of the acroamatic as opposed to the conventional and explicit story, may lie beneath numerous variants on the holistic project vision. In essence our conceptual framework suggests that it is possible to analyse the story of the project, but in a way which allows comparison, discussion and learning.

While the 'story' of one SD project using a 'project ethnography' can be enlightening and, we would argue, beneficial in terms of maximising the benefits from the project its potential 'place specificity' may limit a wider applicability of findings to other SD projects. This, of course, is a fundamental disadvantage of the case study approach – they are limited in terms of wider usefulness. As a counter others have long noted the benefits of using 'meta-analysis' to draw broader conclusions. .

"Meta-analysis refers to the analysis of analyses"

Glass (1976, page 3)

Meta-analysis began in the 1970s as a way of analysing qualitative data from a number of different studies, and the methods employed were statistical. Since that time meta-analysis has been extended into qualitative studies and terms such as meta-ethnography, meta-synthesis and meta-analysis have emerged. Many of the published examples are in health care (Macarthur et al., 1994; Potts et al., 2004; Thorne et al., 2004; Lam and Kennedy, 2005), but interest within the sustainable development community is recent but growing (private communication NERC QUEST Workshop, March 2005). There are, of course, many issues in here including bias of case study selection and consistency of methodology, but the promise of being able to extract commonalities and an understanding of differences (or 'outliers') is appealing. The application of our proposed framework to a range of projects would help address the need for a consistency of methodology.

The framework we provide here has yet to be tested extensively in the field. However, we have piloted it within the confines of a few projects that form part of the Mediterranean Coastal Area Management Programme.

Blue Plan projects in the Mediterranean

The projects described here are part of the Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP) and the series of Coastal Area Management Programmes (CAMPs) undertaken by a range of agencies and organisations. The Blue Plan regional activity centre is located on the French Riviera in Sophia-Antipolis, near Nice, and works with local agencies to plan SD projects in the Mediterranean (see the website www.planbleu.org/indexa.htm for more details). There are four projects relevant for our discussion in this paper:

1. Malta
2. Lebanon
3. Algeria
4. Slovenia

Each of these employed the SPSA methodology for deriving Sustainability Indicators. The Malta project was the first Blue Plan project the authors were involved in, and in many ways was a test-bed of the SPSA methodology. SPSA is more fully described elsewhere (Bell and Morse 1999; Bell and Morse 2003) and can be seen as being based on three existing PSMs:

1. Soft System Methodology (Checkland 1981; Checkland and Scholes 1990; Checkland and Holwell 1998)
2. Scenario planning (Matzdorf and Ramage 1999; Matzdorf and Ramage 2000) or Prospective (Godet, Monti et al. 1999; Godet 2000; Godet 2000)
3. Logical Framework (Gasper 2000; Kumar and Corbridge 2002)

Further, SPSA includes a toolkit of tools and techniques including Active listening (Gordon 1970), risk analysis (Hughes and Cotterell 1999)and focus groups.

SPSA is envisioned to assist communities of stakeholders to structure, understand, measure and promote sustainability in their context - chiefly by providing them with sustainability indicators whereby agreed views of the current situation can be discussed and analysed, past conditions thought about and 'visions' for possible, sustainable futures compared. For the purposes of this paper SPSA can be broadly divided into three stages:

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

The outcomes of this first stage of SPSA 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.

The second stage of SPSA was centred on meetings with the stakeholder community so as to discuss the work of the teams so far achieved, explain the nature of the SPSA 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? 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 third stage of SPSA 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 SPSA 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 (Godet et al. 1999; Godet, 2000, 2001). At this time the wider stakeholder views were again assessed, and teams were asked to think about how they might engage the public more actively in the use of indicators.

SPSA has been seen to have produced useful outcomes by the actors involved in the projects, including:

1. Encouraging 'whole project' activity – this refers to providing the space and capacity for specialists to participate outside their narrow area of expertise and involving them in thinking about the nature of the project as a whole
2. Assisting in project participation by local people. In the wider stakeholder workshops, wide-ranging debates about the meaning and costs of SD took place.
3. Providing a forum for whole project thinking to occur
4. Assisting all project activists to question and review project assumptions.

In each case – Malta, Lebanon, Algeria and Slovenia – there were critical differences in the manner and format which SPSA involved. For example, the Maltese context was that of a small island and focus was on the North West. In Lebanon, again the project site was the area of coast south of Beirut, whereas in Algeria and project was concerned with a far greater geographic area. Similarly, each expression of SPSA

involved slightly different timescales for project activities and different thematic teams to engage. In each case the outputs first seen in Malta, of: encouraging whole project thinking, participation, a forum for questioning and questioning assumptions were sustained. Given this commonality in underlying purpose as well as inherent diversity the Blue Plan projects provided an ideal opportunity to test the assumptions behind the analytical framework.

Deconstructing the Blue Plan project experience: some insider perspectives

We have piloted our analytical methodology with 12 participants in an SPSA project based in a Coastal Area Management Programme in Slovenia. The workshop in which the analysis was undertaken was held in Piran on the coast in February 2005. The respondents in this pilot study were all involved in the CAMP project - in the capacities of key CAMP project staff, SPSA counterparts in country, observers from non-governmental organisations, and those representing coastal municipalities. The project is in process and it is only possible at the time of writing to provide respondent answers to questions relating to the reflecting and connecting aspects of the Kolb cycle.

Using the matrix notation as a convenient and concise conceptual device the predominant views of the respondents (average and standard error, SD/√N, in parentheses) can be represented as follows:

$$\text{Respondents perception of their 'Blue Plan' project} = \begin{vmatrix} 0.4 & 0.61 & 0.36 \\ (0.08) & (0.08) & (0.08) \\ 0.43 & 0.58 & 0.25 \\ (0.06) & (0.1) & (0.04) \end{vmatrix}$$

This pattern is quite different from either of the two types rationalised earlier. But which one does it most resemble? A simple subtraction of the matrices will provide us with the extent of similarity (values in the cells are absolute differences):

$$\text{Respondents perception} - \text{conventional project} = \begin{vmatrix} 0.4 & 0.39 & 0.36 \\ 0.57 & 0.42 & 0.25 \end{vmatrix} = 2.39$$

$$\text{Respondents perception} - \text{holistic project} = \begin{vmatrix} 0.6 & 0.61 & 0.64 \\ 0.43 & 0.58 & 0.75 \end{vmatrix} = 3.61$$

A zero value in a cell indicates that there is an agreement at that point while a value of 1 would indicate maximum disagreement. The total to the right of each matrix is the sum of all of the absolute deviations. The subtractions suggest that the respondent's perception of their projects is closer to the conventional than the holistic. Allowing for variation across cells in the matrices:

$$\begin{vmatrix} C & C & C \\ H & C & C \end{vmatrix}$$

Only one of the six cells has an average response matching 'holistic' rather than 'conventional'. But what if variation (represented here as the standard error) is taken into account?

$$\left| \begin{array}{ccc} C & C & C \\ H & C/H & C \end{array} \right|$$

Even allowing for variation in perspective between respondents the dominant view is still very much that of a conventional project, but even so there is clearly some diversity even when experiences have been so severely condensed to numbers in this way.

Dominant stories and valuing alternative acroamatic stories

A disadvantage of the learning cycle approach to analysing SD projects is that it fails to take into account 'breakout' from the project to long-lasting change. The literature is replete with 'good' projects, where participants have enjoyed the experience and felt that they have made an impact, unravelling once the project ends and the activities and outputs are meant to be sustained. Also, of course, it may well be that those involved in the 'doing' of the project are those with the least power to influence wider take-up and sustained adoption of the project outputs. Our analytical framework would tend to be applied amongst those towards the bottom of Figure 2 – those 'doing' the project - our approach would seek to learn their story and unearth the acroamatic message it contains. In short, it is here that our approach would create the space for learning, but how far up the framework would this space extend? While the 'doers' may well have positive or negative views as to how their activities and outputs relate to the 'higher' levels of the framework strategic responsibility would tend to reside with other individuals and groups. It is at this strategic level that sustainability of the projects activities need to be considered beyond the life-time of the project itself, but unfortunately the learning space may become attenuated further up the Figure 2 and may disappear by the time the project engages with the wider context.

We would argue that the space created at the levels of activities and outputs also needs to be extended towards the more strategic levels but we also acknowledge the difficulty of achieving this in practice - respecting others stories is not a noted virtue in blue print project management. There are dimensions of resourcing and accountability and these may override and dominate any space for co-learning. However, it is perhaps ironic that the project activities are the realised form in which the project engages with the context during its lifetime. Hence while the 'doers' have the experience of engagement they are the group that may have the least power to sustain the benefits which the project is assumed to bring about.

One response has been to ensure that the project activities engage with the context as much as possible – hence a wider participation of stakeholders is encouraged if not demanded as part of the planning process. But participation from stakeholders does not necessarily result in a 'better' project or indeed in a guarantee that the project outputs will generate lasting and desirable change. Their stories may be listened to but dismissed.

So are we doomed to an ever-lasting cycle of SD projects which may 'live' by bringing about sustainable change or 'die' by being unsustainable? The popularity of projects amongst funders would suggest that they will continue to be the *modus operandi* for the foreseeable future. But each project is a story, and each person within the project has their own version of that same story. Projects can be improved if those involved absorb the stories of others, and the question becomes how we can get those stories read by those with busy lives. We believe that we need far more analyses and typology of sustainable development projects, including an appreciation of the diversity of perspective. This is not just a dry catalogue of projects classified as envisioned by the funders or even the do-ers – but a rich multi-typology of stories that could be analysed using meta-analysis, or to take our notation further - meta-project-ethnography (M-E-P).

Discussion

In this paper we have shown how it is possible to create an analytical framework to facilitate an understanding (or at least debate) as to why things happen in SD projects the way they do. We have shown how this framework can be applied on, with and by stakeholders in a SD project and the outcomes which it produces. The confirmation that conventional project mindset 'Rules OK!', even in relatively benign and learning centred projects such as those organised by Blue Plan, causes pause for thought. We have also put forward a further advantage of such an analytical framework is that it allows an extension into M-E-P.

However, we should emphasise again, that M-E-P is put forward purely as a starting point for discussion rather than any pretence at a finished, tried and tested, end product. Our choice of the Kolb cycle as the basis can be contested as can our continua. The quantitative analysis we have put forward is only to facilitate a concise illustration and should not be interpreted as a desire on our part to reduce the diverse project experience to means and standard deviations. The key point we are making is that within a SD context such ongoing deconstruction can only be beneficial as it facilitates discussion, analysis and hence almost inevitably - learning and co-learning as narrative and stories collide, and as different understandings of the SD project process are seen to coincide or conflict with the dominant, project perspective. Our work has shown that, when agencies like Blue Plan have the confidence to experiment with PSMs like SPSA, when PSMs are extended into the contradictions of SEDC projects – then, despite the acknowledged evidence of positive outcomes - e.g. participation, inclusion, sharing and learning, the context of the project itself has the capacity to override the capacities of any PSM to apply systemic and consistent approaches to change and learning. Yet this is certainly not to say that our call for analysis during the project will necessarily make the outputs from that project more relevant or effective. In that sense the environment of the project has all the capacity to make a nonsense of the sense making which PSMs such as SPSA attempt to achieve. A salutary lesson!

One outcome of the current discussion might be the retrenching of PSM practitioners from SEDC projects, leaving the challenge to alternative approaches. Yet, the experience of practitioners and those involved in the application of SPSA within SD

projects was generally hopeful. It is not the analytical approach which is at fault, rather – disappointing outcomes can be traced to the limitations and constraints of the contemporary project mindset itself. The intention of the PSM practitioner is pure … but maybe this is not enough. Rather, a radical re-think of the project process, as the suitable vehicle for any systemic problem solving activity, a process which we label as projectification, this itself needs questioning and radically renewing for the PSMS to be applied successfully more widely. As a starting point we would argue that project funders, planners and mangers need to welcome and embrace an on-going process of deconstruction during the project, surfacing the acroamatic and confronting the assumptions of the projectified world order. Getting to grips with the project ethnography in this way might also, usefully be seen as a valuable and important process rather than as a threat or a distraction.

References

Armson, R. (1997). The Invisible Practitioner or the Holistic Practitioner? The problem helper in the problem situation. <u>Systems for Sustainability: People, organizations and environments</u>. A. Stowell, R. Ison and R. Armson. London, Plenum: 103-108.

Bell, S. (1992). Self-Analysis and Pre-Analysis: Lessons in the Application of Systems Analysis in Developing Countries. <u>Technology Transfer for Development: the prospects and limits of information technology</u>. G. Cyranek and S. C. Bhatnagar. New Delhi, Tata McGraw Hill.

Bell, S. and S. Morse (1999). <u>Sustainability Indicators: Measuring the immeasurable</u>. London, Earthscan.

Bell, S. and S. Morse (2003). <u>Measuring Sustainability: Learning from Doing</u>. London, Earthscan.

Bell, S. and S. Morse (2004). <u>Delivering Sustainability Therapy in a Projectified World - Plenary Presentation</u>. The 2004 International Sustainable Development Research Conference, Hulme Hall, University of Manchester, ERP Environment.

Bell, S. and S. Morse (2005). "Delivering Sustainability Therapy in Sustainable Development Projects." <u>Journal of Environmental Management</u> **75**(1): 37 - 51.

Bell, S. and A. T. Wood-Harper (2005). "Stories and Story Telling: Multiview in a non-governmental organisation in Bangladesh." <u>Information Technology for Development</u> **Being considered for autumn 2005**.

Blaikie, P. (2000). "Development, post-, anti-, and Populist: a critical review." <u>Environment and Planning</u> **32**: 1033 - 1050.

Castro, C. J. (2004). "Sustainable Development. Maintstream and Critical Perspectives." <u>Organisation and Environment</u> **17**(2): 195 - 225.

Chambers, R. (1997). <u>Whose Reality Counts? Putting the first last</u>. London, Intermediate Technology Publications.

Checkland, P. and S. Holwell (1998). <u>Information, Systems and Information Systems: Making sense of the field</u>. Chichester, Wiley.

Checkland, P. B. (1981). <u>Systems thinking, Systems Practise</u>. Chichester, Wiley.

Checkland, P. B. and J. Scholes (1990). <u>Soft Systems Methodology in Action</u>. Chichester, Wiley.

Esperjo, R. and N. Stewart (1998). "Systemic Reflections on Environmnetal Sustainability." <u>Systems Research</u> **15**: 1-14.

Flood, B., S. Weil, et al. (1997). <u>Critical Reflexivity: a multi-dimensional conversation</u>. Forum 2: Action research and Critical Systems Thinking, Hull, Centre for Systems Studies, University of Hull.

Gasper, D. (1997). <u>Logical Frameworks - a critical look</u>. Development Studies Association, University of East Anglia.

Gasper, D. (2000). "Evaluating the "Logical Framework Approach": Towards learning -orientated development evaluation." <u>Public Administration and Development</u> **20**(1): 17-28.

Glass, G. V (1976). Primary, secondary, and meta-analysis of research. *Educational Researcher, 5*, 3-8.

Godet, M. (2000). "The Art of Scenarios and Strategic Planning: Tools and pitfalls." Technological Forecasting and Social Change **65**(1).

Godet, M. (2000). "How to be rigorous with scenario planning." Foresight **2**(1): 5-9.

Godet, M., R. Monti, et al. (1999). Scenarios and Strategies: a toolbox for Scenario planning, Laboratory for Investigation in Prospective and Strategy: Toolbox. **1999**.

Gordon, T. (1970). Parent Effectiveness training. New York., Plume Books, New American Library Inc.

Grahame, P. R. (1998) 'Ethnography, institutions and the problematic of the everyday world', Human Studies 21 (4): 347-360.

Hick, S. (undated). Methodology and methods for materialist standpoint analysis. Accessed at http://www.carleton.ca/~shick/mypage/PUBMET.htm on the 28/8/02.

Hughes, B. and M. Cotterell (1999). Software Project Management. Maidenhead, McGraw Hill.

Kidd, C. (1992). "The Evolution of Sustainability." Journal of Agriculture and Environmental Ethics **5**(1): 1-26.

Kolb, D. (1984). Experiential Learning: experience as the source of learning and development. London, Prentice-Hall.

Kumar, S. and S. Corbridge (2002). "Programmed to Fail? Development Projects and the Politics of Participation." Journal of Development Studies **39**(2): 73-103.

Lam, R. W. and Kennedy, S. (2005). Using Meta-Analysis to Evaluate Evidence: Practical Tips and Traps. Canadian Journal of Psychiatry 50, 167-174.

Macarthur C, Foran PJ, Bailar JC 3rd. (1995). Qualitative assessment of studies included in a meta-analysis: DES and the risk of pregnancy loss. Journal of Clinical Epidemiology 48(6), 739-47.

Maiteny, P. and R. Ison (2000). "Appreciating Systems: Critical reflections on the changing nature of systems as a Discipline in a Systems learning society." Systemic Practice and Action Reseach **13**(4): 559-586.

Matzdorf, F. and M. Ramage (1999). "Out of the box - into the future." Organisations and People **6**(3): 29-34.

Matzdorf, F. and M. Ramage (2000). "Planning for Many Futures." Scenarion and Strategy Planning **2**(4): 20-22.

Mingers, J. (1995). Self-Producing Systems. New York, Plenum.

Moffat, I. (1992). "The Evolution of the Sustainable Development Concept: a perspective from Australia." Australian Geographic Studies **30**: 27-42.

O'Neill, B. J. (1998) 'Institutional ethnography: Studying institutions from the margins', *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* **25** (4): 127-144.

Potts, A., Boler, M., Hicks, D., Doolittle, P., Ariew, S., Cachaper, C., Carico, K., & Prickett, R. (2004). Qualitative meta-analysis for social justice: The creation of an on-line diversity resources database. *Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education International Conference 2004*(1), 832-836.

Robinson, J. (2004). "Squaring the Circle? Some thoughts on the idea of sustainable development." Ecological Economics **48**: 369 - 384.

Rosenhead, J. and J. Mingers, Eds. (2001). Rational Analysis for a Problematic World - Revisited. Chichester, Wiley and Sons.

Smith, D. E. (1987). *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Stowell, F. A., P. Holland, et al. (1990). "Applications of SSM in Information System Design: some reflections." Journal of Applied Systems Analysis **Vol. 17**: pp. 63-69.

Szlezak, T. (1999). Reading Plato. London, Routledge.

Ulrich, W. (1996). A Primer to Critical Systems Heuristics for Action Researchers. Hull, The Centre for Systems Studies, University of Hull.

Thorne, S., Jensen, L., Kearney, M. H., Noblit, G. and Sandelowski, M. (2004). Qualitative Metasynthesis: Reflections on Methodological Orientation and Ideological Agenda. Qualitative Health Research, 14 (10), 1342-1365.

Townsend, E. (1996) 'Institutional ethnography: A method for showing how the context shapes practice', *Occupational Therapy Journal of Research* **16** (3): 179-199.

Table 1. Simple questionnaire to help facilitate application of the analytical framework.

(a) Nodes and continua that define our 4 X 3 dimensional space.

Question Number	Node	Continua	Yes (1)	Intermediate (0 → 1)	No (0)
1	**Reflection**	*Type of focus for any given project*: from the 'blue sky' ideal to the most grounded pragmatic.	ideal	…………….	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.	functional	…………….	dysfunctional
3		*Thinking*: 'in the box' reductionist to relationship focused systemic.	systemic	…………….	reductionist
4	**Connecting**	*Relating to the world*: from the most anthropological focus on world needs (weak sustainability) to the most cosmological (strong sustainability)	anthropological	…………….	cosmological
5		*Approach to science*: from the most pure to the most keenly applied	applied	…………….	pure
6		*Social interaction*: from control models to those more interested in inclusion and partnership	partnership	…………….	control
7	**Modelling**	*Indicator methodology*: explicit and expert driven or implicit - emergent from the actors engaged in the project	implicit	…………….	explicit
8		*Engagement with stakeholders*: inclusive and inviting or exclusive and partitioning	inclusive	…………….	exclusive
9		*Type of indicator*: qualitative (narrative, visual) or quantitative (numerical)	qualitative	…………….	quantitative
10	**Doing**	*Outcome*: single focus to the acceptance and even invitation of the most diverse and challenging	single	…………….	diverse
11		*Approach to learning*: command (characterised as: 'This is how it is!' to autonomy (characterised as: 'What do you think?')	command	…………….	autonomy
12		*Project approach*: purposive (characterised as: 'This is what you do') to purposeful (characterised as: 'What do you think needs to be done?')	purposeful	…………….	purposive

While in this table the emphasis is upon a bipolar categorical response (yes or no) in practice it is likely that responses would be more '*well maybe yes/no but.....*', hence the intermediate column. To illustrate this we have used '1' to represent 'yes' and '0' to represent 'no'. Values for each continua could vary between 0 and 1.

(b) Representation of Table 1a as a questionnaire.

Question Number	Node	Type of question that can be asked	Yes (1)	Intermediate (0 → 1)	No (0)
1		The project process provides stakeholders with the opportunity to consider wide ranging issues	ideal	…………….	pragmatic
2	**Reflection**	The project is only interested in monitoring changes which arise from existing data	functional	…………….	dysfunctional
3		The vision of sustainable development adopted by the project reflects the whole and not just parts of the context of the project	systemic	…………….	reductionist
4	**Connecting**	The project focus is determined by the needs of people first, the environment second.	anthropological	…………….	cosmological
5		The project approach was more interested in 'doing' sustainable development than questioning its meaning or understanding the context	applied	…………….	pure
6		The project process was focused on the need to bring people together	partnership	…………….	control
7		Indicators can often arise from people's experiences rather than scientific observations	implicit	…………….	explicit
8	**Modelling**	I like to have a wide and diverse team to work with for all aspects of project work	inclusive	…………….	exclusive
9		indicators are often unquantifiable but I consider them of equal value to those that are quantifiable	qualitative	…………….	quantitative
10		Projects are at their best when they focus narrowly on limited outcomes	single	…………….	diverse
11	**Doing**	Sustainable development projects should be based on command as opposed to autonomy	command	…………….	autonomy
12		A project works best when its goals are set by the project team themselves	purposeful	…………….	purposive

Each of the 12 questions in this simple questionnaire has been designed to elicit a response that allows mapping onto the 12 dimensional spaces (4 nodes and 3 continua at each node). An improvement would be to create a series of questions for each point rather than just one. This would allow a triangulation of response. Shaded responses are our assumption with regard to most sustainable development projects.

A further improvement to the questionnaire would be questions designed to address why the respondent feels that the answers are what they are. For example, if the project has taken a pragmatic response to reflection then why? Also what would be the repercussions for connection, modelling and doing?

Table 2. Two 'mirror image' types of sustainable development project: holistic and conventional.

These stereotypes are based solely on yes and no answers to the questions.

Question Number	Node		Holistic project		Conventional project	
			Yes (1)	No (0)	Yes (1)	No (0)
1		*Type of focus*	ideal	pragmatic	ideal	pragmatic
2	**Reflection**	*Approach to change*	functional	dysfunctional	functional	dysfunctional
3		*Thinking*	systemic	reductionist	systemic	reductionist
4		*Relating to the world*	anthropological	cosmological	anthropological	cosmological
5	**Connecting**	*Approach to science*	applied	pure	applied	pure
6		*Social interaction*	partnership	control	partnership	control
7		*Indicator methodology*	implicit	explicit	implicit	explicit
8	**Modelling**	*Engagement with stakeholders*	inclusive	exclusive	inclusive	exclusive
9		*Type of indicator*	qualitative	quantitative	qualitative	quantitative
10		*Outcome*	single	diverse	single	diverse
11	**Doing**	*Approach to learning*	command	autonomy	command	autonomy
12		*Project approach*	purposeful	purposive	purposeful	purposive

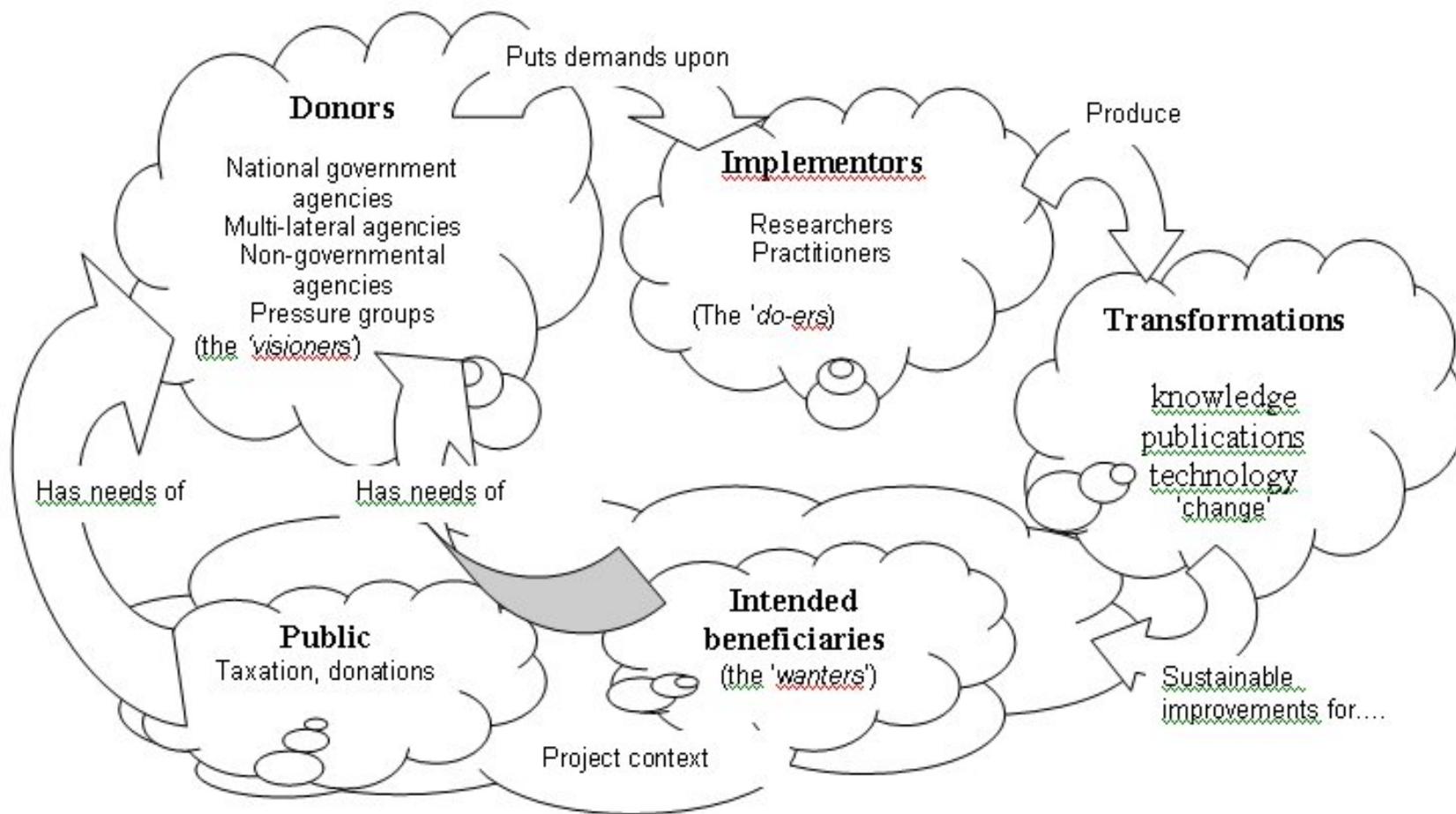Figure 1. The sustainable development project: driving through the 'mess'

Figure 2. The sustainable development project: a planning framework perspective.