



Background Paper:
CREATING OUR FUTURE
Sustainable Development for New Zealand

*Summary of views expressed by participants
during the investigation (2001-2002)*

Office of the
PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT
Te Kaitiaki Taiao a Te Whare Pāremata

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1. Introduction

During the lead up to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in August/September 2002, the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment (PCE) initiated a review of New Zealand's progress in implementing sustainable development. The focus of this review was on *environmental* sustainability, particularly during the ten years following the 'Earth Summit' in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. This culminated in the publication of the PCE's report *Creating Our Future: Sustainable Development for New Zealand* released in August 2002. During the course of this review, the Commissioner's investigating team interviewed individuals and groups across a wide spectrum of society. They spoke with community groups, iwi representatives, businesspeople, professional organisations, academics, the judiciary, central and local government politicians and officials, journalists and environmental groups to explore their perspectives on sustainable development.

Sixty-five people were interviewed during the course of these discussions. Prior to these interviews, all participants were sent a letter that contained seven key questions on sustainability issues (see Appendix 3 in *Creating Our Future* for a copy). Although these questions provided the basic structure for the interviews, the discussions were not restricted to a structured format.

This paper provides a summary of perspectives expressed during the interviews. It is important to emphasise that the opinions that have been identified do not necessarily represent the views of the PCE or his staff. In addition, although the utmost care has been taken during the analysis of these interviews, the PCE does not take responsibility for the accuracy of any statements made by the interviewees.

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2. Views on the concept of sustainable development

2.1 Defining sustainable development

Seven people specifically referred to the ‘Bruntland’ definition of sustainable development, i.e. “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Otherwise, interviewees generally agreed that sustainable development incorporates three key ‘components’: ecological, social and economic. Some thought that these components fit together in a ‘weak sustainability’ way in which they overlap in the middle (see page 34-35 of *Creating our Future*). Others referred to the ‘strong sustainability’ or ‘nested egg’ model, in which the economy is perceived as a subset of society, which in turn is totally constrained by the natural systems of our planet (*ibid.*). One person referred to a five-sided model in which institutions and ethics represent the other two components.

Focus points for definitions of sustainability ranged from health elements (focusing on society and protecting basic sources of environmental health) to more holistic *matauranga*¹ Maori views (focusing on sustainable use of resources rather than absolute protection) to a pure economic view (in which increased growth in GDP was regarded as the primary means for progressing a sustainable society).

The content of many definitions generally included ethical elements. This was reflected in the intergenerational equity aspect that was often referred to. This is founded on the idea that resources should only be used in such a way that will allow future generations to have at least the same opportunities and quality of life that people enjoy today. Several people defined sustainable development as simply a ‘common sense’ approach. There was also reference to spiritual and cultural aspects needing to be present in all components. While some people referred to sustainable development as a process, others disagreed and saw it as a destination that people should work towards.

Several people referred to a ‘needs’ model for sustainability. This recognises the importance of meeting the essential needs within each component of the system. According to this model needs should be distinguished from wants to critically examine the concept of growth. Otherwise, many people saw ‘development’ as denoting change and a progression forwards (although many participants also referred to the limited capacity of the environment to sustain unrestrained social or economic development). Sustainable use (rather than absolute protection or locking up of resources) was seen by many to be a key part of a definition for sustainable development.

People recognised that sustainable development brings together contrasting views relating to the three components, and that there is a need to integrate and reconcile these perspectives in some way.

¹ Traditional knowledge

In the economic component of sustainability, participants commented on the need to:

- maximise economic efficiency
- maximise economic goals without compromising the future
- harmonise economic systems with natural cycles
- recognise humans' dependence on the environment
- manage resources sustainably (instead of 'mining' resources until they are exhausted).
- deal with externalities and decide whether polluters, victims or society as a whole should pay for environmental damage.

Elements of the societal component identified by participants included:

- quality of life
- well-being and community values
- sensitivity to cultural interests
- balancing wants and desires
- the focus on personal environmental impacts
- how the natural and physical environments are affected by humans
- wealth creation as a means to increased living standards and jobs
- integrated planning and management, including in the long term
- equity concerns
- the role of ethics
- the need to follow through with actions.

It was also suggested that values are important to the concept, and these could be environmental, economic, social and/or cultural.

Many participants emphasised the environmental component of sustainable development as the ultimate determinant of sustainability to ensure survival of humans on the planet. The environmental component was also associated with less emphasis on anthropocentrism and more focus on working with other elements of nature to ensure that resources can endure. Some suggested that the precautionary principle needs to be applied while recognising underlying bio-physical systems and the intrinsic values of ecosystems.

2.2 Concerns about definitions of sustainable development

The most common concern raised by participants was the lack of understanding and the complexity in defining the concept of sustainable development. A few people said that a definition needed to be clearer in terms of policy and objectives. One person, however, doubted whether different terminology would make it any easier to explain. There was concern over the range of definitions that are expressed by different people (depending on their position), and the different ways in which people interpret the same definitions. This contributed to some concern about abuse of the definition by those with specific interests, and a need for boundaries to prevent this.

There were also concerns about a lack of integration among all three 'components' of sustainable development and the tendency for some components to be defined in a dominant way. Some people saw the environment dominating unnecessarily so that 'environmental absolutism' could halt development. Others were concerned about the dominance of the economic component, and trading off parts of the ecological

component for short-term social or economic gains. One person saw the need to distinguish between environmentalism (which they defined as absolute protection of the environment with no concern about society and economic systems) and sustainability.

The spatial scale of sustainable development also caused difficulties – should the focus be on sustainable development of a particular community, of New Zealand or of the entire World? Similarly, there were comments about temporal difficulties, given the fact that values change over time. It was suggested that it is sometimes useful to have a ‘vague’ term for all people to agree upon. Nonetheless, some people were uncomfortable with the negative connotations of the word ‘development’ (which implied economic development over sustainability of the environment). One person was concerned about the lack of incorporation of different cultural perspectives in the way sustainable development is often defined. They emphasised the need to include Maori perspectives and the views of all immigrant groups in New Zealand.

Some participants were also concerned that the term had become ‘trendy’ which contributed to its overuse in incorrect circumstances. Thus, one person suggested that sustainable development is valuable as a “rallying call” but it has been overused to a point that it has lost some of its earlier impact and is starting to mean nothing.

2.3 Alternative concepts

Only one alternative term to sustainable development was suggested (although some small variations were also proposed) which was ‘efficient development’. Coming from an economic perspective, this was associated with a need to consider the full costs of development (to avoid high costs while achieving maximum development). Another person suggested that the principles of *rahui*² should be used. One participant suggested that ‘stewardship’ was a useful term, although they acknowledged that some people did not like this.

2.4 Working as a catalyst and raising consciousness

Participants suggested that the recognition of sustainability in New Zealand has primarily been achieved through the enactment of the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA) and its public participation and consultation processes. Several people referred to specific issues or environmental crises as awareness raising events. Other people thought good community relationships and the genetic engineering debate had raised consciousness of sustainability issues.

² Protection of a place or resources by forbidding access or harvest

3 Views on sustainability and what it means to New Zealanders

3.1 The current situation

Only one person thought that New Zealand is doing well at looking after the environment (although that person also acknowledged problems relating to contaminated sites). Otherwise, participants were generally critical of the current situation.

A general sentiment was that New Zealanders do value the environment but they are largely unaware (or “ignorant”) of sustainability issues. There were comments that:

- sustainable development is difficult to understand
- it does not generally feature in public mindsets
- it is problematic because it means different things to different people
- the general public does not consider long-term issues and the need to consider future generations
- the principles of Agenda 21 never really made it on to the public agenda
- the general public does not tend to recognise sustainability issues, even though demands on resources are increasing with their higher expectations of environmental quality and living standards.

Conversely, some participants suggested that a lot of people *do* know about sustainable development but it does not seem relevant to their everyday lives. There were suggestions that sustainable development is regarded as “a load of waffle” by many people because they cannot recognise any “substance” in the term (and that they believe it is more of an intellectual concept).

Some participants, however, argued that the biggest problems are not apathy and ignorance, but that people feel powerless to make any changes or to have a real impact. For example, it was suggested that many people do not know how they can participate in environmental management through the processes of the Resource Management Act 1991.

Several people discussed differences between various age groups in society. They suggested that there is a much more selfish focus among many young people today. They argued that sustainable development is not connected to their lives and that the environment is conceived as something completely separate from their actions. In contrast, they believed that older generations are generally more aware of the importance of “leaving something behind” to future generations. Another participant suggested that older generations simply called sustainable development “common sense”.

There were also comments about the strong focus on economic growth and employment in society. It was suggested that sustainable development is not meaningful because a dominant consumer paradigm is much more heavily promoted. Another person suggested that New Zealand has a luxury of being socially and environmentally sustainable because it is economically well-off. They highlighted that New Zealanders’ lifestyles are being maintained by using resources from other countries to manufacture products for our wants.

Some people referred specifically to the rural sector. There was a comment that responsibility should be “put back” on the people who own the land. Another person suggested that farmers have a natural interest in sustainability because of a desire to pass their business on to future generations. One participant also suggested that there has been an increase in organic food consumption but not many people are specifically interested in food grown in a sustainable way.

On the positive side, some participants highlighted an increasing level of awareness about sustainability issues occurring across a wide range of people in society. It was suggested that there are many people who find sustainability more meaningful than commentators give them credit for. It was also suggested that the current climate is ideal for achieving a proper debate on sustainable development. For example, they commented that there is an increasing interest in environmental ethics.

A few people suggested that tangata whenua tend to be more aware of environmental issues in New Zealand than the general population. One person felt that iwi are generally good at sustainable development and that their wealth of environmental information is now starting to come through in the environmental hearing processes.

Given the proximity to a good environment that many New Zealanders enjoy, it was also suggested that our population has better opportunities to appreciate sustainability issues and to advance technologies that could assist sustainable development.

Although some people welcomed the Government’s response to sustainable development over the years (in terms of legislation such as the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA) and the Hazardous Substances and New Organisms Act 1996), other people criticised the Government’s approach because it has relied too heavily on the RMA.

3.2 Barriers to understanding sustainable development

Many people argued that New Zealanders’ existing attitudes, which are tied up with a culture of consumption, is one of the greatest barriers to getting people to think about and adopt sustainable development. It was suggested that it would be hard to change these attitudes because:

- New Zealanders’ values and their sense of worth are heavily inter-connected with consumerism
- notions of success and happiness are measured by how much ‘wealth’ people have and how much people can afford to consume
- an attitudinal shift is difficult to achieve since people are resistant to change.

It was suggested that, unless there are visible quantified benefits, people do not generally want to pay more for sustainable development. This means there are often no incentives to achieve changes. In addition, it was suggested that big consumers such as the USA influence other countries with their choices. Some participants noted that the ‘West’ needs to reduce its consumption levels to allow enough resources to be used by developing countries, which is a key component of sustainable development.

The next most recognised barrier was a lack of spatial, temporal and material “integration”. It was suggested that people often miss the “big picture” on environmental matters. Insulated by technology and far from the impacts of their lifestyle choices, many people do not realise the environmental effects resulting from their activities. One person also commented that because New Zealand is isolated from the rest of the world New Zealanders do not have a clear picture of global impacts.

Several people also suggested that the belief in a “clean green” myth in New Zealand is problematic. They said this was exacerbated by a lack of good environmental statistics in New Zealand, compared to the amount of social statistics available.

Some participants highlighted problems with the absence of a good definition of sustainable development and the lack of an overall strategy towards its achievement. It was suggested that sustainable development would remain meaningless unless it is tied back to an overall vision.

While there is some growing awareness of sustainable development, it was also noted that awareness alone does not necessarily lead to good practice. One person thought that a feeling of helplessness (of being unable to do anything about environment issues) was a significant barrier that needs to be overcome.

3.3 The way forward for improving understanding

Many participants thought that education would provide the chief means to influence the existing thinking on sustainable development and to enable people (both individually and within communities) to implement the necessary changes. This area is covered in Section 6.

4 Sustainable development initiatives in New Zealand

4.1 Individuals and communities

At an individual and community level, the general perception among participants was that existing implementation of sustainable development initiatives was mediocre. It was suggested that some major changes had been achieved over the last twenty years and that most New Zealanders are aware of, and concerned about, environmental matters. Positive comments were that:

- there has been some good uptake of recycling initiatives
- concepts such as ‘ecological footprints’ are useful educational tools
- farmers are changing their practices because they are now taking a longer-term view and they have a greater sense of personal responsibility for solving environmental problems.

However, there were also criticisms that:

- education for sustainable development is too fragmented and education efforts have not been strong enough to make a fast enough difference
- although implementation at a community level is important, it does not challenge the larger status quo.

There were contrasting views about implementation of sustainable development by local government. One person believed that some local government agencies had adopted sustainable development. In contrast, a couple of participants thought that Regional Councils had failed to deliver on environment management and had a much stronger emphasis on economic growth than environmental sustainability. There was also some suggestion that councils are putting a lot of effort into communicating with the public but their messages are seldom getting through.

4.2 Businesses

It was suggested that the majority of business leaders are now aware of environmental issues but that sustainable development is a “touchy” subject. Some people thought that many business people regard sustainability issues as ethical concerns that are difficult to afford. It was also suggested that most of the businesses that support sustainable development are those that have little impact on resource use (such as energy consumption and waste production). One person commented that successful examples of businesses and sustainable development are not widely known so success stories need to be more publicised.

Several sustainable development initiatives were mentioned. A few people thought that the formation of the New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development was a good change. Triple Bottom Line reporting was also mentioned as a positive initiative for businesses, so long as it is not just used as a marketing tool. Cleaner production was regarded by one participant as difficult to sustain because it needs ongoing support structures. They suggested that it worked well from the shop floor to middle management but that it did not have a significant impact on senior management culture. Another initiative highlighted was the growing use of partnerships, such as the way Ngai Tahu is developing deeds of agreement defining working relationships with a number of businesses.

4.3 National and central government implementation

4.3.1 General comments

There were some positive responses regarding implementation at a national level. These were that:

- since the Earth Summit in 1992 environmental legislation in New Zealand has improved
- the Government’s commitment to sustainable development is now better than in the past
- the political parties are more willing to engage in sustainable development concepts than previously
- there has been some progress with waste management
- the Ministry of Transport is starting to move from a narrow view to a broader perspective with respect to funding allocation in transport
- New Zealand is leading in the percentage of area in protected land
- the requirement under the Local Government Act 1972 for councils to produce a ten-year financial strategy encouraged councils to think beyond election cycles to consider more long-term goals

- there has been increased recognition of sustainable development issues through institutions such as the PCE and the Department of Conservation (DoC) as well as through statutes such as the RMA.

Otherwise, there was a feeling among most participants that there has generally been a lack of implementation and progress with sustainable development in New Zealand. Comments were that:

- there is a lack of political support for implementation
- central government is doing too little, too late
- implementation is piecemeal with mixed results and sustainable development is not well managed
- New Zealand's response to the challenges of sustainable development is considerably less well developed than in other similar OECD countries
- if New Zealand's population were as dense as in European countries the country would be a "pigsty"
- New Zealanders are not good at behaving sustainably but, because we do not have nearby neighbours, others do not notice the effects of what we do
- New Zealand is poor at dealing with natural capital and human and non-human dimensions – including ethical issues.

One person suggested that New Zealand has actually gone backwards in an environmental sense during the last ten years and our performance has simply been 'business as usual'.

Four people criticised a lack of integration with sustainable development efforts. It was suggested that many government agencies are involved in bits of sustainable development with no agreed meaning between them. Officials promoting sustainable development are based in many separate organisations that do not work together. It was argued that activities are therefore isolated and there is often poor communication between government departments. It was suggested that central government does not understand how policies impact "on the ground" and it remains to be seen whether current reforms will take into account a connected form of sustainable development. It was also argued that a "whole of government" approach or mandate is needed because there is a danger of sustainable development being conceived as only a 'green' issue.

It was suggested that the significant public sector changes in the late 1980s and early 1990s would have been a good time to introduce sustainable development, but this opportunity has been lost. One person thought that 15 years of economic restructuring has not worked for environmental issues and that a lot has been lost in the process. Another participant argued that the public sector focus is highly linear and generally fixated on GDP growth. Someone else emphasised that market signals alone are not effective for encouraging sustainable development.

Nonetheless, some people were optimistic about the current situation. They thought that the concept has still not grown beyond a "good idea" but perhaps its time has come. There were comments that:

- New Zealand is still in a good environmental position
- there is still a small population in New Zealand and it has a relatively good supply of natural resources

- New Zealanders remain in the luxurious position of being able to make choices about environment matters.

4.3.2 *The Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA)*

There were a lot of comments on the RMA. Some participants regarded it as a positive form of sustainable development being implemented. They suggested that:

- New Zealand leads the world in many respects with the RMA
- the RMA has been influential in engaging people in thinking about environmental issues
- there has been more focus on sustainable development since the RMA was passed and it has helped to ‘green’ councils, who are now much more environmentally aware.

Other participants suggested that the RMA had been useful from a legislative perspective but that New Zealand is still behind other countries in achieving a broader understanding of sustainable development. There were comments that:

- when the concept of ‘sustainable management’ was first introduced in 1991 it was regarded as ahead of its time. Ten years on, however, it appears to be languishing in terms of broader thinking on the topic
- in the early 1990s there was a feeling that the RMA was New Zealand’s legislative expression of sustainable development. Although this has contributed to effective environmental management over the past ten years there has been a general failure to link this with economic and social considerations
- many people hoped that the RMA would kick start sustainable development. However, although it contributed to changing mindsets about the sustainability of natural resources, it fell short of sustainable development
- although the RMA is good in principle, implementation of the Act by local government has proved difficult.

Many participants were more critical of the RMA. They suggested that:

- larger issues of sustainable development were missed during a period of “over self-congratulations” after the RMA was passed
- it has not measured up in terms of managing water quality and use or in dealing with cumulative effects
- it has not been proactive
- there are big gaps in what it covers, for example the use of ocean resources
- plans prepared under the RMA are too vague and the system is not working well in practice
- local government rules are based on politics and public opinion and research is ignored.

Some people suggested that the majority of criticism of the Act had come from developers but that it is a myth that the RMA is holding development back.

Regarding the Act’s processes, some people suggested that there was too much focus on litigation. With the costs of hearings, one person suggested that investors have decided not to bother with expensive processes and had moved developments

offshore. Several participants believed that participation in the RMA process is too open and that too many people can get involved. It was suggested that increasing use of notification of consent applications made it difficult for businesses that want certainty and quick timeframes under the RMA. In contrast, other participants were concerned about the problems that many people have faced when they have tried to participate and the huge costs for community groups involved.

4.3.3 Government structures

In addition to the comments above (regarding the lack of integration between government agencies) some participants argued that the Ministry for the Environment (MfE) does not have the capacity to provide the necessary leadership on RMA implementation.

4.3.4 Tools

The most commonly mentioned existing tool was Triple Bottom Line reporting. Several people said that it could be useful, but that this will not be enough. They suggested companies still need to define what they are aiming for, what sustainable development means to them and what their priorities are. Another tool was Total Quality Management, which encourages industry to continuously seek improvements in what they are doing. Other tools mentioned were ecological foot printing and ISO certification (although there was also a concern with this only encourages a compliance mentality). One person suggested that efforts to include resource depletion into GDP had not been successful.

5 Barriers to implementation

5.1 Individual and community barriers

Many participants suggested that people's attitudes towards the environment and the concept of sustainable development is a significant barrier. They commented that:

- environmental issues are regarded in negative terms
- people get frightened of the concept of sustainable development
- people have the perception that there are risks that will need to be taken or that they will have to spend more money to achieve sustainable social and environmental benefits.

There was a suggestion that reluctance surrounding sustainable development is linked with the close association of the term to 'greenies'. One person argued there needs to be an appropriate social environment for the concept to be accepted, such as the time when the nuclear-free stance was taken.

As noted previously, a variety of people highlighted problems with a lack of awareness about sustainable development in the community. Many people also highlighted barriers associated with attitudes towards consumerism. Several participants also referred to problems with NIMBY (not in my backyard) attitudes and vested interests as barriers.

Some people suggested that there are barriers with communities resistant to change. To address this, a few people highlighted a need for more public participation. Others

felt that communities were disengaged and it was hard to get communities to participate and be involved in decision-making when there is a lack of trust towards local and central government. One person thought that a significant barrier was a lack of good communications by government agencies that is pitched at the right levels. Another person suggested that people would participate if they were given the right opportunities to be part of developing good ideas for local issues. They also commented that there is a need to recognise that having fun is a fundamental human need and is important.

With regard to education, it was suggested that:

- there is not enough education about sustainable development at any level
- there are not enough resources to include sustainable development in the school curriculum
- there are no check ups on schools to see whether they are implementing environmental education
- linkages are poor between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry for the Environment
- there are problems with universities being commercially driven
- there is a lot of professional training that discourages integrated thinking.

At a local government level, it was suggested that there is a poor understanding of the concept of sustainable development within councils and by people proposing developments. It was also suggested that there is a lack of co-operation among different groups within local councils. One participant noted that local government legislative reforms will not require councils to prepare sustainable development strategies. However, they also suggested that even when strategies are prepared they are frequently not implemented.

One participant argued that long-term intergenerational issues are difficult to get funding for, as local bodies and ratepayers are usually not prepared to fund these. It was suggested that smaller councils in particular have a lack of resources to improve environment performance. A couple of people suggested that the ways rates are taken acts as an impediment because this only gives councils a weak funding base. In addition, councils with large natural resources often have low populations and therefore a low rates base. They argued that without appropriate funding and input from central government they are unable to take large initiatives.

Some participants referred specifically to the primary production sector. They suggested that there are often barriers in farmers' attitudes because of their commitments and concerns about costs. They suggested that the sustainable development concept is tilted towards the environment but farming will always cause environmental effects.

5.2 Businesses

It was suggested that there are many barriers associated with attitudes in the business community, with a narrow focus and unwillingness to take sustainable development on board. There were comments that business people often do inefficient things because that is just "the way things have always been done" and that businesses use output based management styles rather than focusing on longer-term outcomes.

A couple of people discussed Triple Bottom Line reporting. They suggested that, in general, it does not mean much to most businesses. Other participants commented that a key issue for the business sector is survival, so any consideration of sustainable development raises questions of potential constraints on growth. Furthermore, they suggested that small firms, who make up the majority of businesses in New Zealand, do not have the resources or motivation to support sustainable development. However, it was also suggested that business people are not always motivated by money or greater efficiency, but often by values and beliefs.

5.3 National and central government barriers

5.3.1 General comments

The majority of participants referred to barriers at a central government level. A common theme was that there is a need for greater vertical and horizontal integration. They suggested that ‘silo thinking’ in government agencies is a problem, with:

- a lack of integration between the management of the economy, the environment and society
- a lack of dialogue and communication between different agencies
- decision-making fractured and a system that does not reward collaboration
- an absence of holistic thinking in decision-making resulting in a lack of leadership and direction from Government.

It was also suggested that there is a poor understanding of the concept of sustainable development at leadership levels and that the Government has a top-down attitude with policies that do not support sustainable development.

Further criticisms were that:

- there is no underpinning or overall national strategy and a lack of vision and courage
- there is a lack of commitment from central government and a tendency towards *ad hoc* implementation
- sustainable development is tackled in a half-hearted way and gets pushed aside when more immediate priorities take over
- processes do not always work together or even within the same timeframes
- there is a lack of performance measures and measurable goals
- resource pricing is not done properly.

Several participants highlighted problems dealing with long-term and short-term frameworks. They suggested that short-term changes undermine long-term policy commitments and that there is a focus on short-term efficiency rather than long-term sustainability. They also commented that there are contradictions at a political level regarding whether implementation of sustainable development is a regional or national responsibility.

A variety of people were critical of the focus on economic growth and GDP, although they were also critical of arguments that sustainable development would stop economic development. Another participant suggested that sustainable development, as driven from an environment perspective, gives insufficient weight to an economic

perspective. They commented that this could create a risk that one component of sustainable development could consume other elements. Their argument was that economic performance and GDP needed to be improved first, otherwise it would be difficult to deal with societal and economic problems, let alone the environment.

A few people suggested that national environmental agencies are under-funded. The Ministry for the Environment (MfE) and the Energy Efficiency Conservation Authority (EECA) were highlighted in particular. It was suggested that they are weak departmental proponents of sustainable development against strong opponents in the Ministry of Economic Development (MED) and Treasury. Others highlighted a lack of leadership by the MfE as a problem.

Several people commented on barriers related to the science community. One participant suggested that sustainable development is a difficult concept because there is a lack of scientific understanding associated with the term. They also argued that there is insufficient scientific expertise in some agencies compared to people's expectations of that expertise. Another person suggested that New Zealand is without the "technical grunt" in the right places to deal with sustainability issues such as green design. Other comments were that New Zealand lacks research initiatives and that selection of initiatives is poor because the money is not going into research that could further sustainable development.

One person suggested that international covenants and agreements could also be regarded as a barrier. They suggested that New Zealand could be forced to accept the lower environmental standards of other countries as we "sink to the lowest common denominator". They also raised tensions associated with international trade and World Trade Organisation agreements.

5.3.2 The RMA as a barrier

Many people voiced concerns about the RMA. One criticism was that, because of its strong focus on environmental issues, it has had the effect of sidelining some social and economic aspects related to sustainable development. Another concern was that, with its effects-based focus, it does not address sustainable development at a strategic level. There is a total failure in the RMA to deal with cumulative effects. Other comments were that:

- there has been a failure to provide sufficient policy guidance on the Act
- the RMA is still wedded to the old prescriptive approach of the Town and Country Planning Act
- planning is still divided into separate resource areas
- there is a pro-development influence in the wording
- it discounts future generation because it only focuses on their needs, and not their values or wants which we cannot predict
- the methodology of the Act is very complex and the process too adversarial
- long timeframes are involved and the Environment Court is slow
- it has made the Government overly confident that it is acceptable to work with just one tool.

Another suggestion was that, because people have believed that the RMA would provide for sustainable development, they have not thought or acted beyond its limitations.

5.3.3 Government structures as a barrier

Several people suggested that the structure of New Zealand's Government is in itself a barrier to the implementation of sustainable development. This was related to the fragmentation and policy separation built into central government, with so many agencies each with their own mandate, policies and finances. There were also comments that local government has difficulty engaging central government in broader issues.

Many people also criticised the three-year political cycle for preventing central government from committing to a longer-term strategic approach. There was a suggestion that there are "no champions" for sustainable development in the current government structures. Several people also criticised the Ministry for the Environment for becoming "sluggish" with policy work, and were concerned that it had become marginalised as a consequence of aligning with the Treasury model after 1990.

6 The way forward

6.1 Individuals and communities

To progress sustainable development at an individual and community level, there were many comments associated with changing mindsets, developing motivation and providing better education to the public. It was also argued that it is important to provide a vision of what successful sustainable development looks like and to develop a common language on sustainability issues. One person suggested that this could be achieved by having a public debate on sustainability.

With regards to attitudes and mindsets, it was suggested that we need to:

- identify where the environment is in our identity and clarify its importance to us
- connect people to the environment
- rediscover environmental balance
- change the view held, particularly in western consumer countries, that nature is just here to be used by humans
- achieve a cultural shift in the general population to appreciate sustainability issues and to accommodate other views and sets of values (such as those of recent immigrants)
- encourage appreciation of the environment's interconnectedness and acknowledge its fragile nature
- develop better communication
- challenge the concept that growth is always good
- focus on the significance of good health, because healthy people live in healthy environments.

There were also comments that local knowledge should be used wherever possible and that local enthusiasm and ideas should be tapped into while connecting significant issues in the local community with “the bigger picture” of sustainable development. One person suggested that we need to make sure people feel good about sustainable development and to market it better – to make it “fun and easy”.

Linked with this, many participants talked about ways to achieve more motivation on sustainability issues. There were suggestions that we need to:

- enable New Zealanders to take ownership and responsibility for their actions at a community level
- help people to understand the responsibilities that come with living in a clean and green environment
- encourage people to take individual responsibility for making changes in their consumption patterns
- encourage people to go out of their way to make life more pleasant
- work with community groups more
- use incentives, education and funding.

The importance of education was also advocated by many participants. Comments included:

- education gives individuals the information needed to understand how to operate sustainably, while encouraging personal responsibility
- more money needs to be spent on education for all levels and to ensure there is adequate educational material to support the environmental legislation
- by improving people’s education and affluence, it is possible to enable them to have more choices to purchase more sustainable goods.

Methods of environmental education identified by participants included:

- making it part of schools’ core curriculum
- teaching environmental ethics and values to children
- providing more adult education
- using the media to inform citizens
- using stories and teaching genealogy to give people a sense of belonging.

It was also suggested that it is useful to involve schools, and therefore parents, in sustainability initiatives to get ownership from a local community and to help make sustainable development feel personally relevant to people.

In terms of local government, it was suggested that councils need to:

- provide good leadership
- encourage people to get involved and find their own solutions
- deal with local priority issues and solutions at a community level first
- encourage good community participation and consultation
- achieve consistency in how local government agencies implement sustainable development.

Some participants also emphasised the need to consider Maori perspectives to progress sustainable development. They suggested that:

- there is a need for better understanding of Maori culture and ideas to show the potential for alternative ways of thinking
- it is important to acknowledge that many Maori have a significant contribution to make because they are often more close to holistic values
- iwi participation needs to be improved by giving iwi statutory recognition and proper financial support
- it is essential to change an attitude in the general populace that Maori concerns are not important.

One person also suggested that there is a need to draw on feminine energy, as it is more nurturing and grounded in the earth, rather than the masculine energy that has dominated for the last 200 years.

6.2 Businesses

Participants highlighted a variety of ways that businesses could progress sustainable development. While some people suggested that the focus should be on changing attitudes in businesses, others suggested that economic instruments need to be used more widely, with comments that:

- incentives should be used to ensure that non-sustainable methods are paid for by businesses
- many businesses will not participate unless they can financially benefit in some way
- businesses need to be encouraged to internalise environmental costs by introducing better policies that make them responsible for taking care of their own waste
- manufacturers are interested in eliminating waste and unnecessary costs could be identified and avoided in the first place.

It was suggested that leading commercial organisations need to support and lead the sustainable development movement and the Ministry for the Environment could focus on helping industry prepare better codes of practice. Other comments were that:

- the Government could use small-scale grants to help small industries improve their environmental performance, rather than just relying on regulatory means
- the future for small businesses lies in selling into niche markets overseas with demand orientated pricing. Therefore we need to identify which parts of the market we could do well in
- there are solutions based on partnerships with environmentally conscious organisations, and more use of ‘voluntary frugality.’

6.3 National and central government

6.3.1 General comments

A variety of participants suggested that there needs to be a tighter definition of sustainable development at a national level. They thought this could be achieved by legislation, or by developing a yardstick for sustainable development. Several people

also talked about the need to develop strong visions for sustainable development. It was suggested that the Government needs to take a bolder stance. Many people identified the need for strong central leadership, or a strong central advocate supported by other initiatives such as education and sustainable development groups. Some thought that the Prime Minister could provide the necessary leadership to champion sustainable development. Others considered the Ministry for the Environment as a far more proactive leader.

Several people also argued that a co-ordinated approach is needed with integration across Government. They suggested that behavioural changes are needed to overcome “silo thinking” and to promote co-operation among various interests.

There was a call for clear goals and targets to measure New Zealand’s progress with sustainable development indicators. Comments associated with this were that:

- baseline monitoring and sustainable development reporting would provide better linking to issues
- a set of indigenous indicators could be developed using the Waitangi Tribunal process.

One person suggested a move towards a Curitiba type model, with a pool of money from a variety of sources and a central advisory group tasked with coordinating and delivering services.

Some people also highlighted the need for practical examples, suggesting:

- small demonstration projects could be used to show what sustainable development is about
- there is a need to generate interest through on-the-ground projects and to achieve change in little steps instead of big leaps.

The relationship between central and local Government was also discussed, with some people suggesting that there needs to be more coordination and a national framework developed in consultation with others.

Some participants also argued that it is important to foster more research in New Zealand, focusing on:

- environmental carrying capacity
- environmental technologies
- better accounting systems to know the full cost of resource use activities
- better management of the tertiary education system to build environmentally aware intellectual capital
- becoming a knowledge rich country and supporting innovation to build a high technology economy.

Some people focused more on the economic aspects of sustainable development, with diverse suggestions such as:

- the role of the market economy needs to be tempered with good environmental outcomes

- conventional economics needs to be rethought
- economic benefits from good sustainable development could act as a driver to encourage more sustainable behaviour
- there is a need to structure social and economic activities so that sustainable development activities are small and easy
- there is a need for a tax regime for businesses rewarding sustainable behaviour
- the balance of payments could be adjusted to accurately reflect the high price of imported energy sources upon which our current economy relies
- there is a need to move from the ‘mining our resources’ mentality to better, innovative and opportunistic ways to manage resources
- to be sustainable the economy must grow, and stable inflation helps to foster sustainability.

The role of technology was also discussed in a generally positive way. It was suggested that new technologies could be developed to drive growth that is less environmentally damaging. Some people, however, remarked that New Zealand is too small for a technology market, so the long-term solution could be to improve the value of our products while becoming less reliant on imported fuel. Others suggested that technologically driven solutions may not be appropriate in the long term.

Additional comments were that:

- to support development, sustainability requires the right infrastructure, particularly roads and telecommunications
- overseas projects funded by the New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID) had to undergo auditing for their impacts on gender and the environment. Similar assessments need to be carried out on regional development projects within New Zealand
- we should model sustainability on ecosystems that are self sufficient in energy. On this basis New Zealand should be self sufficient in terms of its ecological footprint
- there is a need for new social policies regarding poverty and economic insecurity, with more consideration given to social justice and equity issues.

6.3.2 The role of the RMA

Several people discussed the role of the RMA. Most of these believed that the Act does have a role to play in our future path towards sustainable development. There were comments that:

- we need to ‘sell’ the RMA more to the public
- the solution to problems with the RMA is not in amending the Act, but in encouraging better practice by local government
- central government should adequately support the RMA with advice, education, and preparing more national policy statements under it
- the Government needs to explain the participation process so that the public no longer feels powerless
- there is a need for increased use of non-adversarial methods where people can discuss issues, such as at pre-hearing meetings

- it provides the framework within which economic development takes place, so we need to move away from the presumption that environmental protection means stopping growth
- there is a need for a regulator for RMA mediation outcomes to make sure they are in fact environmentally acceptable outcomes.

Some participants, however, thought that the RMA and its processes need some redesigning. Several of these thought that the existing Act could be used as a platform to come up with a better model of RMA type legislation.

6.3.3 Government structures

The general sentiment among many participants was that changes in government structures are necessary to move sustainability forward. There were criticisms that New Zealand's system promotes patch protection whereas there needs to be more integration. One person commented that it is important to determine whether the system itself is right, rather than take a case-by-case approach to sustainability issues.

Suggestions for improvements were:

- making links between annual strategic plans of government agencies
- checking the mandate of all agencies in legislation and amending them to take into account sustainable development
- working more with the Local Government Act to make sustainable development part of their purpose
- developing a Ministry for Sustainable Development or National Council on Sustainable Development to coordinate, lead and provide a multi-sector approach
- setting up a centralised body to act as an Environmental Protection Agency
- developing better understanding between the Ministry for the Environment and the Ministry of Economic Development
- adapting the role of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment to monitor, review and comment on progress with sustainable development principles
- making the Auditor General responsible for the environment as well as financial issues
- enabling the Ministry of Education to support and promote sustainable development
- allocating the establishment and monitoring of sustainable development indicators to an independent agency such as Statistics New Zealand, to enable all sustainable development information to be brought together under one agency to analyse, help inform and engage the public.

Only one person explicitly commented that they considered the current system to be adequate to achieve sustainable development. They believed that it was a matter of will to get sustainable development implemented by using a national strategy.

6.4 Tools for the future

Participants highlighted a variety of tools that could be used to promote sustainability. The majority of these were forms of economic instruments. They focused on:

- taxing wastes and 'bads' rather than 'goods' (such as income)

- developing national environmental tax mechanisms or eco taxes
- using tradable permits
- regulating some prices.

Some people suggested that a mix of economic and other instruments (such as education) are needed to ensure a sustainable approach. Other participants thought that environmental indicators need to be developed as an alternative to GDP, such as the Genuine Progress Indicator and ‘quality of life’ indicators.

Other tools identified were:

- using the market to lead by ‘branding’ sustainable development
- making more use of eco labelling
- putting sustainable development into industry codes of practice
- promoting architecture and design for making and showing the connections around sustainable development
- using Triple Bottom Line reporting as a means to secure accountability
- developing environmental accounting.

One person, however, condemned environmental accounting as destined to fail, because of the difficulty of placing a dollar value on everything in the environment. They also commented that GDP calculations do not factor in the cost of depletion and other negative effects.

6.5 Critical issues

Concern was expressed over several critical issues. These were:

- negative perceptions about genetic modification, which could offer some opportunities for sustainable development
- water distribution, especially in areas like Canterbury
- the impact of dairying on land and water use
- unresolved Treaty issues
- property rights
- future energy sources
- climate change.

7 Positive overseas examples

A variety of participants contrasted sustainable development in New Zealand with other countries. Several people suggested that New Zealanders rate poorly in comparison to other areas such as Scandinavia and the Netherlands. It was suggested that sustainable development is less significant in New Zealand than other countries because the pressures on resources are not as great here (due to our smaller population). One person made the comment that the 'Western' world is pursuing sustainable development but ignoring some of the harder questions such as equitable distribution of resources to developing countries.

7.1 Scandinavia and Europe

A few people complemented the Scandinavian efforts in implementing sustainable development. In general, they thought that countries in this region understood the concept of sustainable development and are serious about implementing it.

For example, one noted that Sweden has put a lot of money into sustainable development and they have high pricing structures relating to environmental goods and services. They suggested that New Zealand is 10 to 15 years behind in some sustainable development respects, such as aiming to be fossil fuel free. On the other hand, they also thought that Sweden is behind New Zealand in some respects because parts of its environment are already badly damaged from hundreds of years of development and cross boundary pollution.

Denmark was highlighted as a country that has a good degree of community involvement with an informed, educated and participative population. They achieved this by providing on-going education and having a statutory agency responsible for seeking public opinions on important issues. In contrast, this participant thought that the type of consultation done in New Zealand is not very useful because people are not funded for long enough to really grapple with the issues and work them through.

Other participants commented on broader European efforts to implement sustainable development. The European voluntary rating system for sustainability and energy efficiency in buildings was highlighted as a good way to persuade people that sustainability concepts are important. It was suggested that New Zealand should learn from the European Union example where standards are set (for example, for water quality) with assistance given to local communities to achieve those standards.

Germany was also highlighted, with one person suggesting that they have a much greater consciousness of the sustainability problem than New Zealanders.

The Netherlands was also discussed. One participant referred to the Dutch Government's environmental plan that has been attempting to translate sustainable development into concrete/specific terms since the late 1980s. The plan outlines the need for more fundamental, systemic changes that incorporate values as well as economic aspirations. Dutch 'green planning' is based on targets and has produced some good results, but it does not address underlying systemic issues. It puts emphasis on internalising externalities and the need to think in terms of ecological cycles rather than just unrestrained economic growth and development.

In relation to implementing sustainable development, the Dutch have translated generic targets into specific sector targets and allowed individual groups (such as industry) to determine how they are going to meet those targets on semi-voluntary and cost-effective bases. The Dutch Ministry for the Environment coordinates sustainable development activities, which requires a good database to work from to assess progress and meet targets.

7.2 Canada

Two people talked about Canada. They suggested that the Canadian approach has been to rely 80% on achieving correct market signals and 20% through regulation. The Canadian model, with a Commissioner for Sustainable Development, was also welcomed. This Commissioner is empowered to require departments to prepare sustainable development plans and have them audited.

One participant also highlighted the work undertaken by Canadians on the Genuine Progress Indicator to illustrate this indicator on a 'radar' diagram. This is beneficial because it does not require a high level of expertise to interpret the results. This makes it easier for people to understand the issues and to engage in the decision-making process.