Revealing values in a complex environmental program: a scaling up of values-based indicators

Dimity Podger [a], Elona Hoover [a, b], Gemma Burford [a, b], Tomas Hak [c], Marie K. Harder [a, b, *]

[a] *Values & Sustainability Research Group, University of Brighton, Brighton, BN2 4GJ, United Kingdom*
[b] *Department of Environmental Science & Engineering, Fudan University, 220 Handan Rd., Shanghai, 200433, PR China*
[c] *Charles University Environment Center, José Martího 2/407, 16200, Prague 6, Czech Republic*

ABSTRACT

Ethical values such as trust, compassion and equality are core to the way many pro-environmental organizations function, whether or not they claim these are key to their success. Mainstream sustainability indicators do not, however, explicitly acknowledge this values dimension. In this paper we describe a replicable approach that has successfully been used to develop values-based indicators and assessment tools within an emancipatory research paradigm, in an EU-funded project characterized by close partnership between civil society organizations (CSOs) and university-based research groups. We outline the methodology used to develop values-based indicators, and then demonstrate how the resulting indicators were used systematically to evaluate a national program of youth leadership within a large Mexican civil society organization promoting reforestation. We reflect on this illustrative example in relation to wider conversations about values and sustainability.

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1. Introduction

In the time since the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, a field of endeavor has developed that focuses on measuring the effectiveness of international, national, regional and community sustainability initiatives through a wide range of indicators (e.g. UN Division for Sustainable Development, 1995; Bell and Morse, 2008; UN Division for Sustainable Development, 1996; UN Division for Sustainable Development, 2000; Reid et al., 2006; Meadows, 1998; Hardi and Zdan, 1997). The myriad of indicator sets developed have tended to provide measures of environmental, social and economic phenomena, and more recently measures of wellbeing, quality of life, and happiness (Meadows, 1998; Fraser et al., 2006; Stiglitz et al., 2009; European Union, 2015).

It is recognized that each indicator set implicitly embodies a particular set of *values* — a term that can be understood both in the sense of people's judgements about what is important in life (i.e. what they value), and in the sense of ethical principles or standards that guide human behaviour (Oxford English Dictionary, 2013). The

values embedded in those indicator sets generally reflect those of the evaluating body, and through their measurement and policy utilization, can inadvertently reinforce, encourage and even direct particular sustainability outcomes (Reid et al., 2006, p. 14), while overlooking (and potentially marginalizing) others (McCool and Stankey, 2004; Gudmundsson, 2003; Rosenström, 2006; Rametsteiner et al., 2011). However, these mainstream indicator initiatives do not explicitly explore the role that the ethical values of the actively engaged individuals, communities or institutions play in efforts to address sustainability issues — values such as compassion, integrity, justice and respect (Burford et al., 2013a), which can be applied on the one hand to interpersonal relationships and on the other to human interactions with the wider community of life. This is despite the emphasis that various sustainable development documents, particularly those of the United Nations around the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, place on the importance of addressing those values embedded in social, economic and political affairs that have 'put the world on an "unsustainable" path' (UNESCO, 1997, p. 8). Both the Earth Charter (ECI Secretariat, 2010; Corcoran et al., 2005) and the United Nations Millennium Declaration (United Nations General Assembly, 2000) have explicitly called for an 'ethical

* Corresponding author. Values & Sustainability Research Group, University of Brighton, Brighton, BN2 4GJ, United Kingdom. Tel.: +44 1273644707.
E-mail address: M.K.Harder@brighton.ac.uk (M.K. Harder).

framework' for sustainability, and specified particular values that could be included in it.

There is a common view in sustainability discourses that it is crucial for everyone to "get our thinking right: to see the interrelations among these problems [of sustainable development] and recognize the fundamental need to develop a new perspective rooted in the values of sustainability" (UNESCO, 1997; see also Tilbury and Wortman, 2004; Crompton et al., 2010; De Leo, 2012; Walker, 2006; Fuad-Luke, 2009). One perspective, espoused by authors with socially critical orientations, frames social injustice, inequality and inequity as root causes of unsustainable societies and argues that these problems must be addressed as a matter of urgency in order to ensure a better quality of life for everyone without destroying the natural environment (Robottom and Hart, 1993; Tilbury et al., 2005). In parallel, it has been argued by ecological philosopher David Abrams (1996) that a root cause of unsustainability is the widespread human failure to connect deeply with the 'more-than-human' community, and to engage with its members as perceiving subjects rather than as objects for human manipulation. We do not take up a position, in this paper, about the respective merits of these arguments or the relationship(s) between them. Rather, we point out that within both arguments is a recognition of the roles that values can play in acting as obstacles, or as motivators, to the task of societal and organizational transformation towards sustainability. There are others who suggest that in order to make progress beyond a narrow focus on specific environmental or social problems, it is necessary to shift attention to worldviews, which frame what is or is not seen as important at individual, organizational, institutional and societal levels (Fien et al., 2001; Sterling and Wals, 2007; Sterling, 2001), and our approach may well have overlap. However, our position is that before trying to analyze complex connections between different domains of values implicit in sustainability, organizations and wider society, the more specific topic of making values based achievements more tangible and measurable within organizations deserves full attention.

In this paper, we describe a research project which was co-designed with four civil society organizations (CSOs) who work to promote and embed awareness of sustainability concepts – a broad form of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). They shared a common view that consideration of ethical values was a necessary (even if not sufficient) precondition for their work, and expressed a common frustration at their inability to articulate the outcomes that mattered most to them, much less to monitor and evaluate their progress in relation to those core values.

To address this CSO-based issue, researchers from two universities co-initiated the EU-funded ESDinds[1] research project (2009–2011) with a primary research question focused on whether it was possible to develop indicators and assessment tools to evaluate achievements related to core ethical/spiritual values within CSOs promoting ESD (RQ1). It is important to note that this research did not presuppose or set out to reveal links between the ethical/spiritual values of the CSOs and their ESD achievements, but only to 'make tangible' any values-linked dimensions of their (various) achievements, so that the chain of ethical values throughout their work could itself be made tangible, find measures, and be monitored. When this was achieved, with the approach described in the first part of this paper, a secondary research question emerged (RQ2): would the set of ethical values-based indicators designed with the four initial partner CSOs be relevant, comprehensible, and useful for evaluation in new organizations that had not been involved in developing them? This was not initially expected, but was surprisingly borne out and demonstrated in several such field studies (Burford et al., 2013b; Harder et al., 2014a; Podger et al., 2013). In light of this unexpected finding of some transferability of the ESDinds set of 'indicators', a third research question emerged (RQ3): could the approach be scaled up, for example, for use in a large organization which had multi-layered activities at several levels, e.g. national, regional and community levels?

In this paper we present a study of that third question, which shows that the ESDinds approach was indeed able to be scaled up and used for a multi-level organization/project. That result suggested that more care should be taken to document and present the initial process which produced such a useful and novel set of transferable indicators, as their origin and genesis might be key to deeper understandings needed for later considerations. We thus begin our paper by documenting a description of how the main ESDinds 'indicator' set was developed to answer RQ1, including its theoretical grounding, research design and methodology. We briefly summarize the findings for RQ2 from the small-scale field studies (Burford et al., 2013a, 2013b; Harder et al., 2014a; Podger et al., 2013) and then go on to show how the approach was scaled up for systematic values-based evaluation of a national environmental program in Mexico, thus addressing the third research question outlined above (RQ3), and reflect on the implications of this work for wider use in sustainability arenas.

2. Theoretical grounding

Before proceeding to describe the specifics of the research design and methodology, this section outlines the theoretical grounding of the work, including its positioning in relation to recent literature on the definition, assessment and measurement of sustainability and the development of 'soft' indicators. We also describe the overall epistemological positioning of the paper within a paradigm of emancipatory research, and the consequences for our understanding of terms such as 'validity' and 'rigour'.

2.1. Defining and measuring sustainability: an impossible task?

In the last decade, progress has been made with sustainable development indicators to capture more 'soft' characteristics, and to build on those concepts for values-based achievements.

The term 'sustainable development' is most famously defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Burford et al., 2013b). The primary indicator of 'development' itself was taken as GDP (gross domestic product), a measure of monetary flow within a national economy (Bell and Morse, 2011). In parallel, an assessment of 'sustainability', in relation to resource management, was attained by comparing one indicator – current resource yield – with an assumed benchmark of 'maximum sustainable yield' (Grainger, 2012).

In the intervening decades, however, it has increasingly been recognized that attempts to define sustainability can never be value-neutral (Lele and Norgaard, 1996). The importance of social justice as an element of sustainability, and the 'three-pillar' model or 'triple bottom line' emphasizing environmental, economic and social dimensions, is now widely accepted (Pope et al., 2004); yet many authors have also referred to a less tangible 'fourth pillar' or 'missing dimension' of sustainability (Burford et al., 2013a; Dahl, 2012; Littig and Griessler, 2005), variously characterized as