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*Sustainability and the Local
Scale: Squaring the Peg?*

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Sustainability and the Local Scale: Squaring the Peg?

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Abstract

This paper examines the causes for the failure by the Region of Waterloo (Ontario, Canada) to meet its objectives on sustainability. The analysis shows that in such macro matters as sustainability, scale does indeed matter, as do numerous other factors including the degree of trust in inter-relations, perceptions and convictions, conflicting interests and competing agendas, the manner in which discourse occurs on policy formation and implementation, and ideology as expressed through partisan politics. This paper contributes to the discourse on sustainability in two ways. It proposes an evolutionary, multi-dimensional analytical framework to study sustainable development. The framework is then applied to a case study to underline the political implications of operationalizing sustainable development.

Keywords: Agenda 21, Governance, Institutions, Policy Implementation, Scales, Sustainability

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Sustainability and the Local Scale: Squaring the Peg?

1. Introduction

Agenda 21, released as the official document of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and adopted by 178 national governments, is a comprehensive plan of action to attain sustainable development at the global, national, and local scales. The action is to be initiated by governments and “major groups” in every area in which humans impact the environment. Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 is devoted entirely to the central role to be played by local authorities. Many national governments and supra-national governance mechanisms (e.g., the European Union, North American Free Trade Agreement), international bodies (e.g., the United Nations, the International Chamber of Commerce, the World Trade Organization), and international forums and conventions have since issued policy statements on “sustainable development” [1]. Sustainability, particularly its environmental dimension, has become a central focus of national economic policy in the Netherlands, Switzerland, Denmark, Sweden, and Germany [2]. At the local (subnational) scale, numerous regional municipal governments have issued policy statements alluding to sustainable development principles. Parallel with these developments, there has been a discernable shift to “local governance” from national government [3] as the regime through which the direction of local economic development is contested and determined.

These concurrent sets of development warrant research into the local governance implications of “sustainable development”, particularly where local governments have made specific policy commitments to sustainability. Such is the case with the Region of Waterloo, which in 1991 made a formal commitment to achieve a “Sustainable Regional Community”, defined as a community “working in harmony with the environment and striving to provide its citizens with safe, prosperous communities

through proactive policies and appropriate economic, social and physical growth” [4]. This paper investigates the failure by the Regional Municipality of Waterloo to fulfill this commitment. A general discussion of scale is followed by a more specific discussion of scales of governance, systems and subsystems, and levels of inter-relation to outline the conceptual framework for this study. The analysis shows that in such macro matters as sustainability, scale does indeed matter, as do numerous other factors including the degree of trust in inter-relations, perceptions and convictions, conflicting interests and competing agendas, the manner in which discourse occurs on policy formation and implementation, and ideology as expressed through partisan politics.

2. Dynamics and Importance of Scale

Brenner (1998) asserts that spatial scales can no longer be conceived as “pre-given” or “natural” arenas of social interaction. Spatial scales are at once socially constructed and politically contested. Scale may be geographical for empirical and historical research; organizational for socio-economic and political research; strategic for socio-political transformation; discursive in ideological struggles for hegemonic control; and constructed through struggles of actors, movements, and institutions to influence locational structure, territorial extension, and qualitative organization of these scales [5]. Thus, geographical scales are produced, contested, and transformed through an immense range of socio-political and discursive processes, strategies, and struggles that cannot be derived from any single encompassing dynamic. Further, there are “multi-scalar configurations of territorial organization within, upon, and through which each round of capital circulation is successfully territorialized, deterritorialized,

and reterritorialized [6]. Thus the role, importance, and position of a geographical scale are determined through the dynamics of sociospatial transformation [7]

A deterritorialization / reterritorialization (with corresponding scaling and re-scaling) process is certainly discernable at a global scale. Efforts to form trade blocs such as NAFTA, the EU, and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation are said to be aimed at instituting a new regime of accumulation replacing the post World War II Keynesian welfare state [8]. At the national scale, the national economy is being undermined by internationalization coupled with a “hollowing out” process through which national state functions are delegated upward to supra-regional or international bodies, downward to regional or local states, or outward to private interests or relatively autonomous cross-national alliances among local metropolitan or regional states with complementary interests [9]. In the Canadian context, the strengthening of the regulatory role of such quasi-government institutions as the International Council on Local Environmental Initiative (global), the Commission of Environmental Cooperation (continental), the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (national), and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (provincial) in the governance of socio-economic and ecological spaces is a “regulatory” product of this “hollowing out” process.

These quasi-government institutions have assumed increased administrative powers while politically the federal and provincial governments continue to hold sway. The deterritorialization / reterritorialization process may also explain the drive, in some Canadian provinces at least, toward the amalgamation of local governments through abolishing two-tier, area municipality / regional municipality local governments to one-tier regional municipalities in order to “annihilate space” and re-institute surplus

value accumulation through a new mode of regulation. It may be argued further that the deterritorialization / reterritorialization process was set in motion as a result of the overaccumulation crises of the post-Keynesian era necessitating restructuring or reterritorializing of previously territorialized (and relatively fixed) economic spaces. At the structural level, the trend in most industrialized countries to de-nationalize essential industries for efficiency and profitability certainly supports this argument. Capital movement is not unrestricted, however, as geographic scales are produced, contested, and transformed through an immense and diverse range of socio-political and discursive processes, strategies and struggles [10], coupled with locally specific elements to define territorial distinctions.

Thus defined, territorial distinction is perhaps best illuminated by contrasting Sweden's innovative, interventionist, and apparently successful approach to environmental protection with Canada's ineffective reliance on voluntary initiatives and programmes to address global warming resulting in a 15 percent increase in Canada's contribution to greenhouse gas emissions since [11]. In Sweden, government commitment to attain (environmental) sustainability has resulted in institutionalization of learning from ecologically-oriented fields of study and research. Footprint calculation, full cost pricing of goods and services by removing subsidies and implementing environmental tax incentives, state-sponsored adoption of innovative technologies to increase economic and ecological efficiency in the production and consumption systems, and reallocation of tax revenues to safeguard social and ecological well-being has resulted in emergence of new industrial activity and increased employment.

The relative success by Sweden to ecologically modernize the economy may be attributed to an interventionist corporate state (long a specific feature of governance in the Nordic countries of Europe) functioning in a “negotiated economy” [12] based on mutual trust at different levels of inter-relation, and driven by a commitment to maintain well being in social, economic, and ecological systems. Analyses of policy outcomes on sustainability must thus account for the significance of and the relationships between scales, systems, and levels as well as the specific context in which these relationships occur.

3. Scales, Systems, Levels, and Context Specificity

Sociospatial transformation dynamics are manifested as “deeply empowering-disempowering mechanisms [producing] a nested set of related and interpenetrated spatial scales that define the arena of struggle” where conflicts are resolved [13]. It follows that fundamental change such that would be required for sustainability should revolve around scale issues and the associated dynamics of power that restructure and rearticulate scale over time. “Scale” as articulated by Brenner (1998) and Swyngedouw (1997) at once captures *systems* (e.g., social, economic, political) and *scales* of governance. Scale and systems articulations, while invaluable in highlighting the multiple meanings associated with and the importance of scale, are not sufficiently developed for empirically based research into the dynamics of policy development and outcomes at a given “scale” such as that undertaken for this research. Given the centrality of interactive and discursive processes in determining scale, this research focused on the quality of inter-relations at the individual, organizational/institutional, and societal *levels* as indicators of “institutional cohesiveness” around attaining sustainability.

The conceptual framework was based on working definitions of levels, scales, and systems (table 1). The multi-level, multi-scale, multi-system framework was used to examine the evolution of policy making and policy outcomes at the local (Regional Municipality) scale of governance. Context specific causes for failure to implement policy objectives on sustainable development in the Regional Municipality of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada were investigated in light of the recent focus on the role of “the local”.

Table 1 about here

Context specific socio-political, economic, and discursive processes based on trust are said to generate a significant degree of “institutional thickness” (table 2), laying the foundation for “local embeddedness” and facilitating “self-reproducing” economic growth in certain geographical regions [14]. Context specificity may also manifest itself as path dependency, cumulative causation, and lock-in [15]. *Path dependency* may be described as “dependence on initial conditions” [16], or a recurring emergence of initial conditions, resulting in relative permanency [17] of particular habits / customs and institutional forms. *Cumulative causation* is closely associated with the better-known economic concept, the “multiplier effect”. Cumulative causation is thus defined as the unfolding of events connected with a change in the economy [18] due to the appearance of a new enterprise which may be private, e.g., a factory, or public, e.g., a government institution or a public-private partnership. *Lock-in* and its relationship with path dependency and cumulative causation is best demonstrated in an example from Liebowitz and Margolis (1995:210):

The archetypal case of path dependence has been, of course, the configuration of the typewriter keyboard. ...the standard "QWERTY" keyboard arrangement

is dramatically inferior to an arrangement offered by August Dvorak, but we are locked into the inferior arrangement by a coordination failure: No one trains on the Dvorak keyboard because Dvorak machines are hard to find, and Dvorak machines are hard to find because no one trains on Dvorak keyboards. The process is said to be path dependent in that the timing of the adoption of QWERTY, and not its efficiency, explains its survival [19].

To illustrate, Hodgson (1999) makes reference to studies on the economies of former Eastern Bloc that show that post- planned economy capitalist development in those countries consists of path-dependent and historically contingent processes leading, not to convergence to a presumed unique ‘Western’ model, but to historically located and specific varieties of capitalism in each country. Similarly, the Asia Pacific economies did not make their giant leaps in development and growth by following a “free market” model – the state in each case played a quite central role [20]. Context specific conditions mould capitalism while evolving capital relations mould the specifics of the context. “Local” knowledge is not transferable in its entirety, even if all knowledge were readily codifiable and communicable. The patterns of learning and economic development will always be varied and spatially dispersed despite the enormous advancements in communication techniques and technologies [21].

Context specificity has important implications for transitions to a preferred socio-economic state including a sustainable one. Such transitions can be expected to involve a set of connected changes, which interact with one another but take place in several different areas, such as technology, the economy, institutions, behaviour, culture, ecology and belief systems [22]. Put differently, transition to sustainable development occurs through multiple levels of inter-relation, scales of governance,

and systems. Policy work in “real-world situations” to effect transitions needs to be based on appreciation of place-specific peculiarities and dangers of importing ideas that have worked well in one place and time into another place and time [23].

Considerable weight must be attached to “historical contingency” [24] that underlies the institutional functionality within a particular historical, social, political and cultural context. Research into political economies at a regional scale thus needs to be based on recognition of the peculiarities of particular places and institutional contexts as well as supra-local political contexts [25]. As such, regional analysis needs to utilize a multi-level, multi-scale, multi-system, and integrated framework to account for the specificities of the context and the significant supra-regional political, socio-economic, and ecological factors that collectively regulate what occurs at the local scale.

The research focused on assessing “institutional cohesiveness”, contrasted to “institutional thickness” (table 2) and “social capital” as follows. The scale for institutional thickness is sub-national or local while social capital can refer to cohesion at both the sub-national and national scales. The application for institutional thickness and social capital is mainly relational, allowing comparisons between “like” locales. In contrast, institutional cohesiveness goes beyond being concerned with measurable increases in “innovative capacity” and “competitiveness”, focusing instead on how socio-economic and political phenomena relating to societal transitions unfold. Cohesiveness is not synonymous with “cohesion”. Cohesiveness is process-oriented while cohesion may be perceived as a relatively fixed state. Institutional cohesiveness thus offers the potential for developing a multi-scale, multi-system framework sensitive to the dynamics of change.

Table 2 about here

As such, institutional cohesiveness is multi-level, multi-scale, multi-system, and strategic. Clearly, the scale and scope of analysis in studying institutional cohesiveness has to be carefully defined given the complexity and the multitude of causal relations that exist at the local (subnational), national, international (relations between nationally constituted networks), transnational (networks passing through national boundaries), and global (networks covering the globe as a whole) scales. Assessing institutional cohesiveness requires widened scope of inquiry and focusing on the dynamics of the "common purpose" which may be action or inaction on such issues as attaining sustainability, elimination of world poverty, addressing race and gender issues, or the prevention of terrorism. Specifically, this research examined the degree of trust in inter-relations at the individual, organizational/institutional, and societal levels at the local (Regional Municipality) scale of governance. The Regional Municipality was viewed as a composite subsystem made of parts from other subsystems such as the political, economic, ecological, and social subsystem (table 1).

4. Research Design and Fieldwork

The research was undertaken to examine the causes for the failure by the Regional Municipality of Waterloo to implement its policy on instituting "sustainable regional communities" within the Region [26]. The fieldwork focused on collecting individual "stories" or narratives from the main institutional actors / key informers about the subsystem under study. The subsystem under study was delineated as "policy development and outcome on sustainability at a local scale". In designing the interview questions, efforts were made to move away from specific policy items, e.g., transportation, welfare/income, housing, and "environmental" projects such as water

and energy conservation or remediation programmes, in order to focus on the causes that determine success or failure of such policies. The questions were partly focused on establishing what constituted some of the main barriers to attaining sustainability and the key informants' views on how the barriers could be overcome or accounted for in development and implementation of policy to attain sustainability.

The key informants were drawn from formal institutions. The term "institution" is used very loosely here and refers to societal constructions and structures characterized by a significant degree of "permanency". These include governments (municipal, provincial, and federal), large firms, industrial associations, business networks, trade unions, chambers of commerce, farmers associations, community / citizens' forums and networks, universities, financial institutions, religious institutions, and mass media [27]. It is important to underline the significance of "key informant" status of the interviewees in this research. Key informants do not "represent" a larger sample or population. In research work based on "Grounded Theory" [28], background research is carried out on potential interviewees to determine their status as key informants. The background research for this project consisted of reviewing secondary data such as official publications and newspaper reports to identify authors and/or key characters or players in the subsystem. The key informant status of potential interviewees was finalized by soliciting the opinions of key informants / key players about the status of other key informants / key players.

The significance of the information gathered through the interviews was thus not solely determined by how many interviewees made the same set of observations or alluded to the same phenomena. In the analysis of the field notes reported below, the opinion of one key informant is sometimes given the same degree of attention and

weight as an opinion by a group of key informants. The comments by the key informants were treated as informed and/or expert opinion. It is also important to note that no attempt was made to analyze interviewee responses based on gender, occupation, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, or ideological and religious beliefs. As crucial as these factors are in shaping individual opinions and actions in relation to sustainable development, and thus meriting dedicated research projects of their own, they were examined in this research. The key informants were drawn from two “domains”: the Waterloo Region and “External”, the latter comprising supra-local formal institutions. The codes used to identify key informant comments are based on the keys in the table below. For example the code “EX-14-PO-I” refers to a key informant EXternal to the Region of Waterloo, who was the 14th key informant to be interviewed, and had a main institutional association with an Industrial Peak Organization. Similarly, “EX-3-FG” refers to a key informant from outside the Region, associated with the federal government, and the third interviewee to be interviewed for this project.

Jurisdiction and Institution Keys

<u>Jurisdiction</u>	<u>Institution Type</u>	
RW = Waterloo EX = External to the Region	BF = Business Firm CG = Community / Citizens Group FG = Federal Government FI = Financial Institution IN = Information Network LI = Learning Institution MM = Mass Media	PG = Provincial Government PO-A = Peak Organization – Agriculture PO-I = Peak Organization – Industry PO-R = Peak Organization – Religious QG = Quasi-Government RG = Regional Government TU = Trade Union

The interviews took place between December 2000 and July 2001. Interviews were no longer attempted when it was felt that no new data were being collected and that new data would only add, in a minor way, to the many variations of major patterns [29].

QSR Nudist Vivo text analysis software was used to analyze the transcribed

interviews in light of the literature and the analysis of secondary data to generate the findings reported in this paper.

5. Findings

Conceptualizations of “institutional thickness” [30] and “negotiated economies” [31], and Jessop’s (1997) articulations on the levels of embeddedness point to the centrality of trust in inter-relations as an instrumental factor in easing the tensions that arise from the contradictions inherent in the capitalist systems of production and consumption. According to these authors, trust is the defining feature of discourses to resolve, albeit temporarily, conflicting interests and competing agendas and to serve the common good [32]. This research was carried out to underline the links between the degree of trust in inter-relations and the failure to attain social, economic, and ecological sustainability at the regional municipality (local) scale of governance. The analysis of the empirical data reveals that trust forms or diminishes at different levels based on perception and convictions, conflicting interests and competing agendas, discourse characteristics, and partisan politics. The data were also analyzed to assess trust at each level of inter-relation. The results are reported in the following sections.

5.1 Perceptions of Sustainability

There were wide-ranging, sometimes contradictory, interpretations of sustainable development. A significant number of interviewees (approximately 30%) viewed “development” as synonymous with “growth” while some others objected to using development in conjunction with “sustainable”. For example, a business interviewee saw sustainable development as “business development, economic development, economic growth, taking care of the environmental issues, and minimizing

environmental impacts” (EX-39-PO-I) while another offered “constant growth” (EX-15-PO-I) as an interpretation. To gain additional insight, interviewees were asked to think of words, expressions, or metaphors that best captured what sustainable development meant. The left-hand column in table 3 provides a synthesis of these responses. Apart from the general objection to the word “development”, interviewees had significant differences in focus, use of metaphors to describe problems underlined by sustainable development, and the main issues to be resolved in order to attain sustainable development.

Interviewees raised “Integration” of social, economic, and ecological considerations as the most important focus for sustainable development initiatives (16% percent), followed by “Quality of Life” (11%), “Concern for Future Generations” (10%), “Limits to Growth” (10%), and the “Ecosystem Approach” (10%). The responses also varied in scale and specificity. For example, adopting a systemic perspective an interviewee commented, “we have not inherited the planet, we are borrowing it from our children” (EX-31-RG) while another interviewee with a focus on employment and social issues stated, “you can’t have a sustainable community with everyone working for McDonald’s” (EX-19-TU). Yet others commented on the need to examine the infrastructure, the configuration of the economy, and the financial means in attempts to move toward nature conservation, reducing the “Ecological Footprint”, and moving toward sustainability.

Table 3 about here

Some expressed frustration with numerous reports and communiqués from public and private institutions on the importance of committing to sustainable development while offering little or no incentive to fulfill this commitment. The frustration came mainly

from the key informants at the federal / national scale of governance. Pointing to the lack of progress toward attaining sustainable development mandates by private and public institutions one external participant complained,

a lot people participated in sustainable development roundtables [and] we have a library of reports. ... You have to translate sustainability, operationalize the idea. But we just write these reports and papers, and piles and piles of paper, I think it's a waste of time and paper. ... Personally, every time I receive something through e-mail on 'sustainable development', I press the delete button. It's a catch phrase (EX-3-FG).

Another notable observation about the responses is the emphasis by the Region's key informants on scalar issues such as the appropriateness of the "Configuration of the Infrastructure" and the availability of the "Physical and Financial Means" in attaining sustainability. Neither of these issues was raised by the External key informants. In contrast, higher emphasis was placed on the "Quality of Life" by the Region's interviewees than by the External interviewees, indicating perhaps that well being issues such as Quality of Life are more intimately felt or immediate at the local scale than at the provincial and national scales of governance. In contrast, only the External interviewees criticized government and non-government entities for failing to translate words into concrete action, address "Social Justice" issues, and initiate societal "Change" toward sustainability. One may deduce that at higher scales of governance, e.g., provincial or federal, the problem of unsustainability is perhaps more likely to be linked to the structure of the economy and its institutions than at the local scale.

Having underlined for the interviewees the differences of opinion about what constituted sustainability the interviewees were then asked to comment on why there were varied perceptions of sustainability. The theme emerging from the analysis of the responses seemed best captured by “misplaced convictions”, discussed in the next section.

5.2 Misplaced Convictions

One interviewee, a theologian, pointed to the Christian tradition as the main source for the dichotomy between human economic activity and the environment stating, “in general, when you’re looking at the Christian tradition there is the whole idea that the world is a backdrop for life and the only important thing is humans and human life – everything is there for our use and our domination” (EX-2-LI). This view is in sharp contrast to the oriental spiritual traditions or the native or the aboriginal spiritual traditions where the problem of human over nature does not seem to be so prevalent. The theologian also made reference to the “Mother Theresa syndrome” which he viewed (in effect) as working to maintain the current socially unjust socio-political structures responsible for poverty. Helping the poor without asking the “large” questions may be attributed to a fear of being labelled or branded by the proponents of the status quo who operate according to a different set of convictions. Fear of being labelled also affects the policy making process.

Reference was made to an internal poll taken at a national institution responsible for economic development in developing countries. The poll revealed that the economists working for the institution publicly promoted the institution’s official position on the benefits and the inevitability of globalization while privately “almost none of them

believed in these positions – they couldn't say this on record for fear of criticism and ridicule..." (RW-50-LI).

Reference was also made to the widespread belief that the well being of the economy always has to come first:

...to the Chamber [of Commerce] members, the idea of sustainable development is nice when the economy is good. .. As soon as the economy goes down, then the business community will not care too much about the environment or sustainable development (RW-34-IN).

High quality of life was said to be directly linked to "sustained economic growth" (RW-34-IN). One Regional official complained that there was no strategy in place to redevelop brownfields through providing relocation incentives to incoming firms. The Regional government also came under attack for towing the line on the current belief in the efficacy of the private sector and the efficiency of the market by subordinating other concerns to economic growth (RW-41-LI).

Further illumination was provided by a Regional official who made reference to the development of a low-income housing project, funded by the province:

We consulted with the school of architecture students and faculty and developed a model for community-based housing that apparently appealed to more than the low-income people. Because we were so successful, the construction industry lobbyists complained that they were suffering from unfair, subsidized competition. Under the new provincial government, our funding was withdrawn and the project was shelved. That to me is pretty unsustainable (RW-46-RG).

Obsession with economic growth thus seems to override other policy making concerns. Convictions, misplaced or not, form a range of conflicting interests and competing agendas often characterized by uneven political weight. The next section highlights some of the main points of contention.

5.3 Conflicting Interests and Competing Agendas

Numerous interviewees complained about a lack of understanding and/or recognition of the diverse range of interests represented by special lobbies and interest groups. Conflicting interests, most interviewees suggested, were often caused by incompatible or competing agendas. One community activist related that he and his ENGO are painted as radical when they put pressure on business firms about environmental issues while no one seems to pay attention to the aggressively pro growth local Chamber of Commerce (RW-34-IN). Similarly, industry peak organizations are “basically industrial lobbyists. ... You cannot really rely on them in addressing sustainability issues” (EX-3-FG). This polarized environment was seen as undermining collaborations and reaching consensus on policy issues. A trade union official related:

When you are a labour person sitting on a committee with nine business people, you can see the conflicts. They would like to see us privatize the garbage collection services, for example, because three of them work for environmental clean up companies... They are not sitting on City Council and they are not voting on it but as a committee they have the power to make recommendations for policy (EX-19-TU).

Part of finding out how conflicts around sustainability were being resolved was to understand the “pecking order” among the various social and political groupings examined for this research. The participants were asked to name the most important institutions that acted as “movers and shakers” in attaining sustainable development. “Government” was said to be the most important agent for (or obstacle to) change for sustainability followed by quasi-government institutions, the private sector, learning institutions, and E/NGOs. Mass media was brought up by a few interviewees as an institution not doing enough for changing people’s attitudes toward sustainability and often acting like a barrier to change (RW-41-LI). Key informants from government, E/NGOs, and trade unions pointed to the role of trade unions as agents for positive societal change. Trade union and learning institution key informants selected government as the most important agent of change while government key informants emphasized the importance of the private sector, second only to government. Interviewees from the private sector picked out government as the most important agent of change, followed by the private sector, and E/NGOs and learning institutions. Involving the private sector in environmental management, some interviewees argued, while perhaps politically motivated, was practical because of the private sector’s “real life” experience. This latter view was questioned for overlooking the “steering” role of special interests and conflicting agendas in partnerships and collaborative arrangements. A federal official suggested industry associations and business interests “exist, in the main, to obstruct” (EX-3-FG) and opted instead for collaborative arrangements between E/NGOs and governments to address sustainability issues. According to one interviewee, to ensure that goals are attained government has to alternate between “policy with a stick [and] policy with a carrot”. The regulation of industrial activity (the stick) discourages deviation while reduced property or other

taxes (the carrot) encourage adopting new modes of behaviour (EX-14-PO-I).

Government at all scales “should just take a facilitating role” by making information and funding available to E/NGOs, “to empower them to build capacity and awareness around sustainability for all other stakeholders” (EX-13-QG). The effectiveness of strategic alliances does however depend on transparency in the decision-making process and the manner in which discourse occurs in policy development and implementation. Interviewee comments on these issues are examined in the next section.

5.4 Discourse in Policy Development and Implementation

Success or failure to develop and implement policy at the regional or local level largely depends on how well government at these scales works with other institutions and entities. Working well, however, does not come without a price:

If you have the best plan in the world but nobody is willing to work with you, there is not much chance of success. So, in the process ...[of] developing an official plan, we have to provide a basis for cooperation that I think maybe waters down what needs to be done. We compromise because otherwise we won't get to the point of an acceptable policy document (RW-43-RG).

The regional government official also pointed out that watering down principles to reach consensus sometimes can lead to misunderstanding and potential conflicts among the stakeholders during the implementation process, an issue explored in the previous section. A related flaw in consensus building exercises is misrepresentation through participation. Participants who do not adhere to the final outcome of consensus-based consultation processes are sometimes listed as subscribers to the

outcome on the basis of the initial intent to participate. As a result, adversaries could be presented as “supporting things they do not support” (EX-19-TU).

The adversarial approach of the Ontario provincial government was cited as a major area of concern by a trade union official and a religious peak organization member.

Under the current political regime in Ontario, discourse on social issues and transparency of political positions have been superseded by discriminatory politics: “a women’s shelter that receives money from the provincial government would be reluctant to criticize the government because its funding may be cut” (EX-19-TU). A learning institution interviewee expressed concern that the Ontario government is actively involved in punishing, through reducing or abolishing funds, groups that spend significant amounts of their government-provided funds on campaigning against government policy. At the firm level, internalization of adversarialism produces work environments not conducive to discourse on complex, fundamental issues such as sustainability (EX-19-TU).

Downloading and amalgamation initiated by the Ontario provincial government were underlined as having a significant impact on the quality of discourse between the public and the government. The current political climate was said to encourage the exclusion of certain stakeholders such as trade unions while affording disproportionately higher weight to private sector interests. One interviewee observed:

It’s funny that on everyone’s list trade unions are always at the bottom. They are dismissed because of the political climate. ... There are very few collaborations with trade unions [in Ontario] compared to, say, in Germany....(RW-41-LI).

Some interviewees felt that the workings of the market needed to be brought under more stringent control as the market economy encourages short-term, profit centred strategies, compounded with an acute lack of awareness about sustainability, are often detrimental to social and ecological well being. From a private sector perspective,

There's so much going on that when you prioritize, the sustainability stuff just falls off from the bottom of the list of things to do. One thing that comes up when businesses are considering whether to launch environmental or social initiatives is that these initiatives might actually put them at a competitive disadvantage (EX-1-FI).

Lack of awareness is not limited to the private sector, however. To illustrate, only 63% of the key informants from the Waterloo Region were aware of the Region's Official Plan. Two Senior Officials were aware of the Official Plan but did not know of the commitment to creating "sustainable regional communities". Such lack of awareness is likely to adversely affect the policy-making and policy implementation processes. Lack of awareness, decreased transparency in the decision making process, and the partisan Ontario provincial government's quest for political hegemony were underlined by numerous interviewees as having significant implications for "institutional inter-relations", a theme explored further in the following section.

5.5 Institutional Inter-relations and Partisan Politics

Interviewees from government and quasi-government institutions, trade unions, industry, learning institutions, and citizens groups pointed to the recent disruptions in the workings of long-established governance mechanisms, the impacts on institutional inter-relations, and their implications for the Region's commitment to sustainability.

An industry peak organization interviewee complained of a dismantling of relations between his organization and the current government of Ontario (EX-15-PO-I) while a provincial government key informant related:

We used to facilitate ‘institutional inter-relations’ until the new government came in. Our aim was to try and intensify these inter-relations through local workshops with people from different organizations and institutions by trying to bring everybody together and trying to create networks. We could provide a minimum of financial support. We used to have funding for ... developing partnerships and strengthening networks. In 1995, I believe with the change of the provincial government, it all of a sudden stopped. ...As field officers we [lost] all credibility with businesses we were supposed to lead (EX-18-PG).

Collaborative arrangements involving firms, trade unions, and government agencies to increase workplace health and safety and to buffer changes in the labour market were also adversely affected by the change of provincial government:

If [workers] were going to get laid off, we’d give them some tools so they could go on to other workplaces... [But,] then all of a sudden the political climate changed. The province pulled out of the relationship, the [federal government] questioned it, and the business representatives basically said we don’t need this (RW-53-TU).

Exasperated, a federal government official rhetorically asked, “In Toronto a thousand people die every year because of bad air quality. So, what do we need as evidence? Still the federal government is trying to play volleyball with the province” (EX-3-FG). The reason for this seemingly irresponsible course of action was given by a quasi-government official as the inability or unwillingness of politicians to think in

terms other than electoral campaigns and retaining office or not viewing sustainability as a long term necessity (EX-13-QG). Failure to achieve stated policy goals was said to alienate those committed to sustainability:

We rally people around for nine years and in the tenth year we still have not made significant strides around the Uniroyal problem and the proliferation of box stores (RW-38-CG),

or,

we do exercises like ‘Imagine Waterloo’ and plan for the next 5 to 10 years while we watch the disparity between the rich and the poor increase in the community and compared to other places (RW-49-CG).

These failures result in part from inadequate institutional support for policy implementation (RW-41-LI). Some suggested that there had been a regression in development toward sustainability in the Region:

We now have soup kitchens as a permanent entity within the community... soup kitchens are now an ‘institution’. There are families that live in church basements and eat food from the food banks and that’s how they get by now. It’s not very sustainable, is it?” (RW-46-RG).

At the same time, over the last 10 years the Region’s economy has been moving toward high tech, high capital, high paying industry with a more polarized population as a direct result. The polarization was said to be occurring because in line with the dominant macro economic thinking, the infrastructure of the Region was being reorganized to provide services to high income families and individuals. With the arrival of more high tech companies,

we'll give developers our prime land to build houses for the dot.com entrepreneurs. We cannot lose sight of the fact that the low income people like cafeteria workers who serve these firms also have social and housing needs (RW-46-RG).

What emerges from these observations is that the local in this case is an extension of the supra-local as far as fundamental, macro issues are concerned. The Region seems to have adopted the national model of economic development while suffering from similar adverse socio-ecological consequences. Regional specificities and particularities, e.g., locally unique ways of conducting business or engaging the community, were perhaps not as easily discernible or pronounced as had been expected.

It is also apparent that Region has been seriously scarred by provincial government's determination since 1995 to redefine the mode of regulation at the local scale by tightening funding arrangements and restructuring government functions through amalgamation [33]. Interviewee comments were analyzed to gain insight into the implications of these changes for the quality of inter-relations at different levels. The results of this analysis are reported in the next section.

5.6 Levels of Inter-relation

A "sustainable regime of accumulation" needs to be based on linking economic development to simultaneously resolving "problems of unemployment, environmental sustainability, and competitiveness" [34]. Crucial to this process of change is to radically revise the regulatory framework of state policies on public expenditure and tax and benefit systems [35] and a more active role by national governments. The

authors readily recognize that there will continue to exist tensions between the emerging, locally governed, economic regions and supranational authorities. Part of the challenge in operationalizing sustainable development is to understand the complex inter-relations that underpin the tensions at different scales.

Using the field data, the tensions identified by Hudson and Weaver (1997) were explored through Jessop's (1997) three levels of "embedded" social organization. These levels were "social embeddedness" of interpersonal relations, "institutional embeddedness" of inter-organizational relations, and "societal embeddedness" of functionally differentiated institutional orders" [36]. The dynamics that constitute a more or less cohesive set of inter-relations based on trust occur at different scales of governance. The scale of governance for the analysis of embeddedness that follows is local and centred on the Region of Waterloo.

5.6.1 Social Embeddedness

There were not many direct comments on trust among individuals, indicating perhaps that trust at the individual level was not as important as trust at higher (institutional / organizations and societal) levels. Commenting broadly on the role of individuals one interviewee observed that collaboration on issues of sustainability requires commitment from "the mayor, the business leaders, and champions in business organizations and government institutions who have the vision and the ability to do things on the ground" (EX-14-PO-I). A significant number of interviewees believed that individuals could play important roles as champions despite low levels of social and institutional embeddedness and meddling by partisan politicians.

Conflicting interests, once entrenched, effectively undermine social and institutional embeddedness:

[My E/NGO] to some extent ...been painted ...as obstructionist or difficult to deal with. ... Some of these characterizations are extreme and describe us as criminal in a number of situations. ... We are painted as enemies in the community... (EX-29-CG).

Behavioural change in individuals toward sustainability was said to be “very difficult” to accomplish because there were inadequate structures and inappropriate institutionalized norms to accommodate and nurture such change (EX-6-QG). The issue of trust was more discernible in interviewee comments on institutional and societal inter-relations. These are explored next.

5.6.2 Institutional Embeddedness

Asked how successful the efforts had been to promote local / regional sustainability, a federal institution interviewee responded: “We haven’t gone outside of the department”. Elsewhere during the interview the same interviewee stated categorically, “really, we don’t do a lot of the stuff at the regional level, we tend to do things at the federal level”. The failure to promote sustainability nationally was attributed to a three-tier [37] system of government, which discouraged collaboration on account of “turf” protection and caused jurisdictional tensions (EX-4-FG). During one interview, the interviewee asked for and was provided with a broad outline of what sustainable development entailed [38]. After some thinking, the interviewee said:

You know, I am just, I hadn't thought before about the idea that we should be looking for 'opportunities' [to pursue sustainability]...the whole idea blows my mind. We are so busy attending to our core business. To do sustainability stuff, we need a staff of 50 people and I don't think that is what we do (EX-1-FI).

This major financial institution did not have criteria for assessing the sustainability implications of the massive funds it releases for development and investment projects worldwide. Furthermore,

The public sector [should be responsible for sustainable development since] that is what they do, they do things that benefit everybody more than an individual or even an institution can. So I think that the public sector has to coordinate some of these initiatives (EX-1-FI).

The interviewee did not specify the means through which the public sector could fulfill this function, however. Many other interviewees also indicated that isolated commitment to change for sustainability by organizations, institutions, or regions although necessary was not sufficient. A trade union official observed: "the critical thing... is going to be the collective authority of these entities, people's authorities and institutions, that's what we have to fix" (EX-16-TU).

However, operational autonomy of business associations and industrial sectors was also underlined as a possible explanation for the absence of a coordinated effort to effect sustainability initiatives (EX-3-FI). Given the enormity, complexity, interconnectedness, and interdependencies that characterize such issues as air pollution, much of the understanding, direction, coordination, and execution has to originate from multiple institutions at higher scales. However, sustainable

development seems even less manageable at higher levels and scales given the general absence of checks and balances that characterizes free trade and globalization. Some of these themes are explored further in the next section.

5.6.3 Societal Embeddedness

The importance of interconnections, as in: “You can’t just do environmental stuff, you can’t just do economics stuff, you have to understand the interconnections between these systems, ... we really are integrally connected” (RW-40-QG), enormity of problems, as in: “It takes a lot to fix the air quality in Toronto” (EX-3-FG), and the need for collective action, as in: “Nobody can pursue sustainability in a vacuum” (RW-37-RG), capture the flavour of the sentiments expressed during the interviews in response to questions on what interviewees perceived as the main problem in relation to sustainability and how best it could be overcome.

Interconnectedness was brought up by numerous interviewees as a phenomenon often overlooked by decision makers and activists at all scales in efforts to move toward sustainability. One interviewee argued that the local perspective had to be placed within a spectrum of governance scales to ensure that the betterment of one region is not at the expense of another part of the whole system and, “to consider yourself a sustainable community without caring about that which lies outside your area just isn’t sustainable” (EX-2-LI). Attaining local sustainability is an almost impossible task not least because of the absence of sustainability or commitment to work toward sustainability in the neighbouring municipalities and in the local, provincial, and federal political structures (EX-4-FG).

Many major concerns clearly lie beyond the reach of the single or two-tier municipal government:

Income distribution in the Region... increased homelessness, increased need for food banks... we shouldn't need these ...arrangements to deal with real social issues like poverty. Poverty is a macroeconomic matter and as such has to be addressed by provincial and federal governments (RW-46-RG).

At the same time, increased autonomy for regional municipalities allows for more effective response to issues of sustainability at the local scale. But there should be a stronger link between regional municipalities and the federal government because the federal government has the final authority (EX-17-QG). One regional official eloquently summed up the complex interplay between scale, development policy, politics, and sustainability as follows:

Internal strife within institutions such as ours, competition between area municipalities themselves and between them and the Regional government puts up barriers for having this big broad discussion about what kind of economic development we want for all of southern Ontario, say. ...I mean the concept of sustainable development is that there is different scales, one is at a kind of a local municipal / regional and then you've got to look at it from the ... provincial and federal [scales]. So, depending on what issue you want to address or the role you want to play, you have to think about the scale. The direction of what needs to be done has to come from higher [provincial and federal] levels with Regions translating it in local terms to follow the same general direction... As it stands, local scale politics are interfering with the ability to make decisions on sustainability (RW-36-RG).

Another interviewee added,

It is necessary to have a marriage between the bottom-up and top-down approaches [because] you are never going to have total empowerment or control to do the things you want to do... We have to have the support of the federal and provincial governments, ...we have to have champions in every sector, and we have to have expertise here to do what we want to do (RW-40-QG).

The question is not whether or not a community is or should be sustainable within its geographic boundaries:

We should look at southern Ontario [and how it] depends on products and resources from outside its regional limits... [then] we can look at lifestyle issues and see that we are moving away from [sustainability] rather than towards it (RW-35-QG).

Attaining sustainable development at the local scale was said to be “just dreaming on the small scale instead of the big scale” (RW-50-LI). In practical terms, however,

a small local group can play a big role at the local scale which may seem pretty insignificant in the larger scheme of things. But we know that we probably have more influence on the local level than on the provincial and federal levels... (RW-55-PO-R).

Sustainable development, in other words, does not mechanically start at one scale and end at another because it is a multi-scale challenge. Sustainability cannot occur within one subsystem or arena, e.g., economic and not others, i.e., social, ecological, political, and so forth because it is a multi-system and integrated challenge. Finally,

sustainability cannot occur at one level of inter-relation, e.g., individual, to the exclusion of other levels, i.e., institutional and societal, for individuals not only constitute institutional and societal orders but also are simultaneously shaped by them. The next section explores the implications of the above findings for policy development and implementation.

6. Concluding Remarks

There is widespread recognition, at an intellectual level at least, of the interconnectedness and interdependence of social, economic, and ecological (sub)systems. The failure by organizations and institutions to reflect interconnectedness and interdependence in cohesive sets of inter-relations is largely due to a belief of religious proportions in an economic system that overlooks or downplays the ecological imperative and most root causes of social and economic inequity. The political persistence to stay the current productivist trajectory for the economic system, likely to strengthen existing or generate new barriers to attaining sustainability, is a topic worth researching in its own merit. The central focus for this paper has been to provide insights as to the causes for the failure to attain sustainability at a regional municipality scale.

Uneven distribution of political power in favour of business interests has made it difficult to form lasting and equitable collaborative arrangements to address sustainability objectives at the local scale. Most interviewees recognized that sustainable development had potentially enormous implications at all levels of inter-relation and scales of governance. The interviewees were also clear about the significant role they expected governments play. Governments were referred to as the main change agent, facilitator, or leader in attaining sustainable development. The

focus by the key informants on the role of government led to analyzing interviewee comments on discourse in policy development and implementation.

Differing perceptions of sustainability, convictions (misplaced or not), and the resultant conflicting interests and competing agendas create a volatile environment for consensus making to attain sustainable development. The approach to consensus making was said to be abusive to the under-represented in some cases and more generally based on a “watering down” of sustainability principles. The election of a neo-liberal government in Ontario in 1995 and the subsequent weakening of social democratic institutional arrangements seem to have deepened the socio-political polarization at the provincial and local scales, undermining discursive mechanisms built over many years by a consortium of conventionally conflicting stakeholders. Downloading and amalgamation, imposed by the provincial government and accompanied with reduced or “targeted” funding, i.e., funding that could be allocated based on political desirability, have exacerbated the tensions within and between regional municipalities and between regional municipalities and the provincial government.

Aside from beliefs, perceptions, convictions, and social and political positioning individuals are also influenced by institutional settings. Individual creativity and initiative to effect change is often checked by institutional rigidity closely tied to a socially, economically, and ecologically unsustainable regime of accumulation. The tensions between conflicting interests and competing agendas, exacerbated by an ideologically charged provincial government in Ontario since 1995, have adversely affected “trust” in inter-relations at different levels. The analysis of the interview data in light of Jessop’s (1997) “levels of embeddedness” reveals that the issue of trust is

of particular concern at the organizational/institutional and societal levels of embeddedness. At the organizational/institutional level, mistrust is particularly apparent in comments by federal government officials on the strained relations with the provinces. Mistrust is also apparent in comments by E/NGOs on the private sector. The most “disembedded” sector seems to be the private sector which for the most part appears to view social and environmental responsibility as added, often voluntary, tasks.

Following Fox (1996), this research was conducted on the premise that institutional cohesiveness around attaining sustainability could indeed be “engineered” to a large extent through government action. This premise opens up a whole new arena of possibilities for change-making at the individual, organizational/institutional, and societal levels through formal policy formulation, implementation, and enforcement [39]. The premise also calls for learning from earlier work on public policy development and problems of implementation, notably by Mazmanian and Sabatier (1981, 1983) Sabatier and Mazmanian (1983), and Sabatier (1986, 1999) [40], and underlines the significance of “transition management” [41] as the policy framework thought which to effect societal change in the direction of sustainability. The Dutch government, albeit with an exclusively environmental focus, has adopted transition management as formal policy development framework on recognition that governments can, and indeed should, engineer societal change through institutionalizing ecologically sound behaviour in all manner of socio-economic activity. Engineering societal change has to be based on as in-depth as possible an understanding of the social and institutional contexts and in full recognition of the interplay between the different scales of governance.

Managing the federal government's commitment to sustainable development is difficult in part because of strained relations between federal government departments, the federal and provincial governments, and the provincial and municipal governments. To work directly with regional municipalities, the federal government has increasingly relied on quasi-government organizations. FCM represents more than added institutional capacity and is viewed by many as a "strategic institution". Because of its strategic orientation, FCM manages to maintain strong links with regional municipalities and pursue environmental initiatives at the regional level despite the tendency by the federal and other levels of government to reduce funding on environmental protection when the economy is under performing. It has to be noted that part of FCM's success lies in being endowed with leading individuals driven by conviction and an agenda for change, constituting uniquely strong internal cohesion within that institution.

The key informant views on who the "movers and shakers" were in attaining sustainability seem to indicate that even in the era of "self-regulation" and "voluntary" codes of conduct, informed business commentators continue to see a major role for governments as agents of change, contradicting the stereotypical business wisdom that the days of governments as agents of change are over. Quasi-government organization key informants also selected government as the most important agent of change, followed by the private sector and learning institutions. The key informant views on who the most important actors are point to the potential for the formation of strategic alliances on sustainability.

For example, with the private sector viewing government as the main agent of change, and government viewing the private sector as the most important non-government

change agent, the “rational” outcome of this mutual recognition should be to form alliances to address common issues or shared concerns. Such alliances would need to be significantly different from the current modes of “partnership”, predominantly a one-way arrangement to “assist” industry to act responsibly. In Canada new alliances to meet environmental [42] objectives are being formed through such quasi-government organizations as the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) at the national scale, and the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) at a global scale. Much of the facilitation role traditionally played by the federal government is now delegated to FCM which works directly with municipalities, in effect bypassing the provincial governments. In a sense, the existence of and actions by FCM confirm Jessop’s (1997, 1999) assertion that a “hollowing out” process is taking place at the nation-state level in terms of functions and responsibilities but not in terms of governance and exercise of power.

In broad terms, regional specificities do not appear to influence matters of sustainability. It seems that for a locale to exert influence on events to which it is subjected or to affect the direction of macro events at the local scale, a certain socio-economic and political critical mass is required. In a Canadian context this critical mass may have match the proportions of a province, and an economically important one at that. The federal government in Canada continues to govern and exert control by working through formal state institutions and quasi-government institutions such as FCM. The findings from this research suggest that there continues to exist a pivotal role for national and provincial governments to steer the course of economic development and effect change through policy. The findings also demonstrate that attaining sustainability is not a simple matter of government intervention and the “right” mix of policy instruments. It is rather a question of how trust is instituted in

inter-relations to form the foundation for a gestalt societal change in the direction of sustainability.

Table 1. Levels, Scales, and Systems

Levels of inter-relation ¹	<p>Social: Among individuals at large based on interpersonal interdependence where many actors are involved.</p> <p>Organizational / Institutional: Within and among organizations to secure the internal cohesion and adaptability of individual organizations, respectively, and to make compatible respective operational unities and independence with <i>de facto</i> material and social interdependence on other organizations.</p> <p>Societal: Among operationally autonomous (or closed) functional systems each with its own autopoietic³ codes, programmes, institutional logics and interests in self-reproduction.</p>
Scales of governance ²	Local (subnational), national, international (between nationally constituted, functionally differentiated institutional orders), transnational (passing through national boundaries), and global (covering the globe as a whole).
Systems	The whole (Earth-based) system consists of numerous (sub)systems such as social, economic, political, and ecological. Systems may be composite and made up parts from two or more subsystems, e.g., socio-political or socio-economic.

¹ Adapted from Jessop (1997)

² Adapted from Mann, M. (1996). "Neither nation-state nor globalism." *Environment and Planning A* 28: 1960-1964 and Jessop (1997).

³ Jessop (1997:102) defines "autopoiesis" as a condition of radical autonomy secured through self-organization when a system defines its own boundaries relative to its environment, develops its own operational code, implements its own programmes, reproduces its own elements in a closed circuit and obeys its own laws of motion.

Table 2. Institutional Thickness

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a plethora of institutions of different kinds including firms, financial institutions, local chambers of commerce, training agencies, trade associations, local authorities, development agencies, innovation centres, clerical bodies, unions, government agencies providing premises, land, and infrastructure, business service organizations, and marketing boards. All or some of these institutions provide a basis for the growth of particular local practices and collective representations. • high levels of interaction among the institutions in a local area. The institutions involved are actively engaged and conscious of each other, displaying high levels of contact, cooperation, and information interchange ultimately leading to "a degree of isomorphism". • sharply defined structures of domination and/or patterns of coalition resulting in the collective representation of what are normally sectional and individual interests and serving to socialize costs or to control rogue behaviour. • awareness of involvement in a common enterprise manifested in "no more than a loosely defined script" although more formal agendas reinforced by other sources of identity, most especially various forms of socio-cultural identification, are possible.
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Source: Amin and Thrift (1994)

Table 3. What Should be the Main Focus of Sustainability?

Focus *	External (%)	Region of Waterloo (%)	TOTAL (%)
Integration	9	7	16
Quality of Life	3	8	11
Future Generations	3	7	10
Limits to Growth	3	7	10
Ecosystem Approach	7	3	10
Nature Conservation	4	5	9
Configuration of Infrastructure	-	7	7
Balancing Priorities	4	3	7
Ecological Footprint	2	4	6
Physical and Financial Means	-	4	4
Words vs. Action	4	-	4
Change	4	-	4
Social Justice	2	-	2
TOTAL (%)	45	55	100

* The foci identified here were extracted from the interviewee responses to a specific question on defining sustainable development. Responses to other questions that might have contained these foci were not searched for the key terms contained in this table

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31. See, for example, Amin and Thomas (1996); Hausner, Jessop, and Nielsen (1993); Nielsen and Pedersen (1993); Jessop (1997); and, Jones (1999).
32. The "common good" may be maintaining economic prosperity, instituting a negotiated economy, or attaining sustainable development in some larger sense.

33. In 1996, the provincial government downloaded greater responsibility onto municipalities for the provision of services. Public transit, roads and bridges, parks, recreation, income redistribution programmes, the “workfare” programme, public health, and social housing became the responsibility of municipalities while the province assumed additional responsibility for education.
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