Ethics and Sustainability in Local Government

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Synonyms
Accountability; Ethics; Governance; Integrity; Local governments; Municipalities; Resilience; Sustainability; Sustainable development

Definition
Ethics and sustainability are inseparable and integral to maintaining sustainable communities, and local governments have an obligation to track and report outcomes related to ethics and integrity in the sustainability plans.

Introduction
By design, sustainability is an attempt of organizations to recognize and address the social, economic, environmental, and governance issues in strategic planning. Ethics may be intentionally included in the sustainability plan or be a by-product of a deliberate sustainability strategy. Reid (2009) believed sustainability to be an ethical framework (p. 29). The climate change, social inequalities, increased poverty levels, income gap, lack of access to health care, inadequate housing, and energy crisis are among some the most relevant issues facing communities and local governments. Given the lack of national programs addressing climate change, a broken tax system that disfavors urban areas, failing infrastructure, and absence of a comprehensive domestic energy policy, local governments are taking a very aggressive and proactive approach to become self-sustained and sustainable. Sustainability is at the core of the cities’ service delivery, leadership, and community improvement. Saha (2009) conceptualized the sustainable development as “a policy paradigm.” A system change and a new paradigm are needed for an actual implementation of sustainability within local governments.

Ethics and sustainability and ethics of sustainability are directly related. The ICMA’s (2017) Code of Ethics requires its members to uphold the highest standards of conduct and integrity in providing services at the local government level, where the role of administrators is to serve the public and the interest of all the people all the time. Ethical responsibilities of local government administrators include the ability to plan ethically and with integrity. Poor planning is unethical and can lead to disastrous consequences. Over 600 years ago, Ibn Khaldun (1406, 1969), in his work The Muqaddimah: An introduction to history, warned of dire consequences for the
inhabitants of the poorly planned towns and discussed the importance of air and water quality in consideration of town planning. The standard views of sustainability planning at the local level of authority are challenged continuously, re-evaluated, revisited, and reinvented.

Whether the imperative is rooted in morality, religion, social justice, or environmental ethics, the local government’s sustainability planning activities are consistent with the notion of concerns over the finite nature of resources and the proper stewardship over the earth. Zaidi (1981) rejected the idea of a maximization of benefits from natural resources exploitation as unjust and argued for full consideration of environmental degradation from such practices. The commitment to sustainability predictably leads to improved social and environmental outcomes. Worrell and Appleby (2000) defined stewardship as the concept of “responsible use of natural resources” and acceptance of “significant answerability to society” (p. 275). The adverse effects on the environment and the society from economic development are often unrecognized, neglected, and ignored in plans, strategies, and reports.

Sustainability Planning and Ethics in Local Governments

The foundation of the concepts of sustainability can be traced to the United Nations sustainable development goals, but also to earlier environmental and social justice initiatives. Since then the term sustainability, sustainable development, and Triple Bottom Line (TBL) were used to define a variety of initiatives aimed at supporting strategies encompassing economic, environmental, social, and governance goals. The more recent global efforts for sustainable future can be linked to the United Nations 2030 Agenda and the Paris Climate Accord (See more: Dimitrov 2016; UNGA 2015; Alibašić 2017). From the very beginning of sustainability efforts, local governments played an important and a leading role in supporting the notion of a just and equitable society through positive impacts in their communities. Importantly, sustainability has been expressed in the context of the economic situation of an organization, in alignment with the environmental and social justice issues, social responsibility, and governance (Alibašić 2017).

An essential complement to the ethics of sustainability is a fiscal responsibility as a critical component of good governance. A stable organization can commit long term to the sustainability-related efforts. Good governance, ethics, integrity, transparency, community engagement, and accountability are vital elements necessary for attainment and implementation of sustainable policies and practices in organizations. In rare instances organizations practicing and implementing sustainability policies intentionally measure and report good governance, ethics, equity, integrity, transparency, and accountability aspects of sustainability. In evaluating and implementing sustainability initiatives, it is indispensable for organizations to integrate into plans and give full consideration to ethics, integrity, and governance.

Accountability and Participative Citizenry

To be accountable for tax dollars spent, transparent in the delivery of services, and to provide the same level of services, cities administrators continually evolve and transform the long-term strategic planning. With a sustainability planning framework, cities can focus on the economic, governance, social, and environmental aspects of service delivery. Hemmati et al. (2002) noted that “basic societal processes related to sustainability are economic and social processes, and those of governance and political participation” (p. 40). The concept of citizen engagement in the delivery and planning of services preserves the democratic principle of participative governance.

An appropriate way to view an administrator is as an agent of the local or state government or any other form of government, and the local and state government as the people. Post (2006) argued the “citizens are free to engage in public discourse to make the state responsive to their ideas and values,” which similarly applies to all levels of
government (p. 28). Furthermore, Girardet (1999) saw the “popular participation in decision-making to restore confidence in local democracy” as essential to managing cities (p. 71). Local government must be transparent and more engaging with the public. Seeking compromise is the key to democratic governance and usually leads to neither strong nor weak government. Such notion of a participative decision-making process in local and other forms of governments is further supported by Ranney and Kendall (1951) in their understanding of democracy. In essence, the issues of equity, citizen engagement, accountability, transparency, and consensus building are all relevant to successful implementation of sustainability-related efforts.

Often, sustainability is seen as a tool for participation building. Portney and Berry (2010) discussed how sustainable communities with sustainable policies in place have more participatory residents and other interest groups, emphasizing the relevance of civic engagement in cities (Portney and Berry 2010). While active and participant citizenry in communities is critical to the implementation of policies, administrators have a role too in defining what Dubnick (2003) described as setting up “clear and well-defined expectations” (p. 417).

Public Policy and Positive Social Change

Sustainability as a public policy for positive social change is critical to the basic concept of ethics of sustainability in local government. Defining such decisive instrument is difficult when determining the social change context. Defining the social change as a positive is very important as the potential for abuses of public policy as an instrument in creating the adverse social change continues to exist. The ethical norms and ethical standards for local government administrators, as encapsulated by the ICMA Code of Ethics, include “a deep sense of social responsibility as a trusted public servant” in executing policies for the betterment of the communities and organizations they serve. The positive social change from such service is an end goal for public servants. The effectiveness of environmental policies is relevant to economic growth and the nature of economic development. There is a balance, and similar to the private sector, sustainability for municipalities begins with the financial bottom line.

As the layers of the organization embrace sustainability and it becomes embedded within organizations, good governance, along with diversity, integrity, and transparency, coalesce around the basic tenants of sustainable development, economic, social, and environmental tenets. Public policies focusing on bringing about positive social change are essential. For example, the climate change bill and national energy policy have the potential for positive impact on the entire society. However, there has been no political consensus on passing those policies. Where the federal government in the United States failed to take a leading role in addressing the climate change concerns, subnational levels of government through local municipal leadership have filled in a void. American cities have been active in planning and implementing sustainability measures to counter the adverse impacts of climate change and to be more just, safer, and healthier communities.

Ethics and Quadruple Bottom Line (QBL)

Most cities embrace the concept of Triple Bottom Line, focusing on economic, social, and environmental elements of sustainability in sustainability planning. However, there have been recent efforts in some cities around the globe, mostly in Australia using the Quadruple Bottom Line (QBL) in sustainability planning and reporting. In addition to the TBL pillars of sustainability, the QBL is intended to address governance (Alibašić 2017). The fourth component of sustainability, Governance, emphasizes the often-neglected areas of organizational sustainability, including ethics, integrity, financial resilience, community engagement, transparency, accountability, and ethics. It rewards staff involved in sustainability implementation with ownership of sustainability initiatives and helps the city administrators to track sustainability efforts using a
A holistic, organization-wide approach. The inclusion of governance strengthens all the parts of sustainability planning, ensuring sustainability efforts are thorough and implemented efficiently. The four pillars provide a robust framework for inclusion and measurement of ethics and integrity in the sustainability reports.

**Conclusion**

Ethics in sustainability and the ethics of sustainability are instrumental for successful implementation of sustainability-related efforts and ultimately for sustainable communities. Over the years, researchers and practitioners have realized the limitations of using the Triple Bottom Line, and the implications of not measuring and reporting ethics, accountability, transparency, and other elements of good governance in sustainability plans. Ethical implications of sustainability planning and implementing sustainability-related efforts include more just, equitable, healthy, and environmentally resilient communities with an overall positive societal outcome. A solution to the lack of meaningful inclusion of ethics and integrity in sustainability would be a more deliberate approach to measuring ethics in sustainability plans, by applying the Quadruple Bottom Line. Ethics and sustainability are integral to sustainable communities, and local government administrators should track and report outcomes related to ethics and integrity in the sustainability plans.

**Cross-References**

- Economics
- Ethics
- Ethics and Public Policy
- Ethics and Social Policy
- Global Ethics
- Governance
- Governmental Accountability
- Leadership
- Management
- Resilience
- Sustainability
- Transparency

**References**


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