

**PROFESSOR PETER NEWMAN  
SUSTAINABILITY POLICY UNIT  
DEPARTMENT OF PREMIER AND CABINET**

**PILBARA DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION – COMMENTS  
DRAFT STATE SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY**

**Introduction**

The Pilbara Development Commission strongly supports the concept of sustainability and would like to see a strong interrelationship between the Sustainability Strategy and the recently released draft Regional Development Policy.

The Regional Development Policy sets four key policy areas for regional development in Western Australia:

- Economic: *Growing a Diversified Economy.*
- Social: *Educated, Healthy, Safe and Supportive Communities.*
- Environment: *Valuing and Protecting the Environment.*
- Governance: *Understanding, Partnering and Delivering Better Outcomes.*

Central to the role of State Government in regional development and the implementation of the policy are the Regional Development Commissions and as indicated in the Draft Sustainability Strategy the Commissions could play a significant role in implementing the Sustainability Strategy.

**Regional Communities and Sustainability**

The Pilbara Development Commission supports the broad intent of the principles of the Sustainability Strategy. However, in its current form the Strategy is simply a series of groups of actions which often need to be implemented at a local or individual level. As a consequence one of the major deficiencies is that the Strategy does not provide a robust framework by which regional communities can interact and work in partnership with industry and government to provide for a sustainable future.

Whilst industry groups and community groups often have clear and differing standpoints on sustainability, the Strategy does not provide a mechanism by which issues can be resolved and a balance reached. If anything the Strategy appears to rely on the government setting standards to ensure industry actions are consistent with sustainability. What is missing from the Strategy is a mechanism by which the

community is able to participate in the process of developing and assessing criteria which must be satisfied to ensure a project or industry development is sustainable.

It is the view of the Commission that sustainability develops from a local, informed, and participatory process, which allows a balance between economic, ecological and social sustainability and values to be reached by industry and community at a regional level.

The Pilbara Development Commission has a strong role to play in facilitating such interaction at both a local and regional level. An example of the Commission's work in this area is the Nickol Bay Accommodation Taskforce, which is managing the housing issues and the potential for social dislocation as a result of a substantial influx of construction workers.

### **The Regional Dimension**

The Draft Strategy, whilst not having a strong regional focus does indicate that sustainability is best applied at regional level. However, the Strategy indicates the possibility of defining regions for managing sustainability issues. The Commission believes that existing regional development boundaries are suitable for managing sustainability issues.

The State has nine non-metropolitan regions as defined by the Regional Development Commissions Act (1993). The basis of the boundaries is that they encapsulate communities of common interest with strong economic as well as social linkages. It is the view of the Commission, that the existing regions should be used as the conceptional tool to link ecological, social and economic processes to specific spatial settings. A vital part of sustainability is the identification of individuals with their cultural, social, ecological and economic environment. Similarly, successful regional development builds on strong identification of individuals with their locality.

The potential development of alternate regional boundaries for management of sustainability issues will simply serve to dislocate the State Government's commitment to regional development from its commitment to sustainability. It is preferable to have common boundaries so that issues of regional development and sustainability are considered in tandem and on a common platform.

### **The Development Dimension**

The draft Regional Development policy acknowledges that development and the future viability of regions encompasses environmental, social and economic values and needs. Similarly, the Draft Sustainability Strategy uses environmental, social and economic values as the cornerstones of sustainability.

However, the vast majority of the Sustainability Strategy concentrates on the first two aspects and largely ignores the economic development aspect. From a regional standpoint this is disappointing as the long-term viability of the State is strongly dependant on the continued economic contribution made by regional Western

Australia. The sustainability or otherwise of regional areas will have a significant impact on the metropolitan area. If regions were no longer economically viable the population drift to Perth would cause significant externalities associated with pollution and transport gridlock and have a significant impact on sustainability.

Furthermore, the Draft Strategy appears to ignore that for most regions in Western Australia their economic base is narrow and as a result subject to fluctuations in commodity prices and in cases the impacts of severe climatic conditions such as drought or cyclones. As a consequence the long-term viability and sustainability of the Pilbara, as for other regions, undoubtedly requires the region to place an emphasis on diversifying its economic structure.

This does not suggest that regions do not need to examine aspects of social development, conservation of ecological systems or preservation of man made settlements. Indeed there is a strong recognition within the Pilbara that economic development, the environment and social and cultural development are inextricably linked.

However, a Pilbara with a more diverse economy will be a more sustainable region as a more diverse economy will reduce the economic risk associated with boom and bust cycles resulting from fluctuations in commodity prices. A more diverse economy may lead to increased population which in turn would make the delivery of services to the region more sustainable. However, economic diversification and population growth in the region may come at some expense to the environment. In short, the future development of the region is a balance of many issues and there may need to be trade-offs or a compromise between economic, social and environmental values in order for sustainability as a whole to occur.

In its current form the Sustainability Strategy appears to be based on a requirement for a simultaneous improvement of social, economic and environment factors for development to occur. Such an approach does not appear to recognise that in pragmatic terms there may need to be a trade-off between different values for the region to remain viable and hence sustainable.

From the region's perspective, a net overall benefit should be the guiding principle of development rather than an increase in all three domains. Proper pricing of environmental factors and social needs would stop any erosion of ecological and social systems to a point where they become unsustainable as at that point the net benefit would become negative.

The other issue is that whilst the Sustainability Strategy recognises the concept of a region forms the basis for sustainability there needs to be recognition that sustainability flows across regional and national boundaries. Exports from the Pilbara region contribute to State and national sustainability and also the sustainability of the recipient locality.

Consequently, there is need to ensure that that community understands the relationship between the region and State and indeed global sustainability. That is, the community makes informed decisions rather than concentrating on local issues to the exclusion of the wider picture.

## **The Governance Dimension**

The other dimension contained in the State's draft Regional Development Policy is the principle of Governance. The Commission would like to see some integration of this section of the Policy with the Western Australian Citizenship Policy and the Sustainability Strategy.

From the Commission's perspective governance is an important part of any sustainability framework and can be seen to require the following elements:

- Inclusion and Participation
- Partnership
- Regional Decision making.

### *Inclusion and Participation*

The concept of participation is that all individuals in the region should have the right to be involved in decision making, planning and implementation processes that will impact on their future. Whereas partnership is based on horizontal equity, the concept of participation is based on input into what are often hierarchical processes.

### *Partnership*

Partnership recognises the character of relations between individuals and institutions (both public and private) and between institutions in a horizontal dimension. That is developing trust and cooperation within a common framework. The concept of partnerships highlights the common responsibilities of all parties and the need for conflicts to be resolved amicably.

### *Regional Decision making*

It is recognised that the Pilbara is one of nine regions that contribute to the development of the State of Western Australia and that there are advantages of integration with the other regions just as there are advantages in autonomy.

However, principles of regional development suggest that best and most appropriate decisions are made at the local level. As a consequence, decision-making should be devolved to the region unless there are tangible benefits in delegating it upwards.

Whilst it is easy to recognise such principles and the actions in the Strategy are often based on them, it is not clear who, from a governance point of view, has responsibility for ensuring that the principles are applied both in broad examinations of sustainability but also at project or individual level.

The Sustainability Unit with the Department of Premier and Cabinet has an obvious role to play at a macro level. However, if communities are to take responsibility for

sustainability at a regional level, then it is suggested that Regional Development Commissions have a strong advocacy and facilitation role in ensuring the participation, partnership and regional decision making are cornerstones for the future development of their region.

### **Concluding remarks**

The Pilbara Development Commission supports the development and implementation of a State Sustainability Strategy. In particular, the Commission would like to see the Sustainability Policy to be integrated with State Government's Regional Development Policy and Citizenship Policy. However, the Commission recommends that the Draft Sustainability Strategy would be strengthened by:

- Providing a framework and mechanisms by which the community is able to participate in the process of developing and assessing criteria which must be satisfied to ensure a project or industry development is sustainable rather than localised and individual actions.
- The use of the State government's existing regional boundaries as defined in the Regional Development Commissions Act to define sustainability regions.
- Allowing communities to use the principle of net benefit when examining issues of sustainability in regional areas.
- Acknowledging whilst "the region" may provide a sound basis for sustainability, sustainability flows across regional, state and national boundaries and this needs to be balanced against localised concerns.
- Confirming that Regional Development Commissions are the State Government's agent for facilitating local, informed, and participatory processes, which allow a balance between economic, ecological and social sustainability and values to be reached by industry and community at a regional level.
- Not prescribing 249 individual actions but empowering Regional Development Commissions and regional communities to work with industry and business to determine their priorities and actions for sustainability.

Submitted for information and consideration

Erica Smyth  
Chairman  
Pilbara Development Commission

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