

# The WA Collaboration: Facilitating Integration of Sustainability Issues in a Community And Civil Society Context

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## INTRODUCTION

Sustainability is clearly an issue that tests the policy-making capacities of governments. It attracts broad public interest and a large number of organised stakeholders are likely to seek input into sustainability policy making. Their demands are often disparate and pertain only to their given narrow constituency. Sustainability is a highly contested and malleable concept and, as such, participants in the public debate often attempt to redefine the term in ways that fit best with their existing agendas. It follows then that effective governing for sustainability fundamentally requires integration—of the imperatives of public, civil society and private sectors, and across social, cultural, environmental and economic concerns. In this paper we examine the role of the WA Collaboration in facilitating integration. Its contribution in this area is examined in respect to i) its capacity to find ‘encompassing positions’ amongst its diverse membership (as opposed to working only on a single point of convergence) and ii) its ability to facilitate strategic policy capacity by mobilising public debate.



At the heart of the WA Collaboration is the recognition of the potential strength of an integrated civil society approach to the sustainability agenda. While coalitions of interest groups are not new, they tend to form to pursue single issue agendas. The WA Collaboration is something quite different. It aims to provide an alliance suitable for the breadth of issues the concept of sustainability encompasses and ultimately to facilitate the greater involvement of the community in policy making for sustainability.

In its most general sense, this article focuses on how an interest organisation operates in a collaborative rather than coalition context and the internal processes it has developed to achieve a tricky process of institutional design. As will be discussed below, the absence of integrative capacity is a significant gap in the institutional capacity of the modern Australian policy process. Understanding processes like the WA Collaboration will provide some pointers on how we can promote collaboration and at the same time increase integrative capacity in the Australian polity.

### Political integration

It has been persuasively argued that the modern Australian policy process lacks the capacity for political ‘integration’, which means we often end up with policy outcomes that are sub-optimal for society (Marsh 2000). Marsh describes integration as the ‘ability of the formal political system to create and/or distil support for proposed actions in public and interest-group opinion’. His proposition is that political parties used to be the dominant integrating institutions in the Australian polity, but the decline of party competition, in party identification among citizens and the convergence of party agendas, render them ineffective. Marsh argues that the existing public policy process in Australia tends to mobilise the general public only at the end of the issue cycle and largely once government has settled on the overall thrust of change. While a limited number of key stakeholder groups may be involved, there is little capacity to integrate them, or most importantly their constituencies, into a strategic policy conversation. The fluid nature of the allegiances and interests of modern Australian society compounds the integration problem. He concludes by saying that the deficit in existing modes of political integration—the party system—can be remedied in part by engaging interest groups and social movements into the political process to i) explore contested issues in a strategic phase ii) mobilise group consent of interested parties in an issue (2000, 196).

There are many who would be sceptical of the capacity for groups to act in a way that enhances integration. While, interest groups, whether labelled as pressure groups, social movements or NGOs, are central to resolving policy issues, accounts of the orthodox public policy process tend to emphasise issues being resolved through de-politicised consensus seeking amongst directly affected interests and relevant government agencies (see discussion in Halpin 2002, pp. 489–90). The emphasis is on ‘closed’ depoliticised policy making rather than mobilising broad public debate. Similarly, it has been the academic orthodoxy to argue that groups are unlikely to seek goals that are not in the particular interest of members or to consider ‘knock-on’ effects of their claims (Beer 1982, 24–5; Brittain 1983, 79; Olson 1965, 1982; Jordan and Richardson 1987 provide a useful summary). In thinking about how groups could be harnessed to enhance integrative capacity, the focal point must surely be on facilitating groups to work together to mobilise public debate and popular participation in order to form encompassing policy agendas.

Of course, in a contemporary context we find that groups do form coalitions. However, these usually take the form of one-issue stands and often fail to involve expanded efforts at inter-sectoral problem solving and mobilisation of public opinion. Browne (1990), for instance, notes that ‘Effective coalitions are probably formed on the principle of integrating the least number of players needed to win rather than searching for encompassing policies that satisfy the widest range of policy claimants.’ (1990, 497). If Browne’s synopsis of the US evidence is an accurate reflection of contemporary Australian practices, enhancing the integrative capacities of the policy process clearly requires a more substantive form of interaction and debate amongst partners of group coalitions. At its core it requires groups occupying an intermediary role, both articulating the wishes and interests of their constituencies while at the same time being cognisant of the resources of the state and the wider impacts of immediate demands on other sections of the community.

## PROBLEM CONTEXT

### The Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy

Western Australia is the first State Government in Australia to develop a comprehensive strategy for sustainability. A Sustainability Policy Unit was created in the Department of Premier and Cabinet in July 2001. In December 2001 the Sustainability Policy Unit (SPU) released the “Focus on the Future” discussion paper, seeking public submissions until April 2002. Then in September 2002 “Focus on the Future: the Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy” consultation draft was released. Public comment on the consultation draft closed in February 2003.

In the public comment period between September 2002 and February 2003 the consultation strategy undertaken by the Sustainability Policy Unit included six major public seminars in Perth, and further seminars in regional areas of Western Australia, as well as informal discussions with a range of groups and individuals—a relatively conventional consultation process, and not surprisingly limited to key stakeholders and interest groups. Furthermore, there has been limited coverage of the State Sustainability Strategy in the media, suggesting there may be limited opportunities for the growth of public awareness of such issues. However, the broad interest in sustainability from interest groups and private sector organisations is evident in the large number of public submissions received by the Sustainability Policy Unit in both public comment periods, and the large attendance at the range of public seminars held throughout Western Australia.

The final strategy *Hope for the Future: Western Australian State Sustainability Strategy* was released in September 2003, and implementation of the strategy is currently being progressed through the formation of a multi-sectoral Sustainability Roundtable, the development of a draft Sustainability Code of Practice for government agencies to guide the development of Sustainability Action Plans and the drafting of a Sustainability Act.

## The WA Collaboration

The election commitment of the State Government to develop a Sustainability Strategy was the major catalyst for the formation of the WA Collaboration, with recognition from the organisations involved of the potential for developing a coordinated approach to sustainability in the WA non-government sector. The WA Collaboration was also inspired by the formation of the Australian Collaboration in 2001, a similar grouping of peak organisations at the national level, and their publication of *A Just and Sustainable Australia*.

The formation of the WA Collaboration is the first time that organisations from such a diversity of perspectives have cooperated to such an extent in Western Australia. The founding organisations are primarily peak bodies in the civil society sector in Western Australia, representing an attempt to draw together the quadruple bottom line of environmental, social, cultural and economic concerns:

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission*—while not a non-government body, ATSIC is part of the WA Collaboration in the absence of a state-wide group representing Aboriginal people;

*Council of Churches of WA*—an association of Christian Churches or related Christian bodies, which exists to promote a closer unity among Christians in WA;

*Ethnic Communities Council of WA*—advocates on behalf of all ethnic communities in WA;

*Environmental Alliance*—itself a loose alliance of key environmental groups including the Conservation Council of WA, Australian Conservation Foundation and other groups;

*Unions WA*—formerly the Trades & Labour Council of WA, Unions WA is the peak trade union body in WA;

*WA Council of Social Service*—peak council of community service organisations and individuals in Western Australia;

*WA Sustainable Industry Group*—a multi-stakeholder network of business, Public sector, environment, engineering and education professionals.<sup>1</sup>

## ORGANISATIONAL AND INFORMATIONAL STRATEGIES

The above organisations form the Steering Committee of the WA Collaboration and its primary decision-making body. There are additional layers of potential involvement in the WA Collaboration. Apart from the peak-body organisations represented on the

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1. See the WA Collaboration website [www.wacollaboration.org.au](http://www.wacollaboration.org.au) for further information on the groups involved and for the structure and activities of the organisation.

Steering Committee, the WA Collaboration also invites interested civil society organisations to affiliate, and at the time of writing, there were approximately 30 organisations formally affiliated. These affiliates include groups operating in the areas of social service provision, environmental advocacy, community development and churches. In addition, the WA Collaboration has established a much broader community of interested individuals, academics, individuals in State and Local Government and the private sector who attend WA Collaboration events and keep in touch via the email list.

The WA Collaboration is not a formally incorporated organisation. The decision was made to keep the partnership more informal in these initial stages, and the funding and day to day management of the project is handled by the Conservation Council of WA. The structure of the WA Collaboration is outlined in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which all groups on the Steering Committee and all affiliated organisations have signed. The MOU outlines a consensus decision-making model for the WA Collaboration, with the proviso that if there is disagreement in relation to policy guidelines for public statements, the Steering Committee shall note which participants did not support a particular policy position. Public statements attributable to the WA Collaboration may only be made if those statements are consistent with agreed policy guidelines for the Collaboration, or if those statements have been approved by the Steering Committee.

## **Developing the Community Sustainability Agenda**

The commitment of the State Government to develop a State Sustainability Strategy (SSS) focused the initial efforts of the WA Collaboration on coordinating a ‘community’ response to the draft State Sustainability Strategy. In developing this response, the WA Collaboration sought to model a more inclusive and participatory approach to sustainability than that being undertaken in the development of the SSS. From the outset, the WA Collaboration was committed to the idea of creating an encompassing and multi-sectoral agenda around sustainability. The WA Collaboration recognised that genuine partnerships and dialogue are characteristics of a long term project, and that it was unlikely that the diverse interests represented in the WA Collaboration would quickly or easily come to complete agreement in a field as complex as sustainability. However, its structure and operation signalled an attempt to operate differently.

Between September 2002 and February 2003 the WA Collaboration conducted 10 workshops throughout WA, between Albany and Kununurra, with the aim of increasing discussion in the community about sustainability and considering the implications of the State Government’s draft *State Sustainability Strategy*. Almost 200 participants, primarily interested community members and representatives of local community organisations, took part. In organising the workshops specific attempts were made to attract as wide a range of perspectives as possible, and the most successful workshops were those with a diversity of perspectives (for example, social service providers and advocates, environmental groups, church leaders and local government).

The first workshop was conducted with the intent of more directly referring to and responding to the SSS. However the difficulty of directly responding to such a large document that few workshop participants had even seen, let alone engaged in, soon

became apparent. Subsequent workshops were more exploratory, aiming to build a picture of sustainability from the ‘ground-up’ by asking essentially three questions: ‘What does sustainability mean to you?’, ‘What are the important sustainability issues in this region?’, and ‘What are some possible strategies to address those sustainability issues?’ Besides reporting back to participants, the outcomes of these regional workshops were fed into a draft Community Sustainability Agenda for consideration at a Sustainability Summit, prepared by the Coordinator of the WA Collaboration together with a contractor.

The two day Sustainability Summit in February 2003 organised by the WA Collaboration brought together another 200 people (some of whom were at some of the regional workshops) to explore the issues and themes identified in the regional workshops in more depth, as well as attempt to identify the most strategic actions and recommendations for furthering sustainability policy in Western Australia. The Summit was the first time that such a large number of people from such a diversity of perspectives from the community and non-government sector in Western Australia had come together with representatives of State and Local Government, business and industry, to deliberate on how to create a just and sustainable future for Western Australia.

The final outcome of this part of the WA Collaboration process was the *Community Sustainability Agenda: Creating a just and sustainable Western Australia* [hereafter referred to as the CSA] launched in March 2003. It was originally conceptualised as a response to the State Sustainability Strategy. However as the process unfolded the CSA developed into a document that could stand alone as a position statement of the community sector in relation to State Government action on sustainability, and not just a reactive submission to the State Sustainability Strategy process.

## Reflections on integration

In reflecting on the WA Collaboration’s experience with integration, it is useful to consider the experience in terms of Marsh’s two imperatives for increasing integrative capacity. That is, i) generating encompassing positions (more than agreeing to disagree on everything but the one issue being pursued), and ii) mobilising public debate. As the WA Collaboration found, these are both particularly challenging tasks, requiring conscious efforts on the part of the organisation.

### *Integration: developing encompassing positions*

A particular challenge for the WA Collaboration is that its focus—sustainability—does not lend itself to developing a single coordinated position. Sustainability is complex, multi-faceted, and a heavily contested concept. The challenge for the groups involved in the WA Collaboration is to be strategic and focused on where the common ground on sustainability lies, rather than seeing sustainability as a ‘parking ground’ for every issue of interest to each organisation.

This became particularly important in the process of finalising the CSA. The process of developing the raw outcomes of the regional workshops and Sustainability Summit, did ultimately fall to a small number of people. As in every public policy process, at some point there needs to be a decision. The WA Collaboration could only open up the debate

to the broader community for so long, until having to refer back to a more familiar form of decision-making: getting the key decision-makers together to finalise the recommendations, which did involve making some compromises from particular angles. This is, however, an important part of the value of collaboration between interest groups, as opposed to straight out direct community consultation. The WA Collaboration performed a form of interest aggregation and prioritisation that direct consultation may not.

There is early evidence then that the WA Collaboration has promoted a form of coalition building that is more than matching pre-existing positions and ignoring differences. The development and release of the *Community Sustainability Agenda* (CSA) is the most significant example of where the differing organisations of the WA Collaboration have found common ground. There are obviously some sections and recommendations within the document which are of more interest to some organisations than others, but many areas touched on by the CSA, such as the need for a genuinely participatory process and some of the institutional reforms to support sustainability, were supported by all organisations.

The WA Collaboration is still in its infancy, launched in August 2002, and the CSA is but one example of the emergence of encompassing positions. At the minimum, it demonstrates the potential for this type of engagement between groups under the umbrella of structures like the WA Collaboration. In reality, the WA Collaboration faces a difficulty in finding the time or opportunity to address the challenges of facilitating internal processes of deliberation amongst the founding organisations, each of which have diverse background histories and cultures which are significant to the ongoing sustainability dialogue. In order to examine this diversity more closely, and where the common ground might lie, the WA Collaboration is amidst an ongoing process of reflection on their differing policy positions, approaches to sustainability and values that each organisation brings to the WA Collaboration to address this need for internal integration<sup>2</sup>. Such reflection will help to surface the underlying values and policy positions of each organisation and help to build a more robust sustainability discourse within the WA Collaboration.

### ***Integration: mobilising public conversations on sustainability***

The WA State Sustainability Strategy process tended to follow a more conventional form of public engagement, where governments tend to decide on an agenda and invite response rather than embarking on a process of engaging public opinion early on in the issue cycle. This approach to engaging the community has led to considerable disillusionment with the policy process. In responding to the State Government's sustainability agenda, the WA Collaboration aimed to model a more inclusive and participatory approach to developing sustainability policy.

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2. As part of this important reflective process, the WA Collaboration Steering Committee participated in an intensive research process with Kathryn Buselich, one of the authors of this paper, as part of her PhD research.

The major points of differentiation between the WA Collaboration process and more traditional consultation processes stem from the WA Collaboration's unique situation and intermediary role. The regional workshops and the Sustainability Summit were approached with a genuine sense of inquiry and willingness to listen, being open to the views and issues that emerged and not being constrained by current government policy or politics. Consistent with Marsh's prescription, the WA Collaboration was able to step outside existing policy ideas and criticise government policy where necessary. There was an emphasis in the workshops and the Summit on facilitating discussion rather than imparting information. Rather than acting as a forum for group leaders and other elites to find common points of interest on which to base a lobbying strategy, the Collaboration membership were content to open up the agenda to 'community' input.

In opening up the debate, there were of course limiting factors and areas where input was less than optimal. For instance, the WA Collaboration process did follow some familiar and more traditional patterns, such as a lack of provision for the greater involvement of indigenous people and minority groups and a lack of time for extra background research to minimise the exploratory and 'information phase of the regional workshops. While the discussions were useful for scene-setting and information-gathering, they were not long or extensive enough to move on from identifying the major sustainability issues in that region. Time constraints were also evident in the small lead up time available to create awareness of sustainability issues in the broader community, as well as mobilise opinion on what issues are important to people, was evident in the work of the WA Collaboration. Levels of previous engagement with the concept of sustainability were relatively low in the broader community. This means that in an open process there will often be new people with little experience of the WA Collaboration, or the concept of sustainability itself, coming along to meetings and workshops. Thus an open process fulfils an important learning function but also tends to move discussion back to the beginning again, to the gathering of information and general discussion about sustainability. Again, the absence of time and media attention inhibited the development of an informed public able to engage with the WA Collaboration and sustainability in a timely manner.

Of course, the WA Collaboration process was not greeted with universal approval. People involved throughout the process brought a variety of working styles and expectations. Some people were tired of aimless discussion and discourse and wanted to identify actions immediately, while others felt the need for much more discussion. Some people complained about the lack of structure of the workshop sessions at the regional workshops and the Sustainability Summit, while others complained that there was too much structure constraining the discussion. The challenge for the WA Collaboration continues to be how to encompass this diversity within an open and ongoing process.

## RESOURCES

The WA Collaboration has to date been funded through the community funding program of Lotterywest<sup>3</sup>. The funding has allowed the employment of a Coordinator, with a small amount of additional contractors (including the preparation of the *Community Sustainability Agenda*), as well as an operational budget for travel, regional workshops and the *Sustainability Summit*.

The ability of the WA Collaboration to adopt an open-ended mode of conversation with the community, well beyond its founding partner organisations, was to some extent attributable to its funding. The contribution of Lotterywest to funding the group meant that it was independent of the direct operational realities of its member groups and of obligations to the state. The external resourcing, independent of government and also of its member organisations, enables the Collaboration to stand and function as a true intermediary between state and civil society. It was freely able to engage and criticise government without risking a loss of funding.

While the budget for this first phase of the WA Collaboration has been generous in relation to many other non-government organisations and community sector projects, there were still some constraints in the WA Collaboration experience directly attributable to constraints of time and resources. The funding of one staff member and the absence of any independent research capacity meant that, apart from attendance at specific events, the Collaboration could not make its own independent contribution to informing public opinion nor was it able to garner media attention sufficient to project its presence more broadly.

As mentioned previously, time was also a limiting factor, for example, there was a six month period between the official launch of the WA Collaboration and submission of the CSA to the State Sustainability Strategy consultation process. This meant a narrow window of opportunity for an open process of mobilising public opinion and developing awareness, and thus a necessarily reduced depth of participation. Ideally the process would have been much longer, allowing time for multiple deeper conversations about sustainability and the use of a greater variety of methods to engage in those conversations. Combined with the time that each of the organisations and individuals involved in the WA Collaboration actually have available to take part in important ongoing discussions and dialogue, there are clearly barriers to this being repeated on a consistent basis.

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3. Lottery West is the official state lottery for Western Australia. The profits from the sale of lottery products are returned to the community according to the Lotteries Commission Act 1990.

## RELATIONSHIP WITH POLICY SYSTEM AND RESEARCH COMMUNITY

To date, the focus of the WA Collaboration has very much been on the State Government policy development process leading to the finalisation of the SSS. With the release of the final SSS, the WA Collaboration is continuing to play a key intermediary role between the civil society sector and the State Government in the implementation of the Strategy.

The primary institutional driver for the implementation of the SSS is the newly established Sustainability Roundtable, a multi-sectoral body providing advice to the Premier of Western Australia. The Coordinator of the WA Collaboration is a member of the Roundtable. In addition to the Sustainability Roundtable, the WA Collaboration is closely involved in the implementation of the Greater Perth planning process, based on implementing the outcomes of the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure's *Dialogue with the City* consultation process<sup>4</sup>.

The links that continue to be established between the policy system and the WA Collaboration represent some significant challenges. For example, there has been the tendency for the WA Collaboration to be viewed as a 'peak of the peaks' or a peak body for 'community', and in some ways a substitute for a broader participatory process. With its reasonable success in mobilising participation, deliberation and public opinion—in effect becoming an intermediary structure between state and society, it seems that government has had unfounded expectations of the WA Collaboration and lacks familiarity with both its processes of participation and modes of behaviour. One can appreciate the way in which more traditional and institutional modes of operation would be attractive for government. However, at the end of the day the WA Collaboration cannot discipline, coerce or bargain with society. It is able to develop a position amongst group leaders and generate authority for its statements by its own methods of participation and mobilisation, but it is not a substitute for elected government exercising authority and representing its public.

In contrast, the WA Collaboration's relationship with the research community is not formalised with any particular institution, but there are many informal links with academics and researchers from all of Western Australia's universities, and many academics and students have shown interest in and participated in WA Collaboration events and discussions. The WA Collaboration hopes to extend its links with the research community in the next phase of its activities.

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4. See <http://www.dpi.wa.gov.au/dialogue> for more information on Dialogue with the City.

## STATUS, IMPACTS, FUTURE PLANS

The impact of the WA Collaboration can be considered in the context of the two key themes of integration that have been the focus of this paper, i) generating encompassing ‘other regarding’ positions, ii) increasing general public awareness, knowledge and debate of sustainability in WA.

The development and release of the CSA is the WA Collaboration’s primary ‘encompassing position’, and represents a significant achievement for the organisation. As a basis for advocacy, it is difficult to accurately determine the impact of the CSA on the final policy outcomes of the *State Sustainability Strategy*. However, there were a number of significant ‘policy gaps’ in the consultation draft of the Strategy on which the WA Collaboration focused its advocacy efforts in the six months between the release of the CSA and the release of the final SSS. The final Strategy reflected the WA Collaboration’s priorities (to some extent) in a number of key areas, such as institutional reform for sustainability; Sustainability or Genuine Progress indicators; and legislative reform (including a Sustainability Act).

Probably the most significant impact of the WA Collaboration has been its role in increasing awareness of the sustainability agenda amongst the community and non-government sector. Most of the indicators of broader interest in the WA Collaboration are increasing, such as the number of groups affiliating with the WA Collaboration, hits on the website and growing interest in events, forums and the email list.

The WA Collaboration is currently facing some challenges in securing ongoing, core funding for the continuation of the organisation. While Lotterywest has been extremely generous in the funding provided thus far, they are unable to provide core funding to any organisation. The WA Collaboration is currently attempting to secure ongoing core funding from a range of sources such as various State Government Departments, the private sector and the philanthropic sector.

To date, the focus of the WA Collaboration has been on the development of an integrated policy response to a State Government policy process. In the future the WA Collaboration will focus on four key areas:

Working with the broader community and community/non-government sector to raise awareness of sustainability, such as through a project to develop community sustainability indicators.

Working with State Government to continue the intermediary role between civil society sector and State Government on sustainability policy making.

Working with the private sector to increase the dialogue around issues of mutual interest and benefit.

Strengthening the Collaboration itself, including focusing on increasing the dialogue around developing encompassing positions and internal integration.

## CONCLUSIONS

Initiatives such as the WA Collaboration facilitate the types of mobilising and participatory processes essential for integration to occur, but at the same time there is a need for a policy environment that supports its strategic policy making capacity. The WA Collaboration has made significant progress towards creating opportunities for deliberation that leads to integration of policy issues in its mobilisation of public participants in a relatively short period of time. Partnerships between and within civil society, government and the private sector, such as those the WA Collaboration fosters, will enable a transition towards strategic and more integrative decision-making.

However, there are significant challenges inherent in operating in this integrative mode for interest groups, social movements and NGOs. The emphasis on collaboration rather than coalition amongst the participating groups in the WA Collaboration requires intensive internal 'team building' efforts, and as the grouping enlarges, the task of reaching encompassing positions that do not represent false consensus will become more difficult. As time goes on, maintaining a collaboration rather than simply a coalition will remain a challenge. In terms of public mobilisation, there is a struggle in moving beyond the 'usual suspects' who are already convinced of the value of a sustainability perspective. The WA Collaboration has been committed to moving beyond this, but such a task takes time and resources, both of which are under pressure within the short term phases of the conventional policy process.

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