Conceptualising and Institutionalising Sustainability: ESD Views from the Departments

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Introduction

Sustainable development represents the contemporary face of environmental policy making. It reflects the growing awareness that economic development needs to be tempered against the demands of ecological (and social) sustainability. The "triple bottom line" of sustainable development requires that business activities and public policies take into account the interrelated environmental, economic and social impacts they generate. While this sounds more than reasonable, sustainable development remains an elastic term that is conceptualised, understood and applied very differently. Indeed, the breadth and generality of the term makes it vulnerable to rhetorical 'capture'. Nonetheless, environmental considerations are now relatively mainstream and attempts to marginalise them carries significant political risk. Most Australian governments also acknowledge that ecologically sustainable development (ESD) applies to a broader range of activities and issues than originally conceived. Nonetheless, while these governments speak the language of ESD, the practice remains more contentious.

ESD officially entered the Australian environmental policy lexicon in the 1980s with the formation of the ESD working groups. The term was formally translated to the COAG-endorsed National Strategy of Ecologically Sustainable Development in 1992. ESD principles are now incorporated in the new framework environment legislation – the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC) 1999. The commonwealth acknowledges the relevance of sustainability principles to the activities of all of its departments and agencies. The Department of Finance and Administration (2001-2) (www.finance.gov.au/) appreciates, for example, that "[e]nvironmental activities are not limited to the Environment and Heritage Portfolio." It claims that "[s]ustainable development requires the application of environmental considerations across all Commonwealth policies and programmes" as well as the integration of "environmental considerations with economic and social considerations". Thus all departments should set about "improving the environmental management of their [own] operations".

In 1999, the Productivity Commission's investigated the implementation of ESD by Commonwealth departments and agencies and found significant implementation deficits. These deficits were in part attributable to the "uncertainty … and a lack of clarity regarding what ESD means for government policy" (1999: XXII). This reinforced the view that "an understanding of the underlying concepts" of ESD is crucial to environmental policy success (1999: XVIII). To assist the penetration of ESD into departmental business, section 516A of the EPBC Act now requires all Commonwealth departments and agencies to report on their contributions to ESD. This section of the Act responds to the NSESD's observation that governments need to make changes to their "institutional arrangements to ensure that ESD principles and objectives are taken into consideration in relevant policy making processes"

responded to the requirements of the EPBC Act. It examines the ESD reporting sections of the departments' 2001 – 2002 Annual Reports and uses these reporting items as an indication of ESD commitment.

Section 516A (EPBC, 1999) specifically requires all Commonwealth departments and agencies' annual reporting to:

(a) include a report on how the actions of, and the administration (if any) of legislation by, the reporter during the period accorded with the principles of ecologically sustainable development; and
(b) identify how the outcomes (if any) specified for the reporter in an Appropriations Act relating to the period contribute to ecologically sustainable development; and
(c) document the effect of the reporter's actions on the environment; and
(d) identify any measures the reporter is taking to minimise the impact of actions by the reporter on the environment; and
(e) identify the mechanisms (if any) for reviewing and increasing the effectiveness of those measures.

In keeping with NSESD, the EPBC Act stipulates the following ESD principles:

(a) decision making processes should effectively integrate both long-term and short-term economic, environmental, social and equitable considerations;
(b) if there are threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage, lack of scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation;
(c) the principle of inter-generational equity – that the present generation should ensure that the health, diversity and productivity of the environment is maintained or enhanced for the benefit of future generations;
(d) the conservation of biological diversity and ecological integrity should be a fundamental consideration in decision-making;
(e) improved valuation, pricing and incentive mechanisms should be promoted.

The paper is divided into several sections. There is first a brief discussion of the evolution of sustainability as the underpinning principle in contemporary discussions of environmental matters. The paper then presents – both discursively and diagrammatically – some of the ESD-related findings from the departments' Annual Reports. Finally, the implications of the findings are weaved into a broader discussion of the current environmental policy experience in Australia. While the data's confinement to Annual Reports means that only preliminary and speculative conclusions can be drawn, the paper nonetheless uncovers a limited conceptualisation, incorporation and penetration of ESD principles in departmental business.

Conceptualising sustainable development

Sustainable development is one of the 20th century's powerful concepts. It entices with the prospect that "we can have it all: economic growth, environmental conservation, social justice" (Dryzek, 1997:132). Paralleling the lure of democracy, sustainable development has become today's "rhetorical talisman" and governments ignore it at their own electoral peril (Lafferty, 1998:265). However understood, the overarching concept of environmentalism

sustainability "the dominant discourse" while Torgerson (1995:10) claims that "public discussion concerning the environment has become primarily a discourse of sustainability". The term incorporates a broad range of social, economic, ethical as well as ecological objectives (Beder, 1996). These objectives are often referred to as the triple bottom line – that is, the economic, social and ecological components of sustainable development.

The Brundtland Report defines sustainable development as development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987:263). This is now a standard definition, although different stakeholders conceptualise sustainable development very differently. While sustainable development has been the dominant discourse of environmental policy since the 1980s, its conceptual spectrum is complex and extensive. Where the emphasis of sustainable development lies depends largely on the stakeholders and the context. Business may put emphasis on the development part of the equation, environmentalists on ecological sustainability and governments on the pragmatic policy collaboration between the two. The 1992 Earth Summit thrust the concept centre stage, mainstreaming its use and acceptance. Less frequently cited, however, is the Brundland Report's admonition that the sustainable development process is far from politically straightforward. Indeed, "[p]ainful choices have to be made. Thus in the final analysis, sustainable development must rest on political will" (WCED, 1987:263). To the "triple bottom line" of sustainable development – economic, social and ecological – there can thus be added a political fourth – political will or political leadership as a critical driver of sustainability.

The broad endorsement of sustainable development thus reflects both the powerful nature of the concept as well as its negotiable meaning. The underlying premise that economic and environmental agendas are compatible means that sustainable development poses few threats to those that prioritise economic development. At the same time, if rigorously applied, sustainable development can be quite radical in scope and content. Even a straightforward Brundtland definition poses significant challenges. The meeting of the social and ecological needs of both present and future generations requires addressing the enormous distributional inequalities that characterise contemporary life. Sustainability's conceptions of social justice, responsibility to future generations and the precautionary principle are robust underpinning principles that demand significant degrees of political and socio-economic change. The sustainability discourse thus incorporates a 'stronger' or broader version, as well as a 'weaker' or narrower one (see Dryzek, 1997; Christoff, 1996). While both versions share the view that environmental resource use needs to be balanced with the maintenance of resource integrity, use and integrity can be understood very differently. This in turn conditions the conceptualisation of the development-environment relationship that drives environmental policy.

A key difference between 'narrower' and 'broader' versions of sustainability lies in the normative principles that underpin the different frameworks. This conditions how ecological integrity and ecological relationships are understood, including the development-environment relationship. In the literature, this is often conceptualised as the distinction between radical or 'deep green' ecology and 'shallow' or mainstream environmentalism, with the former taking a broader socio-political approach to sustainability and the latter a considerably narrower one (see Merchant, 1992; Dryzek, 1997). Generally speaking, these 'broader' versions of sustainability identify key deficiencies in current socio-economic and political systems that impact negatively on both the environment as well as on many marginalised communities – both human and non-human. A 'broad-based' version of sustainability acknowledges a strong link between poverty and environmental degradation. A focus on the equity and justice component of sustainability is considered very important, requiring innovative and inclusive policy responses.

Narrower versions of sustainability, on the other hand, seek to create more technical efficiency and policy effectiveness within already established economic liberal parameters. The preferred policy response is the broader application of market instruments to resolving environmental problems. According to this view, environmental degradation is often a result of incomplete scientific knowledge, inefficient industry practices, slow policy responses and inadequate application or penetration of market tools (Dryzek, 1997:115). In liberal democratic regimes such as Australia, the narrower version of sustainability predominates, even as many non-government organisations agitate for a more vigorous response. While such a crude distinction can mask the complexity of sustainability, it is generally agreed that the achievement of sustainability depends on the collaborative efforts of governments, industry and communities.

Sustainable development, however understood, offers significant policy promise. Within its ambit lies a constellation of policy opportunities that offer retreat from accelerating degradation. Nonetheless, many well-conceived sustainability policies fail to realise their set objectives. There are two main interrelated explanations for this. First, the different conceptualisations of sustainable development and the different priorities that attach to them, can diminish policy coherence. The lack of shared understanding of the concept and a disinclination by governments to engage more vigorously with it, diminishes agreement on and commitment to its virtues. In their investigation of the implementation of ESD in commonwealth departments and agencies, the Productivity Commission concluded that an "important finding of this inquiry is that there is a lack of clarity about what ESD means for government policy"; a "lack of clarity regarding what constitutes ESD related policies"; "a tendency to act on problems which are immediately visible" and "a lack of long term focus" (1999:XXII-XXIII). .

Second, policy failure can reflect the existence of only a rhetorical commitment to sustainability. This is a subject of intense debate in the environmental politics literature (see Beder, 1997). A rhetorical commitment is often exposed through implementation failure, even if implementation failure can also reflect a poorly managed policy development process (see Productivity Commission, 1999). Thus poor resource commitment, a paucity of effective monitoring mechanisms, lack of political will, poorly integrated policy development processes, and poor inter-governmental and inter-agency collaboration can bring unstuck some of the best environmental policy ideas. Once again, this can reflect poor understanding of sustainability, poor commitment to the principles in the first place, or – as is often the case – a combination of the two. This combination is reflected in the commonwealth departments' engagement with ESD.

The Annual Reports and ESD

The information collected for this preliminary investigation is limited to 2001 – 2002 departmental annual reports. This period represents the first clear reporting period for many departments on the ESD requirements of the EPBC Act. The information is also limited to Commonwealth departments and not the agencies, where more ESD-relevant information may be housed, especially in those agencies working more directly in environmental or environment-related areas. (An exploration of the agencies and of specific programs is the task of further research.) There are, however, important reasons for focusing solely on the departments. The departments are well positioned to assume an important ESD coordinating role. The senior departments are additionally well positioned to undertake a strong leadership role. Political leadership – as we noted above – is critical to an effective whole-of-government engagement with ESD.

ESD sections in the annual reports varied considerably in size and detail. As one would expect, the specifically environment-related departments provided the most comprehensive reports. Most ESD reporting was confined to a one to two page appendix at the end of the report, however. Some departments specifically mentioned some ESD principles and related them, in some specific capacity or other, to related programs or processes. Others articulated the principles but provided little or no substantive detail. This echoes the susceptibility of sustainability principles to "rhetorical capture" and the consequent difficulty of determining levels of commitment from such general absorption of the language of sustainability. To compensate for this, the data extracted from the annual reports was organised in a particular manner.

The tables show that while all departments responded to the mandated reporting requirements, there was considerable diversity in both the approach and length of the reporting. As would be

reports, although these too varied considerably. The Departments of Environment and Heritage, and Defence, for example, provided lengthy, detailed and well organised reports while the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry's report was relatively general and sketchy. Nonetheless, the most notable reporting gap is between the environment-related departments and the others. While this is not unexpected, it thwarts one of the main objectives of ESD, which was the penetration of sustainability principles into the whole of government arena in an effort to develop a more integrated policy approach. The data exposes another important reporting gap: the limited information provided by the senior departments. Given that successful ESD integration relies on active political leadership, the limited reporting by the senior departments becomes particularly significant.

The majority of reports addressed ESD in a very general or cursory fashion. Most adopted, as they were required, the definition of ESD as prescribed by the EPBC act, and employed some of the key terms encompassed in this definition to highlight their ESD related activities. For example, 'sustainable', 'equity' (both intergenerational and more generally) and 'ecological integrity' were often utilised to describe general progress towards the meeting of ESD objectives. However, more tangible indications of what these terms meant within the ambit of the department's activities was less forthcoming.

We will examine the responses to each ESD principle in turn. Tables 1 and 2 differentiate departmental ESD responses into 'mention only' or 'substantive responses'. A specific mention of the principle (no matter how brief) warranted a citation in Table 1. Table 2 records the more substantive responses. However, a substantive response is relative to the 'mention only' alternative and does not always imply a 'serious' and substantive commitment to sustainability. The substantive responses outlined in Table 2 simply record the effort by some departments to provide greater reporting detail. We note from the findings presented in Table 1 the frequent mention of a range of ESD principles by most departments. Closer scrutiny reveals that while some principles were more frequently referred to than others, this often reflected their generality rather than their specific observance.

While most departments referred to 'integrated decision- making' the form that integration took varied considerably and did not always refer specifically to environmental policy integration. Departments such as DAG, DOFA, DPMC and Treasury specifically undertake an integrative role as part of their portfolio's umbrella function. DAG, for example, notes that it includes "economic (financial, business, consumer), social, equity, political, cultural, international and environmental considerations" in its policy advice to government (DAG Annual Report, 2001-02). It is "[o]n this basis that the Department's activities can be seen to accord with the first of the ESD principles while having less direct relevance to the remaining principles" (DAG Annual Report, 2001-02). ESD principles, however, are not referred to

directly in the Department's two key outcomes of an equitable and accessible civil justice system and a just, secure and 'safer Australia'.

Table 1: Mention of ESD Principles

Commonwealth Departments Annual Reports 2001 – 2002

Principles of ESD

Department	Integrated Decision-making1	Pre-cautionary principle2	Inter-generational equity3	Conser-vation principle4	Review & improve mechanisms5
DAFF	✓		✓	✓	✓
DAG	✓		✓	✓	
DCITA				✓	
Defence	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
DEST			✓	✓	
DEWR	✓			✓	
DEH	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
DFACS	✓			✓	✓
DFAT	✓		✓	✓	
DOFA				✓	
DHA	✓	✓		✓	✓
DIMMA				✓	
DITR	✓		✓	✓	✓
DPMC	✓			✓	
DTRS	✓		✓	✓	✓
Treasury	✓			✓	

1 Decision-making processes should effectively integrate both long-term and short-term economic, environmental, social and equitable considerations.

2 If there are threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation (the ‘precautionary principle’).

3 The principle of inter-generational equity – that the present generation should ensure that the health, diversity and productivity of the environment is maintained or enhanced for the benefit of future generations.

4 The conservation of biological diversity and ecological integrity should be a fundamental consideration in decision-making (conservation interpreted broadly).

5 Improved valuation, pricing and incentive mechanisms should be promoted.

Table 2: Substantive response to ESD principles#

Commonwealth Departments Annual Reports 2001 – 2002

Principles of ESD

Department	Integrated Decision-making	Pre-cautionary principle	Inter-generational equity	Conserv-ation principle##	Review & improve mechanisms
DAFF			✓	✓	
DAG					
DCITA					
Defence	✓		✓	✓	✓
DEST				✓	
DEWR				✓	
DEH	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
DFACS					
DFAT	✓				
DOFA					
DHA	✓	✓			
DIMMA					
DITR	✓		✓	✓	✓
DPMC	✓				
DTRS	✓		✓	✓	✓
Treasury					

Are ESD principles mentioned only (as noted in Table 1), or is there a more substantive response linked to specific processes, strategies, programs or policies?

For a more detailed breakdown of this principle see Table 4.

The DPMC's specific reporting on the integrated decision making principle is very brief. It refers, however, to relevant environment matters that require "a cross-portfolio and/or intergovernmental perspective" to its Industry, Infrastructure and Environment Division and thus warrants a substantive citation in Table 2. While this section lists quite an extensive array of relevant environmental policy issues, it does not – beyond noting a Sustainable Environment Committee of Cabinet – do so, however, within a framework of ecologically sustainable development. Beyond participating in "government forums on environmental issues" and involvement in some environmental management matters, Treasury too omits any direct reference to its integrated decision-making role with respect to sustainability. DOFA claims to be awaiting specific guidelines from DEH with regard to reviewing EPBC related legislation the department oversights. Its report is thus confined to energy conservation

A more detailed response to the principle of integrated environmental decision making was confined to the environment related departments – for example, DEH, DITR, DTRS – or those with more specific environment responsibilities such as Defence, as noted in Table 2. DHA reported on its liaison with other agencies, including international organisations such as the World Health Organisation and OECD and national agencies such as the National Environmental Protection Council. Inter-departmental and more extensive inter-agency collaboration was not detailed however.

The precautionary principle was conspicuous for its relative absence. It was rarely mentioned and attracted few substantive responses. This is despite the fact that when it was referred to specifically as an underpinning principle of key legislation it was included as a substantive response in Table 2, even if this reference was brief. DHA, for example, highlighted the precautionary framework of its Gene Technology Act 2000: "where there are threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage, a lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation" (DHA Annual Report, 2001-02). As would be expected, DEH provided the most substantive response in that it embedded the principle – albeit very generally – throughout its ESD reporting.

The specific embedding of the precautionary principle into relevant departmental activities proved elusive. This explains the limited citations in Table 2. For example, while DFAT detailed its commitment to and participation in areas and protocols to which a precautionary approach applied, it did not directly highlight the principle. With regard to climate change, it stressed its commitment to a "global regime that that addresses climate change effectively, while minimising the cost to the economy, and preserving our international competitiveness" (DFAT Annual Report, 2001-02). Similarly, on the Bio-safety protocol it stated that it had "worked successfully against proposals that would create unnecessary impediments to trade … without contributing to the protocol's environmental objective." Furthermore, in "recognition that the protocol has potential to affect adversely Australian exports should trading partners become parties, we alerted Australian industry representatives to some practical implications of its entry-into-force" (DFAT Annual Report, 2001-02). Thus, beyond a precautionary approach to economic sustainability, there was little direct reference to ecological precaution.

By contrast many departments mentioned the intergenerational equity principle. This partly reflects the generality of the principle and its "motherhood statement" status. Few, after all, would not be for intergenerational equity. Under the rubric of the "equitable and accessible" component in its first outcome, for example, the Department of Attorney-General claims to

(DAG, Annual Report, 2001-02). As evidence of commitment to ESD principles generally, the department of Foreign Affairs and Trade referred to its Output on International Organisations: Legal and Environment. It claimed to demonstrate this commitment through its involvement in environment-related policies per se rather than with regard to the sustainability quality of the policies themselves. These policies and activities included Marine resources and Antarctic activities and participation in the Protocols on climate change and bio-safety – policies that have attracted considerable criticism for their unsustainable elements.

Substantive responses to the intergenerational principle were less forthcoming. Once again, environment-related departments were more likely to report substantive activities, with DEH providing the most robust response. DAFF, Defence, DITR and DTRS also made relatively specific contributions. The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, for example, argued that the majority of its programs were "directly targeted at the conservation of biodiversity, the maintenance of ecological integrity or intergenerational equity" (DAFF Annual Report, 2001-02). This included its Regional Forest Agreements Act 2002 and through its "inspection, regulation and education" programs, agencies and activities that are committed to "ensuring that the health, diversity and productivity of the Australian environment is maintained or enhanced for the benefit of future generations" (DAFF Annual Report, 2001-02).

For other departments, commitment to intergenerational equity (or equity per se) was embedded in the general endorsement of ESD principles as a whole. Support for the equity principle was also as likely to refer to economic as well as environmental equity. The goals of environmental sustainability were often embedded within those of economic sustainability. For example, the department of Industry, Tourism and Resources states that:

> Economic progress through improvements in the competitiveness of Australian industry contributes to Australia's ability to meet other social and environmental goals. Through the development of and delivery of industry programs and the provision of business information services, the Department promoted sustainable production growth in Australian industry and sustainable development of the Australian economy as a whole (DITR Annual Report, 2001-02)

While the interconnection between economic and environmental sustainability is of course an important one, the specific equity and intergenerational justice issues raised by environmental risk are overlooked (see Low & Gleeson, 1998; Beck, 1992).

The conservation principle was the principle most frequently referred to by most of the departments. It also attracted the most substantive responses – albeit often because of its narrow interpretation. Paradoxically, the principle was interpreted both broadly and narrowly. On a broad level, few people (and departments) are wantonly against conservation, even if

including ecological integrity. Thus a broad commitment to the principle of conservation is unremarkable. Many departments – especially the environment-related ones – alluded to a broad commitment to conversation per se. In reporting on more substantive conservation activities, however, most departments focused primarily on a narrower conceptualisation of conservation – that is, the conservation of energy outputs. Most departments thus highlighted the internal departmental activities that impacted on the environment and the measures they took to minimise this impact (see Table 2). Table 1 demonstrates that all departments mentioned the conservation principle and Table 2 that almost all of the departments detailed a more substantive response. Because evidence of observance of the conservation principle was confined primarily to internal energy conservation measures, it elicited the most specific and detailed responses. Departments were thus able to showcase – to their credit – their environment management systems and their strategies for transforming energy-usage behaviour. Such measures included electricity conservation, the recycling of paper and print cartridges, the introduction of lighting timer switches, the production of energy audits and the development of more efficient air conditioning units.

A glance at Tables 1 and 2 would thus create the impression that considerable activity is taking place in response to the conservation principle, especially when compared to responses to other ESD principles. For many departments it also represents the only activity or principle referred to. To distinguish between those departments that did differentiate more expansive ecological conservation activities from energy conservation alone, Table 3 provides a breakdown of responses to the conservation principle. It distinguishes between first, those departments that referred to internal departmental energy conservation measures only; second, those that referred to ecological conservation measures only; and finally, those that referred to both ecological conservation principles and departmental efficiencies.

Once again, in often referring to both, environment-related departments tended to adopt a more expansive conceptualisation of and response to the conservation principle. There was some acknowledgement that the conservation principle applied to the conservation of ecological communities and processes and thus to ‘ecological integrity’. These departments – including Defence, DEST (through the 2000 Green Corps program), DEWR (through the Green Reserves program), DEH, DITR and DTRS – referred more broadly to their ecological conservation policies and commitments as well as to their internal conservation measures. The remainder – with the exception of DAFF, which discussed only ecological conservation measures – referred to internal departmental conservation efficiencies only. The departments for whom internal departmental efficiencies represented the main or primary ESD reporting response included Treasury, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and DOFA.

The final principle refers to review and improvement mechanisms, especially in relation to

departments responded most directly to this principle. We thus find departments such as DAFF, Defence, DEH, DITR and DTRS represented both in Table 1 and in Table 2. DHA was also represented, especially in its capacity as manager of the recently created environmental health program – Enhealth (Enhealth, 1999).

Table 3: ESD Conservation principle

Commonwealth Departments Annual Reports 2000 – 2002

Department	Ecological* AND Departmental** conservation	Departmental Conservation ONLY	Ecological Conservation ONLY
DAFF			✓
DA-G		✓	
DCITA		✓	
Defence	✓		
DEST	✓		
DEWR	✓		
DEH	✓		
DFACS		✓	
DFAT		✓	
DOFA		✓	
DH&A		✓	
DIMMA		✓	
DIT & R	✓		
DPM&C		✓	
DT& RS	✓		
Treasury		✓	

* Refers to specific policies, programs, commitments or goals that seek the conservation of ecological communities and processes.

** Refers to internal departmental energy conservation measures such as electricity conservation, recycling, energy audits and more efficient air conditioning units. Correlates to reporting items 3 and 4 in Table 4.

The breakdown of ESD principles presented in Tables 1 – 3 provided a glimpse of how departments conceptualised and/or responded to ESD principles. As evidence of the steps taken to address ESD considerations and incorporate ESD principles – as understood above – the EPBC Act required departments to list specific reporting items (see Table 4). Only a few departments organised their reporting items systematically, however, with many preferring to talk generally – if at all – about their ESD achievements. Departments were formally required to report on how the administration of legislation by the organisation accorded with the principles of ESD. The more detailed responses were elicited from the environment-related departments. As would be expected, however, no department submitted that its legislation contravened or contradicted these principles.

Those environment-related departments with specific responsibility for environment legislation often simply listed the relevant pieces of administered legislation influencing ESD. This often assumed that environment-related legislation was by implication ESD 'friendly'. This may well be the case. After all, the absence of supporting data in these reports does not imply absence altogether. Nonetheless, some environment legislation or policy justifications that are available in the reports often reflect an overriding commitment to economic priorities to which environment concerns are adapted. For example, in reporting on policy and related activities, DFAT states that they

> worked to ensure that multilateral trade negotiations in the World Trade Organisation enhanced the mutual supportiveness of trade and environment, including through: encouraging recognition of the benefits of sustainable development of further liberalisation of trade in agriculture … as well as negotiations for the reduction or, as appropriate, elimination of tariff and non-tariff barriers to environmental goods and services" (DFAT Annual Report, 2001-02).

Similarly, DITR implies that good economic indices are necessarily the precursors to environmental sustainability: "Economic progress through improvements in the competitiveness of Australian industry contributes to Australia's ability to meet other social and environmental goals" (DITR Annual Report, 2001-02). This goal is encapsulated in one of DIT&R's key outcomes: that ESD goals are best achieved by "a stronger, sustainable and internationally competitive Australian industry". While a strong economy is indeed an important goal, the assumption that environmental outcomes are always best achieved through the pursuit of economic growth or through the use of market instruments that promote competition, remains contentious (Hollander & Curran, 2001). It is also a position more readily ascribed to the narrow version of sustainability.

Table 4: Reporting Items

Commonwealth Departments Annual Reports 2001 – 2002

Department	**Administer Legislation & ESD1**	**Outcomes and ESD2**	**Activities Impact on environm3**	**Minimising Impact on environm4**	**Review Mechanisms 5**
DAFF	✓	✓			✓
DA-G			✓	✓	
DCITA			✓	✓	
Defence	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
DEST	✓		✓	✓	✓
DEWR	✓		✓	✓	
DEH	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
DFACS			✓	✓	
DFAT	✓	✓	✓	✓	
DOFA			✓	✓	

DIMMA			✓	✓	
DIT & R	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
DPM&C	✓	✓	✓	✓	
DT& RS	✓		✓	✓	✓
Treasury			✓	✓	

1 How administration of legislation by the organisation accorded with the principles of ESD.

2 How the outcomes specified for the organisation in an Appropriations Act contribute to ESD.

3 The effect of the organisation's activities on the environment. (This is primarily interpreted as energy conservation measures that are put in place, including environmental management systems that instigate improved energy use.)

4 The measures (if any) taken by the organisation to minimise this impact (here refers primarily to specific internal measures to conserve energy and other efficiencies).

5 The mechanisms (if any) for reviewing and increasing effectiveness of efficiency measures.

The second reporting item involved the connection between departmental outcomes and ESD. The environment related departments responded most frequently to this item, with the DPMC – through its Industry, Infrastructure and Environment Division – also specifying some ESD outcomes. However, while some departments provide a thorough and systematic response to this reporting item, these responses are not automatically significant or substantive. For example, the Department of Health and Aging articulates a lengthy and systematic response. Closer inspection of its response highlights some uncertain connections with ESD principles. With regard to the synergy between its Population health outcome and ESD principles, the department points to the fact that:

> An indirect outcome of programs promoting physical activity and healthy weight is the potential for reducing private motor vehicle use, particularly for short distance travel, with benefits for pollution reduction, conservation of ecological integrity and protecting the health of the environment for future generations. (www.health.gov.au/pubs/annrep/ar2002/part4/04_e004.htm) .

Without more information, it is difficult to determine whether this – albeit positive sustainability response – is a postscript or a deliberate ESD strategy built into the very fabric of the population health policy.

In response to the last three items – how the departments' activities impacted on the environment; measures undertaken to minimise these impacts; and review mechanisms – most departments referred primarily to the energy conservation measures they had put in place – or would be putting in place – to address internal inefficiencies. This item was discussed above in response to the conservation principle.

Discussion and Conclusions

The 2001-02 Annual Reports provided the first opportunity for most commonwealth departments to report on their contributions to ESD as required by the EPBC (1999) Act. Aside from the more comprehensive reports of some of the environment-related departments, most of these first reports were cursory. As already suggested, this is not entirely unexpected. The reporting requirement undoubtedly proved a challenge for many departments at best unfamiliar with, or at worst disinterested in, the ESD framework. This is despite the fact that the principles of ESD were embodied in the NSESD – the strategy which most governments endorsed in the early 1990s. Most commonwealth departments would have been cognisant of the ESD framework even if the more specific reporting requirement is a recent legislative development. The ESD framework – and sustainable development principles generally – has after all been visibly in place for well over a decade. There nonetheless remains considerable confusion about what these principles actually mean both conceptually and in practice.

The integration of ESD principles into established departmental practices has a considerable way to go. Effective integration is often hampered by political and administrative settings dominated by economic rationalities, often at the expense of socio-ecological ones. This preliminary investigation of ESD reporting demonstrated a limited preparedness to grapple with the challenge of sustainability. Few of the departments referred to planned changes to their decision-making processes, beyond a cursory acknowledgement of the integrated decision making principle. Certainly there was no talk of systematic review of departmental practices, programs or policies with a view to identifying 'unsustainable elements'. Least such a review seem fanciful, an important precedent exists. In the late 1990s, National Competition Policy mandated that all relevant legislation be retrospectively reviewed with the object of identifying anti-competitive elements. In commenting on NCP's legislative review process, Dovers (1997:80) observes that "[n]o one concerned with sustainability would dare fantasise that the 1800 pieces of Australian statute law could ever be subjected to a review seeking 'unsustainable elements'". Yet such a review would contribute considerably to a clearer conceptualisation of ESD and would facilitate the practical integration of sustainability principles into the policy mainstream and into institutional design. The practical integration of sustainability principles into institutional design could also be assisted through the establishment of 'ESD units' within each department (Dovers, 1997, Yenchken 2000). These units could be tasked with embedding ESD principles into a range of departmental policies and processes. As part of their ESD overview function they could also take responsibility for comprehensive annual ESD reporting against clearly determined benchmarks.

Once again, effective political leadership is critical to environmental policy success. Central departments such as Prime Minister and Cabinet, Treasury and Finance and Administration

these departments provided the briefest (half to one page) reports. Annual reports may not be the best forum for demonstrating commitment and leadership, but they do present a modelling opportunity for the central departments. Yencken (2000:23) notes that the commonwealth "cannot expect business and other institutions to adopt comprehensive environmental management plans and full environmental reporting if it does not practice what it preaches". To reinforce their leadership role, central agencies such as Prime Minister and Cabinet and Treasury could monitor the whole-of-government approach to ESD. PMC does refer such matters to its Industry, Infrastructure and Environment Division, but there is still significant room for an ESD-dedicated division. In their comparison of the policy trajectory of National Competition Policy vis-à-vis ESD, Curran and Hollander (2002) note that policy commitment is often revealed through the departmental 'housing' of policy. While ESD may have begun its life in the department of Prime Minister and Cabinet it did not remain there. National Competition Policy by contrast remains the responsibility of Prime Minister and Cabinet and Treasury in all jurisdictions (Curran and Hollander, 2002:162).

Overall, these reports reveal a limited penetration of whole-of-government responsibility for sustainability. This is demonstrated in the limited institutional engagement with ESD outcomes and the frequent 'lip-service' reference to ESD principles that we observed in the reports. When discussed more substantively, the understanding of these principles seemed to fit more with a 'narrow' conceptualisation of sustainability than the 'broader' version discussed above. There was considerable disinclination to engage substantively with the social and equity aspects of sustainability, even by some of the environment-related departments whose policy work interfaced – either directly or indirectly – with social and equity concerns. There also appeared to be considerable disinclination by the central departments to exhibit a strong ESD leadership role by modelling substantive responses.

The notable achievements in environmental policy and institutional design over the past few years should not be overlooked, however (see Papadakis, 2002). The Howard government has initiated "significant institutional reform" including the creation of a specifically dedicated environment department, the Natural Heritage Trust and the Australian Greenhouse Office (Christoff, 2002:11). Even so, "these reforms have failed to achieve their full potential" because of limited institutional and funding commitments to achieving sustainability goals (Christoff, 2002:11). This commitment shortfall is reflected in this paper's findings. Overall, it seems that until ESD gains the fulsome consideration it warrants, ESD reporting will continue to be perfunctory and ad hoc.

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Acronyms:

Departments	
DAFF	Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry
DAG	Attorney General
DCITA	Communications, Information Technology & the Arts
Defence	Defence
DEST	Education, Science & Training
DEWR	Employment & Workplace Relations
DEH	Environment & Heritage
DFACS	Family & Community Services
DFAT	Foreign Affairs & Trade
DOFA	Finance & Administration
DHA	Health & Ageing
DIMMA	Immigration & Multicultural Affairs
DITR	Industry, Tourism & Re

DPMC	Prime Minister & Cabinet
DTRS	Transport & Regional Services
Treasury	Treasury