

The International Conference on Environmental, Cultural,  
Economic and Social Sustainability.

held at the East-West Center, Island of Oahu, Hawai'i

25–27 February 2005

**THE CULTURAL DIMENSION OF THE SUSTAINABILITY  
CHALLENGE**

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The Cultural Development Network is proud to be a partner in this first international sustainability conference and journal, and to have had the privilege of hosting the talking circles in the cultural sustainability stream. The outcome of these discussion sessions is outlined below, but I offer a few preliminary remarks from our perspective, as one of the few non-academic participants at the conference.

Together with Common Ground in 2001 we published *'The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture's Essential Role in Public Planning'* by Jon Hawkes, a keynote speaker at the conference. The book is part of our effort to advocate the centrality of the cultural dimension of public policies and programs for sustainability (of the environment, and the economies and communities it has the capacity to support into the future). The book has attracted interest in arts, public policy and academic circles, and has informed the structure and approach of the first international sustainability conference itself. Its thesis is that:

*"Cultural vitality is as essential to a healthy and sustainable society as social equity, environmental responsibility and economic viability. In order for public planning to be more effective, its methodology should include an integrated framework of cultural evaluation along similar lines to those being developed for social, environmental and economic impact assessment".*

We are a small non-profit association in Melbourne, Australia promoting 'cultural vitality' as a core responsibility of municipal government and, within that, the value of participatory arts in community strengthening and civic engagement at the local level. Our perspective and approach to the conference themes therefore was unlike that of most other participants, whose ideas derive from their academic research. We are essentially a network of artists, community groups and local government cultural development staff. For us then it was a great opportunity to meet with thinkers and researchers from diverse academic disciplines

concerned, like we are, to build new paradigms and a more inclusive effective dialogue on this most pressing topic of sustainability. In this search for an empowering inclusive dialogue I would make a plea for the consideration of community-based arts approaches to drawing out the voices and issues of those still excluded from the discussion.

Like many others reflecting on the conference on the last day, we too were invigorated and by the emerging discourse across traditional disciplines. There was for us, an additional layer of complexity - beyond that inherent in the dialogue between scientists and artists; that is the challenge of bringing together useful discussion between the community and academic worlds. I hope that future conferences attract participants from academic institutions but also increasingly from a wide range of community contexts – most especially from indigenous communities whose wisdom about the natural interconnectedness of land, spirit, culture, future and so on is vital for us to learn from.

The inspiring, and creative presentations of the two indigenous Hawaiian speakers, Lilette Subedi, and Ramsay Taum, demonstrated to me the value of a deeply integrated approach (including cultural vitality) to sustainability and the powerful expression of the implications of this through the medium of the arts. We have a lot to learn.

In the cultural sustainability talking circles the following points were agreed as those that best summarised our discussions, and the challenges we continue to face:

- transforming the promises and threats of globalisation into a creative tension
- the centrality of culture: values underpin everything – not an add-on
- the common ground is the ground
- language diversity is as important as bio diversity
- mismatching metaphors (same words – different meanings)
- “other” cultures are living not mere heritage
- happiness is a legitimate goal
- acknowledge ancient wisdom and acknowledge the sacred
- the context is as important as the content (how not just what)
- we must learn what indigenous cultures are telling us