

## **From Sustainable Community to Big Society: 10 years learning with the Imagine approach**

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Community is a key word in the current UK political vocabulary. As part of Big Society or as a sustainable means to develop social coherence, community has been an area of focus that has attained UK political party interest since 2003. In 1999, the Imagine method was first hinted at in the Earthscan book: “Sustainability Indicators: measuring the immeasurable”. The approach allows citizens to learn about and self-evaluate their own sustainability by developing their own sustainability indicators in a manner which is participatory and evidence based. Communities could make use of the approach, not in an attempt to arrive at some “absolute” value of sustainability but in striving to achieve a self-knowing sense of how sustainable they are, by their own measured indicators, and to use this evaluation in discourse with other agencies such as local and national government. The tone of Imagine is to empower citizens to own their own sustainability and to plan for sustainable futures. The method, developed for spatial and temporal sustainability assessment, has been trialled by countries in the Mediterranean region within Coastal Area Management Programmes (CAMPs). Building off this engagement with geographically and culturally diverse communities, the method has been supported by the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) in the UK and developed into a teaching module that has been subsequently tested at undergraduate, postgraduate, continuing professional development (CPD), Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and working with practitioners, as a hands-on Masterclass. The resulting course Creating Sustainable Communities (CSC) has now been introduced to 20 UK universities and has seen use by seven of them. This paper tracks the development of the Imagine method, explores its major elements and sets out the learning impacts it has had to date.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Community; Big Society; Imagine method; sustainability indicators; participation; local community

### **1. Introduction and background**

There is contemporary interest in community participation. Two of the policy phrases in current use are Big Society and Sustainable Community. Political rhetoric is rarely a good basis for empirical analysis, but the two terms do share some common themes and have offered policy guidance on the development of concrete approaches. In the launch of the Big Society, David Cameron said:

The first element is about giving communities more power – so, for instance, our policy to train more community organisers, to help actually create the social action of the future. (Prime Ministers Speech, Tuesday, 18 May, 2010).

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The themes of communities gaining more power and the training of community organisers found parallel in earlier rhetoric about Sustainable Communities. In 2003, John Prescott, the Deputy Prime Minister, set out the criteria for a sustainable community. High on the list of attributes were:

Effective engagement and participation by local people, groups and businesses, especially in the planning, design and long term stewardship of their community, and an active voluntary and community sector. (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2003, p. 5)

From these brief quotes, we can deduce that community focus is important for UK Central Government policy and that the empowerment of communities to lead in their own affairs remains a touchstone for current policy. The rhetoric is in place but how are these themes attained? How can communities of place, of interest and/or of practice be encouraged to be proactive in their own measurement, assessment and subsequent development? Recent papers have identified some of the issues of community engagement in self-understanding/mutual understanding (Lidstone & Stoltman, 2007) in governance (McIntyre & McKee, 2008), environmental education (Carter & Hill, 2007; Pearson & Honeywood, 2005; Wilks, 2010), urban development (Fahy & O Cinneide, 2009) and learning about sustainability (Pearson & Honeywood, 2005). Underlying issues of citizen participation and engagement are also well mapped. Toolkits to achieve greater participation have been developed (Chambers, 2002; Creighton, 2005), and their use is both global and domain rich (for examples from forestry to e-participation, from China to Finland, see de Zuniga, Veenstra, & Shah, 2010; Kangas et al., 2010; Peterson, 2010; Spirakis, Spiraki, & Nikolopoulos, 2010; Zhao, 2010). Considerable research has been recorded in addressing key issues for participation, including ways in which the term “public” is constructed, participant motivation, identification of interests and interest groups and empowerment arising from the outcomes from participation (Barnes, Newman, & Sullivan, 2007; Clayton Thomas, 1995).

As both Kinson, Pain, and Kesby (2007) and others (Chambers, 1992, 1997, 2002; Rajakutty, 1991) have shown, the range of approaches to participation is legion. However, the key outcome is general to all, working together to make things better. And all agree, this is not an easy or rapid process yet the political rhetoric remains as strident as ever.

Bell and Morse attempted to address issues of participation in sustainable community via sustainability indicators (SIs; Bell & Morse, 2003, 2008). The “mission” of the original 1999 book was to draw attention to the misplaced academic and practitioner focus on the measurement of sustainability from the top down and in a quantitative manner. The book focused on a review of the experiences of academics who were attempting to achieve this and, possibly expectedly, came to the conclusion that the task was unfeasible and the means used to measure sustainability were inappropriate. In an attempt to take this forward, the authors included a suggestion for a citizen-based, systemic approach to developing qualitative and quantitative SIs. The method (Systemic Sustainability Analysis [SSA]) was intended as a foil and an alternative to objective and quantifiable measurement. More importantly, evolving from earlier attempts to engage in public participation in decision making (Bell, 1996), it was produced as a means to redress the balance and to give local communities the capacity to assess their own sustainability, to be able to argue back and assert their own view of sustainability and to contest the orthodoxy of top down and imposed visions of sustainability. In due course, SSA evolved into the Imagine methodology.

From 1999 to 2010, there were four stages in the evolution of Imagine – these, with the stimulus for development and primary outputs, are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The evolution of Imagine, stimulus and application(s).

Methodology	Main characteristics	Stimulus for development	Main applications
Systemic Sustainability Analysis – SSA (Bell & Morse, 2008)	A five-stage approach which allowed a group to map its sustainability	Literature and projects in the sustainability indicator arena	Evolved from an evaluatory tool applied in Pakistan (Bell, 1996). Adopted for Coastal Area Management Programme (CAMP), Malta
Systemic Prospective Sustainability Analysis – SPSA (Bell & Morse, 2003)	Evolved model of SSA but now with explicit development of a scenario making aspect – building off the work of Godet (Godet, 1997, 2001; Godet, Monti, Meunier, & Roubelat, 2004)	Evolving the use of SSA in the Mediterranean and response to the requirement of Plan Bleu	CAMPs in Malta, Lebanon and Algeria
Imagine (Bell & Coudert, 2005)	A process model of SPSA – the approach is now produced as a systematic and teachable set of techniques	Continuing development of SPSA in the CAMP context	CAMPs in Slovenia and Cyprus
Creating Sustainable Communities (Bell, 2008; Bell & Morse, 2008)	Imagine now completely transferred to a teachable version – face to face and virtual	Academy for Sustainable Communities/Homes and Communities Agency project to develop a teaching version	20 UK Higher Education Institutions and numerous Masterclasses around the UK

## 2. Steps in the evolution of Imagine/CSC

### 2.1. Systemic sustainability analysis: 1999–2001

In Bell and Morse (1999), the use of SIs were reviewed in an eclectic mix of different domains: Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY; specifically the work of Garcia, Sparre, & Csirke, 1989; Hoening, Warren, & Stocker, 1994; Polyacheck, Hilborn, & Punt, 1993; Prager, 1994; Schaefer, 1957), marine ecosystems (Ten Brink, Hosperi, & Collin, 1991), sustainable communities (Dominski, Clark, & Fox, 1992; Egan, 2004; MacGillivray, 1996; Zachery, 1995), institutional sustainability (Brinkerhoff & Goldsmith, 1992; Gustafson, 1994) and sustainability in project appraisal (Barbier, Markandya, & Pearce, 1990; van Pelt, Kuyvenhoven, & Nijkamp, 1990). In each domain, significant issues and problems were identified in the form, content and process of SI usage. The authors were concerned by the following: Who determines what is important to measure and why? Are objective assessments of value always possible? Is positivistic objectivism a good means to assess something so subjective as “sustainability” – most particularly at the community level? The review led to a number of serious questions, meaningful across domains:

- Is sustainability important in the project context, and if so, then whose visions of sustainability count and what are those visions?
- Can SIs help to address the problem?
- What SIs do we need?
- How are the SIs to be gauged?
- How are the SIs to be interpreted and used?

The glue that binds all five questions together is people and participation – who makes the decisions and how? Recognizing that sustainability means different things to different people is at the heart of the matter. (Bell & Morse, 2008, p. 74)

The SSA methodology emerged as a suggested means to engage community in a grounded review of its own sustainability. Other methodologies and approaches exist (for an example of some of the literature, see Agyeman & Angus, 2003; Aigner, Flora, & Hernandez, 2001; Bridger & Luloff, 2001; Maliene, Howe, & Malys, 2008; Raco, 2007; Robinson & Adams, 2008), but SSA was purpose designed in response to the orthodoxy of the time and as a means for community participation to operate as the basis and origin for subsequent sustainability issue identification.

Figure 1 provides a schematic overview of the approach in 1999 showing the cyclic nature of the approach and the key involvement of stakeholders in the process from an early point. The figure also introduces the use of AMOEBA diagrams as a means to display SIs (this will be returned to soon). SSA shares three tools in common with later presentations of the method: Rich Pictures for community level information sharing, SIs to assess at community level the experience of sustainability (or lack of it) and AMOEBA diagrams as a means to capture these indicators in a readily accessible manner. Figure 2 shows examples of these tools in process.

In 2000–2001, SSA was adopted by Plan Bleu, a French/United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Regional Activity Centre for the Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup> The approach was applied in a Coastal Area Management Programme (CAMP) project under the auspices of the Mediterranean Action Plan (MAP), which was about to begin in Malta. SSA was applied in five workshops from March 2000 to May 2001. In the process of adoption, the approach was re-configured to include a more explicit element of scenario making (to align this with existing Plan Bleu practice the approach was linked to that of Godet: Godet, 1993,

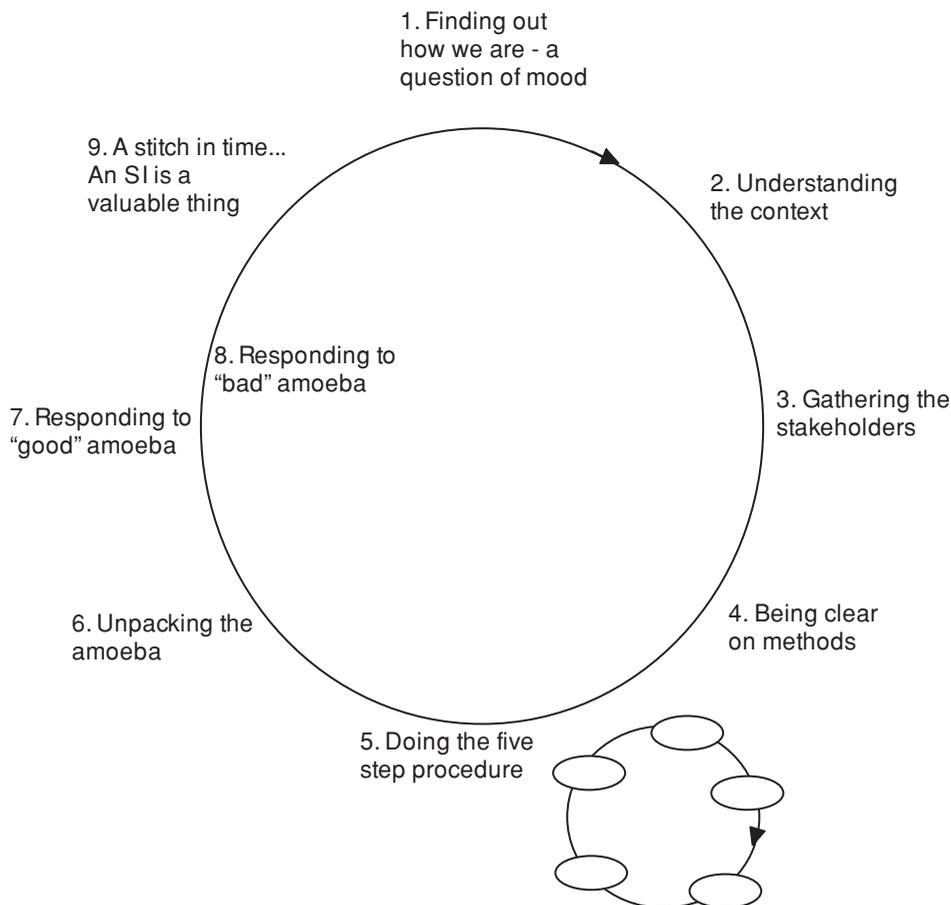


Figure 1. Systemic Sustainability analysis (Bell & Morse, 2008, p. 122).

2000a, 2000b). The outcome of this was Systemic Prospective Sustainability Analysis or SPSA (for more details on this presentation of the approach in Malta, see Bell & Morse, 2004).

In terms of effectiveness, SSA received some critical acclaim from Maltese agencies but remained a theory in need of further development in response to further practical application.

**2.2. Systemic prospective sustainability analysis: 2001–2005**

The CAMP was to be run out in a number of countries across the Mediterranean, and each CAMP was intended to study the viability and sustainability of a segment of coastline. The projects were intended to review the interdependencies of social, economic and environmental pressures and to address emerging development strands as understood and expressed by local communities. SPSA in Malta specifically focused on involving community in the CAMP process, specifically vis-a-vis the sustainability of the North West of the Island. Two of the CAMP objectives for the updated method were the following:

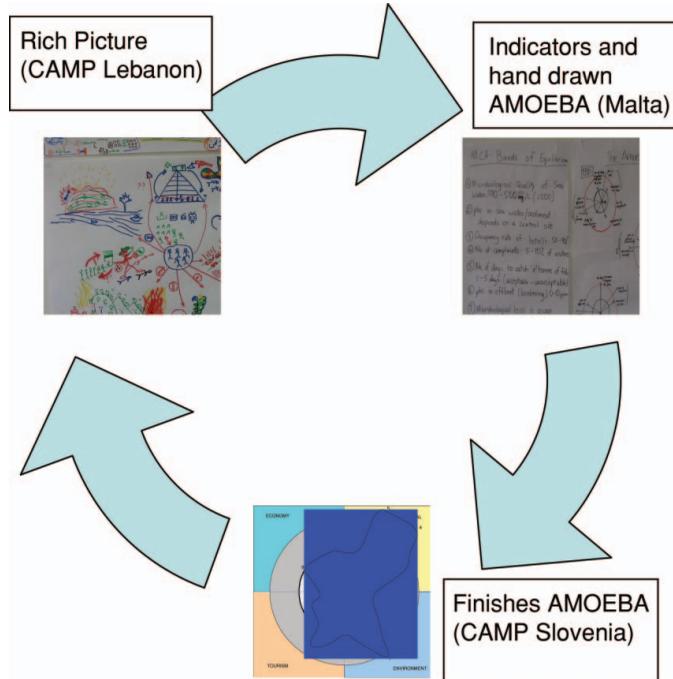


Figure 2. Rich Picture leads to indicators and these result in AMOEBA diagrams.

- To contribute to efforts towards a sustainable development of the island, in particular its north-west area, by preparing a set of sustainability indicators and a systemic sustainability analysis, to be made on the primary basis of a description and assessment of the level of sustainability by consideration of the main indicators and the process which generated them;
- to introduce and apply the systemic sustainability analysis as a specific tool for empowering sustainable management, in this case coastal and marine areas. (Ellul, 2002, p. 15)

SPSA was applied with local groups and communities and, working with these groups, features of the sustainability of the North West were mapped; a number of reports were produced<sup>2</sup> including a final report that identified that SPSA had been a qualified success in terms of developing stakeholder engagement:

The experience of SPSA has shown that diverse sectors can meet and discuss issues in a systemic manner where each sector seeks to understand the other and together express common concerns and seek to respond to solutions in an integrated and co-ordinated manner. (Ellul, 2002, p. 58)

The application of the approach also resulted in the development of local indicators:

With regard to the SPSA a number of key indicators have been identified and these SIs will be monitored over the next two years to evaluate whether actions being taken in the interim period with regard to the specific sectors are leading towards a more sustainable level of activity in the NW. (Ellul, 2002, p. 60)

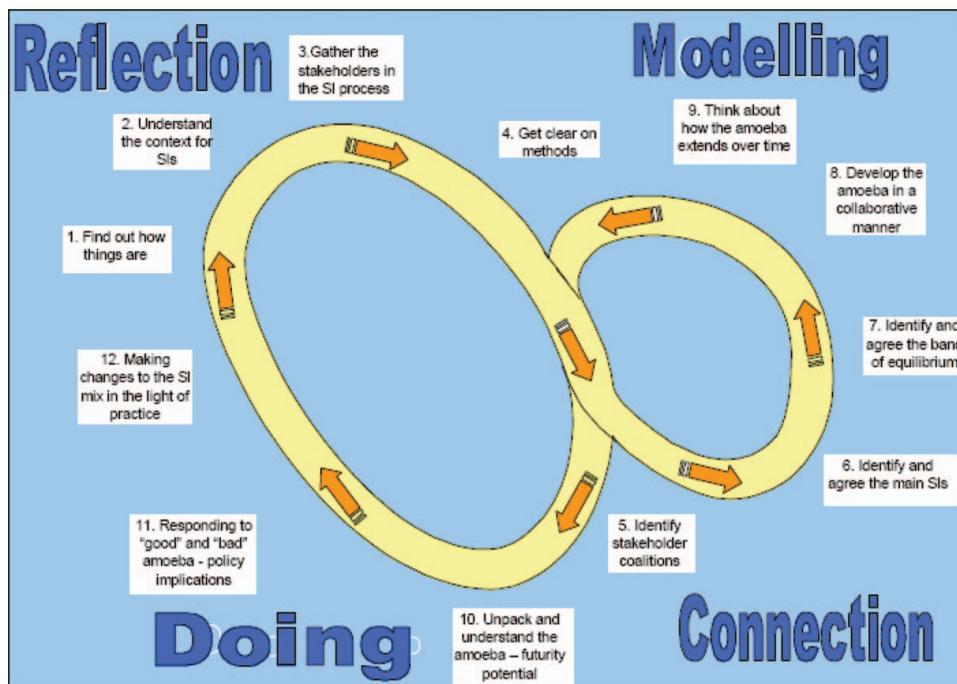


Figure 3. Systemic Prospective Sustainability analysis (Ellul, 2002, p. 7).

These indicators were agreed to and generated locally, the data were gathered by the communities themselves and the project acted as a means for people at a local level to relate to and engage with national and international agendas (Bell & Morse, 2001).

The new version of the method (as shown in Figure 3) resulted in some qualified success in terms of:

- engaging local groups,
- successfully encouraging them to assess their own sustainability and
- developing indicators for measurement of this sustainability beyond the lifetime of the project.

Following CAMP in Malta, SPSA was subsequently applied to similar CAMP projects (Larid, 2005; Mada, 2003) in Lebanon (September 2002–August 2003) and Algeria (February 2003–December 2004; Coudert & Larid, 2011). CAMP in Lebanon reported:

The workshop process was highly interactive with key participants (a total of 20) – thematic team experts and municipal council members and local community members. Participants were highly engaged in facilitating the availability of data. . . . The workshop was impressive in terms of energy and enthusiasm and this reflected in the outcomes. (Mada, 2003, p. 32)

However, SPSA remained something of a research tool to be applied with and on community. It was a “project device” and there was no evidence that it, or its predecessor, continued to be applied when the CAMP project was completed. The ambition of the authors was to produce a device which could be handed over to local groups and applied in and out of project contexts in order to produce a community level engagement tool. We

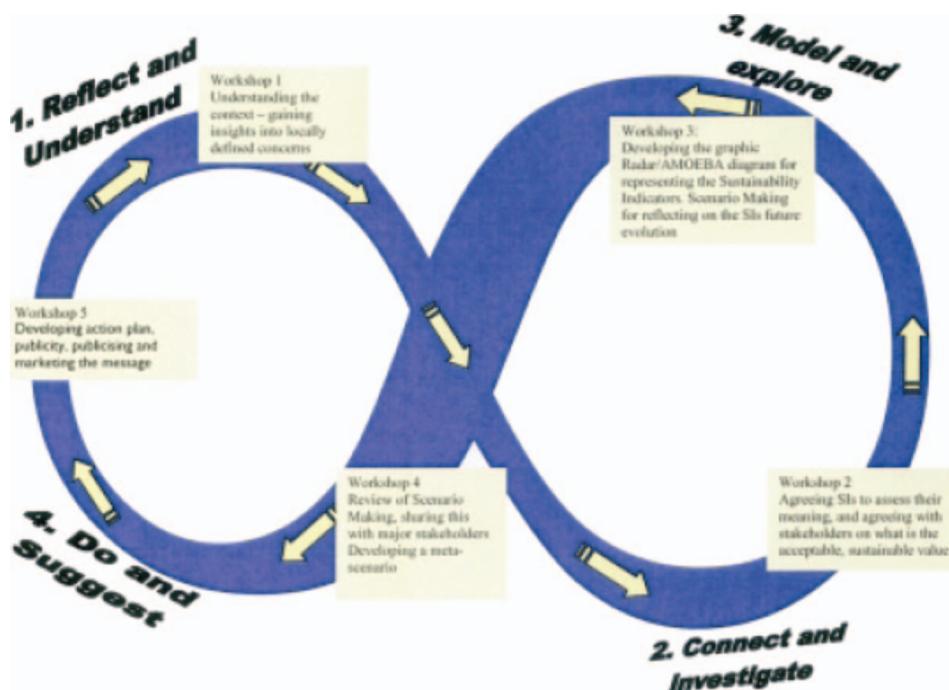


Figure 4. Imagine (Bell & Coudert, 2005, p. 13).

sought community-wide engagement to some extent pre-empting the ambition set out in David Cameron's notion for the Big Society set out in the opening paragraph of this paper. By 2005, it was clear that this ambition was not yet achieved.

### 2.3. *Imagine: 2005–2009*

Imagine was intended to be more community usable and less of a research tool than SPSA (see Figure 4). It was published by Plan Bleu (Bell & Coudert, 2005) and was released with a teaching pack and disk of PowerPoint slides.

Imagine was applied to CAMPs in Slovenia and Cyprus (Kalopedis, 2007; Maher, 2006) from January 2005 to August 2007 and subsequently described in publication (Bell & Morse, 2007b, 2009). During this process, communities were engaged, indicators emerged and the sustainable agenda was debated. To demonstrate the level of impact Imagine achieved, the recommendations from Cyprus included the following:

1. To establish Imagine as a de facto means to improve local participation in sustainability issues. (Kalopedis, 2007, pp. 3–4)

The recommendation to include Imagine as a “de facto means to improve participation” suggested that the approach was significant and, arguably, had capacity to enhance community engagement in national policy forums and to be adopted more widely than just a project device. The experiences in Cyprus and Slovenia suggested that the approach could be adopted at a wider and higher level within government and be included as a means to support local engagement in a more process managed (rather than project based – for issues

in the project use of sustainability objectives, see the Bell & Morse, 2007a, approach). However, the issue of the longevity of the approaches application within communities and its capacity to be handed over in a “learned and applied” manner remained a concern.

#### **2.4. *Creating sustainable communities: 2006–2010***

The fourth stage in the evolution of the Imagine method was in the UK, the Creating Sustainable Communities (CSC) course. The course is a taught version of the Imagine method and is at present being adopted and applied within higher education in the UK. It constitutes a response to the current policy concern already discussed that community sustainability is central to the sustainability of society itself. This response is also related to what Archer (2007) has called the “internal conversation”, which guides the patterns of social mobility in contemporary society. The course was intended to develop, at a community level, both the internal and external conversations – aiding concepts of social coherence and linking to more general issues of equality, democracy, development and equity (for a more detailed review of this see Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).

Sustainable Communities and notions of Big Society are relatively new concepts, emerging as has been shown, as policy influencers for the UK Government. This arguably started in 1998 fuelled by the report “Towards an Urban Renaissance”. Lord Rogers was invited to chair an Urban Task Force to review problems faced by Britain’s towns and cities. The report made a number of recommendations, including the need to promote interdisciplinary working. Rogers asserted:

the teaching in professional skills is excellent. The main problem is a lack of inter-disciplinary learning with a strong vocational element. The evidence is that it is generic rather than technical skills that are in short supply. (1998, p. 161)

The experience of SSA, SPSA and Imagine in the context of the CAMP projects arguably shows that it has applied generic skills and helped people to understand their community environment in an interdisciplinary (systemic) manner. Imagine was considered by the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) to be potentially a useful vehicle to teach community participation.

### **3. The creating sustainable communities course**

The notion of people living in community but not compromising social or environmental limitations is a key element to the notion of sustainable community. The Homes and Communities Academy argued:

Most people want to live in a place where they know their neighbours and feel safe. A place with good homes, local shops, lots of jobs and opportunities for young people to get a good education. (Academy for Sustainable Communities, 2007, p. 5)

The Academy for Sustainable Communities (to become in 2009 the HCA Skills and Knowledge Directorate) is an agency charged to address these elements and commissioned to the development of CSC as one means to undertake this.

#### **3.1. *Drivers for CSC***

In 2004, Sir John Egan looked at the skills needed to deliver the sustainable communities agenda. The Egan Review (Egan, 2004) concurred with the Urban Task Force and suggested

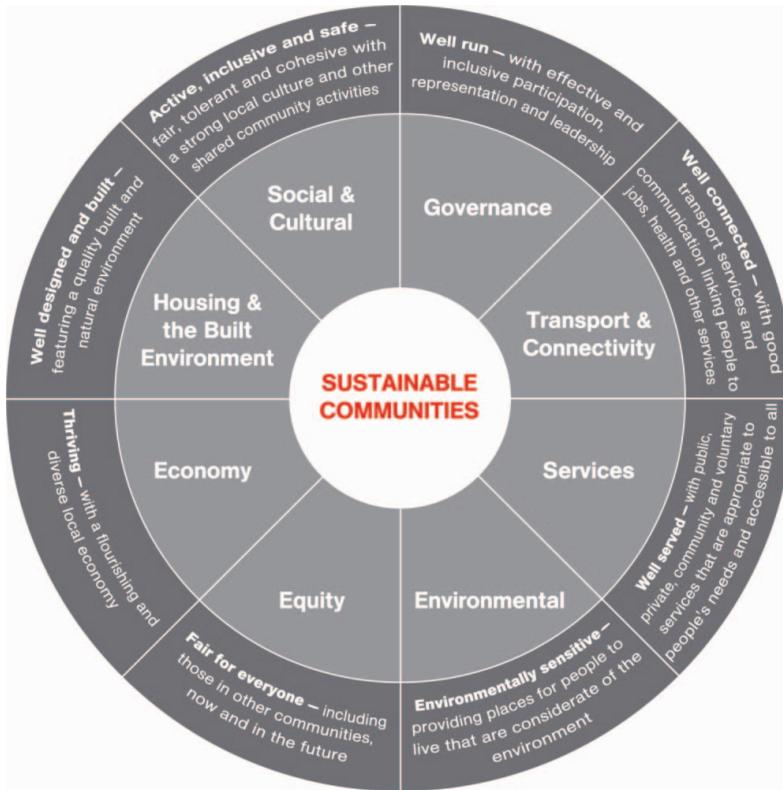


Figure 5. The Egan wheel.

that, in addition to their technical competencies, professionals and practitioners dealing with the development of sustainable communities would benefit from a number of “generic skills” and interdisciplinary learning. This pivotal and holistic nature is neatly captured in the “Egan wheel” (see Figure 5).

In 2006, the Academy adopted the Imagine methodology and funded the development of the CSC module – intending the course to assist in development, at a community level, generic skills such areas as:

Leadership, Breakthrough thinking/brokerage and Inclusive visioning. (Academy for Sustainable Communities, 2007, p. 16)

### 3.2. Main elements of CSC

The course follows the process shown for Imagine in Figure 4. Communities (e.g. academic groups, communities of place, communities of practice or transient communities of common interest) are encouraged to explore issues associated with sustainable development specific to their context. On the basis of the experiences of those participating, the course process takes the participants through four cognitive processes: reflection, connection, modelling and action planning – an action learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). In overview, the course takes the student through a five-stage process:



Figure 6. A Rich Picture drawn by a community in Milton Keynes.

- understand the context;
- agree SIs and bands of equilibrium;
- develop the AMOEBA and scenario making;
- review and meta-scenario making and
- publicity, publicizing and marketing the message.
- If the process of the course is fivefold, the main tools comprise:
  - Rich Pictures of original context and of future scenarios,
  - hierarchically graded tasks and issues,
  - establishing bands of sustainability,
  - AMOEBA diagrams of current, past and future realities – back-casting – and
  - action planning.

CSC intended to encourage a process of reflection to facilitate participants’ co-understanding of the issues in the community in question. The basis for this understanding is captured by the participants in a Rich Picture (see Figure 6).

Rich Pictures are of growing interest in group work (Bell & Morse, 2010). The picture captures the group’s assessment of their current situation vis-a-vis sustainability. The participants draw out tasks and issues and then agree to a set of SIs and to establish common sustainable values for them. The picture drawing exercise is intended to both help a group to bond in a task and explore both the consciously held and unconsciously assumed aspects of the context in question. To some extent, the technical proficiency of the drawing is secondary to the group dynamics of the process. Building on this, a diagrammatic

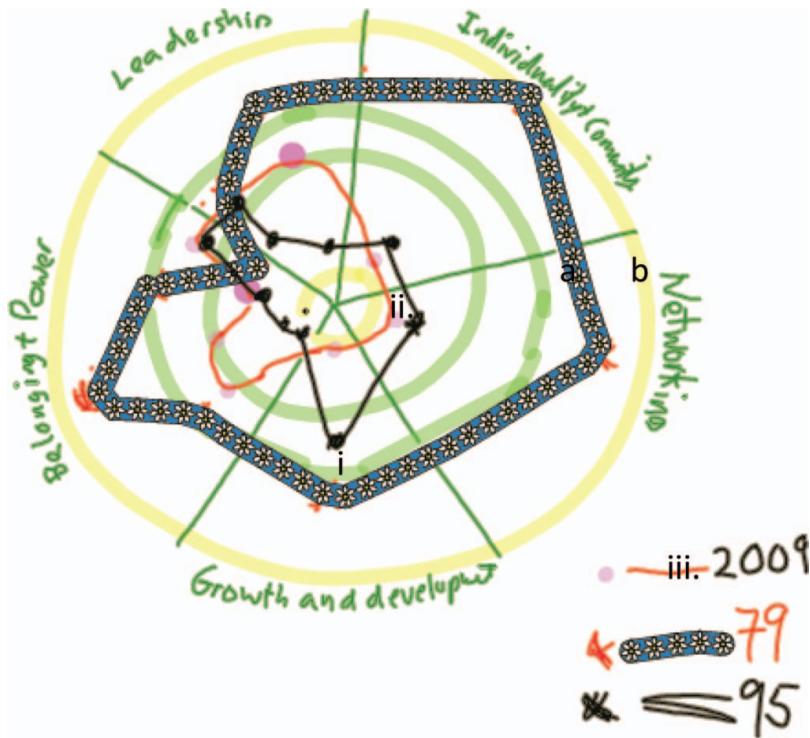


Figure 7. AMOEBA diagram of the Milton Keynes context.

representation of the SIs is developed in the form of an AMOEBA diagram (as already mentioned in Section 2.1). Such a diagram is shown in Figure 7. The AMOEBA is a group data capturing and expressing device. It can also provide a fulcrum for the emergence of unexpected and surprising information. For example a group may realise that it is far more sustainable in some areas than others, that it is exceeding its targets in surprising areas or that it suffered more of a sustainability deficit than it previously realised.

In Figure 7, the community has selected five sectors: Belonging and Power, Leadership, Individuality and Community, Networking and Growth and Development, and selected indicators assessing the sustainability of each. AMOEBA-like diagrams are shown representing the communities' views about these factors for 1979, 1995 and 2009.

The diagrammatic representation of the SIs leads to scenario making of the communities' future evolution. The scenario is used to develop action plans of what needs to be done next, who should be influenced and what needs to change. Once the action plans are established, these can be used to develop publicity and marketing material to promote/enhance future sustainable inputs.

The course is supported by a purpose built software tool called YourScope (<http://yourscope.hcaacademy.co.uk/index.php>), which allows participants to model and review the AMOEBA diagrams, comparing the timeline data and modelling potential futures – see Figure 8. Although YourScope is not essential for Imagine, it is a key element of the undergraduate and postgraduate CSC presentation of the methodology, allowing student groups to model and simulate various sustainability scenarios.

Following the YourScope exercise, groups are encouraged to develop a new Rich Picture of the likely futures which may emerge. Figure 9 shows a scenario Rich Picture of Milton Keynes in 2020.

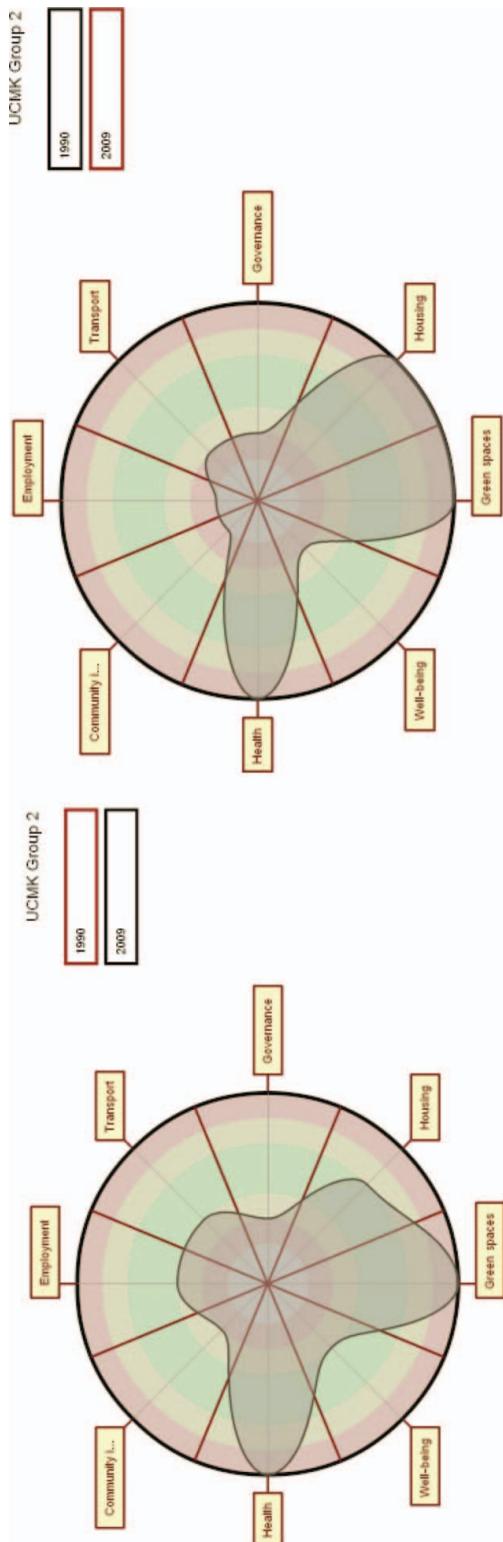


Figure 8. YourScope diagrams – 1990 and 2009 for eight segments.



Figure 9. Rich Picture for 2020.

Figure 10 demonstrates the 2020 scenario as a hand-drawn AMOEBA diagram.

The pictures and YourScope diagrams shown here are overwhelmingly positive in content and shared view and both show an expected improvement in most of 12 indicator areas for 2020 (for a fuller description see Bell & Lane, 2009).

Since the CSC project began in 2006, the course has been reviewed by 20 UK universities and, at the time of writing, has been adopted in one of its formats by seven universities (see Table 2).

Most notably, Queens University has run the course at a postgraduate level – in one case encouraging students to work in teams assessing the sustainability of a local coastal community. Salford University, the University Centre Milton Keynes, De Montfort University and Kingston University have applied CSC as continuing professional development (CPD) or Masterclass format. These two forms of presentation are similar to the use of Imagine in the Mediterranean, and in that they tend to be applied with professional groupings rather than for undergraduate or postgraduate students.

The Masterclass version of CSC has been applied in the UK and also in Europe, for regional groups (e.g. East Midlands), for mixtures of academic and social activist groups (e.g. Milton Keynes) and for senior management teams interested in understanding their organisations changing role and long-term strategy (e.g. London). Estimates of CSC uptake are provided in Table 3.

By 2009, feedback on the course had been encouraging. C-Scaipe at Kingston University reported:

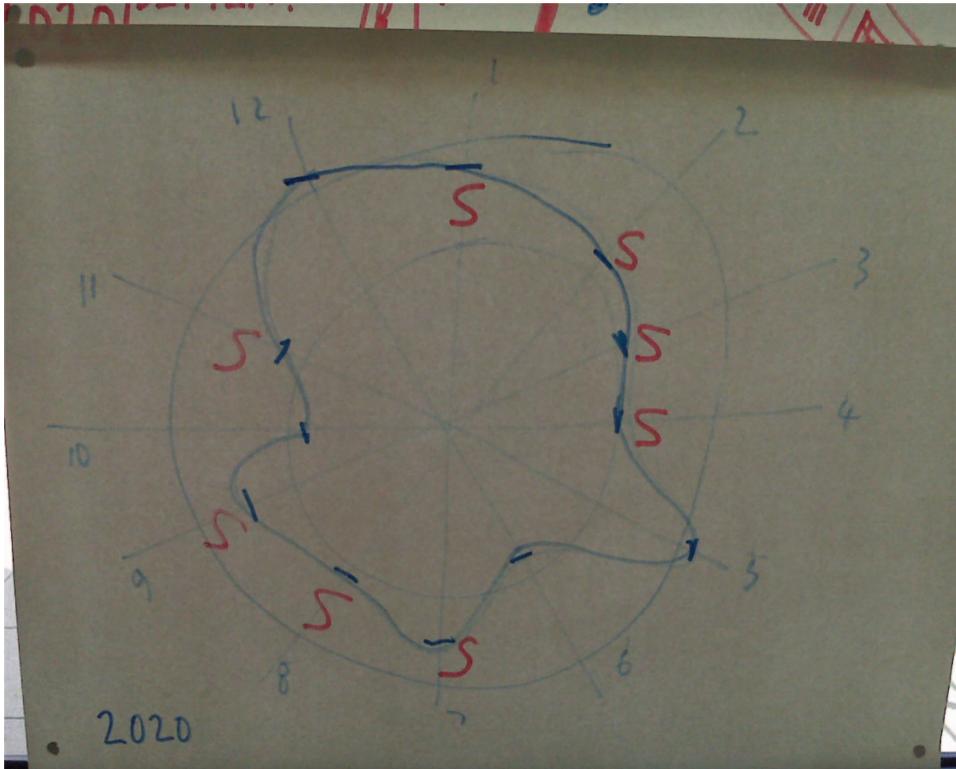


Figure 10. Resulting AMOEBA/YourScope for 2020.

The statistics, that 100% of respondents believe the course to be relevant to their work, and that 100% believe it will have a positive impact on the way they work, indicate the Masterclass is useful to professionals outside the fields of community engagement and regeneration (as the majority of participants were academics). (Sayce & Toogood, 2009, p. 5)

And

It is encouraging that 100% of all respondents went away with a “good” or “excellent” impression of the Masterclass. This is particularly impressive because participants came from a range of backgrounds/sectors and had differing objectives. (Sayce & Toogood, 2009, p. 6)

At the time of writing, the various expressions of the course have resulted in little or no negative feedback but some critical themes emerging from the course can be considered:

- The relative success of the Masterclass as a format. This is most clearly shown in the feedback evaluation forms (such as those shown above) and to some extent echoes the positive feedback received from the use of SSA, SPSA and Imagine in the Mediterranean. The Masterclass version is a two-day intensive course and, of necessity, practically orientated allowing local flavours, concerns and imperatives to be addressed. This would tend to support the evidence that this kind of workshop process is relevant to community activists.

Table 2. Progress in CSC adoption.

Number	Institution	Early interest	Signs of progress	Some adoption
1	Anglia Ruskin	Yes	Yes	Not yet
2	Belfast Queens	Yes	Yes	Yes at postgraduate
3	Birmingham City	Yes	Yes	Short course
4	De Montfort	Yes	Yes	Yes – CPD
5	Exeter	Yes	Yes	Not yet
6	Kingston	Yes	Yes	Yes – CPD
7	Leeds Met	Yes	Yes	Some partial use – elements included in course
8	London Met	Yes	Yes	Not yet
9	London South Bank	Yes	Yes	No
10	Loughborough	Yes	No	No
11	Northumbria	Yes	Yes	Possible inclusion in Foundation Degree
12	Nottingham	Yes	No	No
13	Open University	Yes	Yes	Yes, pilot VLE
14	Salford	Yes	Yes	Yes as CPD
15	Sheffield Hallam	Yes	Yes	Not yet
16	Southampton	Yes	No	No
17	Stafford	Yes	No	No
18	University Centre Milton Keynes	Yes	Yes	As MasterClass
19	University of West England	Yes	No	No
20	Westminster	Yes	No	No
Total affirmative in each category	20	20	14	7

- However, at a more academic level, there has been a noticeable lack of uptake at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. CSC was designed to be relevant to a variety of learning groups but has not as yet found a natural niche in more formal university teaching (with the notable exception of Queens). Reasons (drawn anecdotally from meetings in universities) for this may include the following:
  - Lack of imperative. Imagine is designed to engage in real concerns for local sustainability. A learned process set in simulation (the likely format for an undergraduate presentation) lacks this immediacy and focus.
  - Already full curricula. University teaching is already very full, and there is a lack of hard evidence that CSC offers additional value to undergraduate teaching already being provided.

Table 3. CSC course attendance estimate.

CSC formats	Locations	Estimated numbers engaged
Postgraduate	Belfast	85
Undergraduate	Leeds Met taster	25
CPD	Salford, Kingston, etc.	85
VLE	Open University pilot	5
Masterclass	Brussels, De Montfort, etc.	100
Total		300

- A sense that the sustainability project may be currently being superseded by new yet similar initiatives such as well-being.
- The challenge of the recently piloted Virtual Learning Environment or VLE version. The VLE version of CSC has been piloted by the Open University for a small group of urban planners in the West Midlands in 2009. A number of issues remain – most specifically around the use of synchronous, interactive media for the on-line workshop component (a software package called Elluminate was explored in this context). Outcomes are unclear and further trials are planned for 2010/2011; however, some of the feedback from the small pilot was positive. On the other hand, the group was very small and numbers diminished over the five interactive workshop period. Whilst VLE offers flexibility in delivery and an option to work with communities who are not so concerned with place, the approach is dependent upon a number of technical requirements (e.g. bandwidth and software availability) and organisational leniency (permission to engage in on-line workshops during working hours) which reduce the accessibility of the learning process.

#### **4. Reflections arising from the delivery of CSC**

There is evidence that CSC formed a “hinge” component in HCA offerings – linking “quick and easy” introductory material (such as the “Train and Sustain” pack, <http://skills.homesandcommunities.co.uk/courses/train-and-sustain>), to more extensive learning (e.g. the Sustainable Development Foundation Degree, <http://skills.homesandcommunities.co.uk/courses/foundation-degree>). However, establishing the course in existing university curricula has not been an easy, quick or straightforward process – mainly due to full curricula, high existing teaching loads and competing approaches (to name just a few sources in this expanding range are as follows: Deakin, Curwell, & Lombardi, 2001; Hanna, 2005; Hopkins, 2008; ISIN [International Sustainability Indicators Network], 2010; James & Torbjorn, 2004; The Global Village Network, 2010).

In terms of uptake of the Masterclass format of CSC, as with the use of SSA, SPSA and Imagine in the CAMP projects, encouraging communities to engage in sustainability review is not easy, quick or straightforward – progress is gradual. However, the course, when included in learning events, has a range of positive outcomes. Major observations include the following:

- The course encourages local “flavours” to enrich the community learning experience.
- Diverse communities (e.g. health, social care, local government and pressure groups), as well as single “communities of practice”, seem willing to engage in learning from the process.

#### **5. Conclusions and further research**

This paper has described the development of the Imagine methodology and its application in various locational, professional and academic communities “places”. In conclusion, a number of points can be made.

To be meaningful and to lead to real engagement, the content of any learning process which encourages communities to engage in reflections on sustainability would seem to require a degree of flexibility, enough to allow local “flavours” to enrich the experience. The Masterclass success would encourage this view and that the community applying the method needs to “want”, from the inside out, to engage in the process of review if it is to

take major benefit from the experience. In this regard, the meaningfulness of sustainability analysis on and within community needs further research. The experiences of the Transition Town project may provide one means to make further assessment, and there is evidence of work in this direction (Adams & Jeanrenaud, 2008; Hopkins, 2008; van de Kerkhof & Wieczorek, 2005).

Without exception, all the communities engaged thus far in the SSA, SPSA, Imagine and CSC processes have shown themselves to be interested in their own sustainability; however, they may not use this language to express their interest. Language can be a disincentive to engage in sustainability self-review if it is used as a coded or exclusive dialogue. The practice of sustainability may occur below the radar of much research because it may not apply the type of vocabulary generally used in the academic and political fields. For example, with the Imagine approach, the entry condition for participation is “interest” and the primary means to gather views and opinions, the Rich Picture, allows participants to use their own language, or no language at all (via diagrams), to capture and explore views. Further review of community level engagement in projects related to sustainability topics may explore this in more detail.

SPSA, Imagine and CSC are learning processes, and the outcomes of these processes have been seen to be positive across gender, ethnicity and professional grouping. However, the “neutrality” of the process from local community in the Mediterranean to academic and professional communities in the UK cannot be assumed and could be usefully explored in a wider and more diverse range of contexts.

Finally, if CSC is taught as a simulation or in relation to a case study, there is evidence that the learning process lacks the reality necessary to drive the process. The Big Society initiative, if it is applied with the means to teach community learning, may provide a basis for hands-on use of the course but this would probably be in a CPD mode rather than in a taught undergraduate or postgraduate format.

In summary, social inclusion in strategies such as Sustainable Communities and Big Society is important, but for these strategies to be relevant at the level of the community, the form and operation of reflection needs to be fostered and not assumed. Within Imagine/CSC, community self-review is an emergent property from experience and learning processes. A learning observation arising from the use of Imagine is that, in the same way as society does not now assume that practical skills such as project management and meeting organisation are “natural” and innate human skills which can just be “done” without prior consideration, self-reflection upon sustainability may be possible for all people; but, to be truly effective, it needs to be consciously and deliberately applied and not left to chance. The original inspiration for SSA in 1999 was to allow community to make its own vision and plan its own sustainability. Without this autonomy, the exercise in sustainability analysis is likely to be degraded.

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### **Notes**

1. <http://www.planbleu.org/indexUK.html>.
2. All CAMP reports, including full details of the application of the method in each context, are available for download from <http://www.planbleu.org/publications/littoralUk.html>.

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