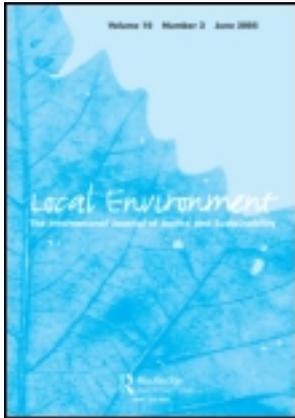


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Freya Kristensen<sup>a</sup> & Mark Roseland<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Geography, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada

<sup>b</sup> SFU Centre for Sustainable Community Development, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada

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## Mobilising collaboration with Pando | Sustainable Communities

Freya Kristensen<sup>a</sup> and Mark Roseland<sup>b\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Department of Geography, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada;* <sup>b</sup>*SFU Centre for Sustainable Community Development, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada*

Pando ([www.pando.sc](http://www.pando.sc)) is a new online sustainability tool to connect sustainability researchers and local government practitioners around the world. After briefly summarising the state of sustainability since the 1992 Rio Declaration, the article details why networking should be seen as a major strategy to enhance learning about sustainability and to spur policy innovations at the local government level. Learning has the potential to increase institutional capacity within local government and to mobilise existing sustainability knowledge held by sustainability researchers. In promoting the potential of networks, we acknowledge the challenges associated with networking, including the difficulties that arise when academics and practitioners collaborate. Another challenge is related to the promotion of one-size-fits-all policy solutions, often packaged as “best practices”. In acknowledging these real challenges, we show how Pando has been designed to minimise them by connecting academics and practitioners in mutually beneficial relationships.

**Keywords:** sustainable communities; research; practice; network; collaboration; mobilisation

Sustainable development is a complex concept that has seen an increase in interest and usage in recent years while simultaneously being scrutinised and interrogated by a host of scholars (Castro 2004, Connelly 2007, Kemp and Martens 2007, Swyngedouw 2007). While acknowledging the validity of many of these critiques, this article is rooted in the idea that communities must collectively define what sustainability is for themselves and as such is concerned with how to develop strategies that will facilitate communities to achieve their sustainability goals. For example, Holden (2006) suggested that rather than viewing it as a strict and definitive concept, sustainability ought to include notions of “adaptability, negotiability and flexibility” (p. 172) and as such should be a constant process of learning based on new knowledge gained.

Writing on the eve of the approaching 20th anniversary of the Rio Declaration, we reflect on the evolution of sustainability. The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (the Rio Declaration) conceived and agreed upon at the 1992 UNCED meeting (also known as the Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro has had arguably the most tangible and noticeable impact on sustainability. This is due largely to Chapter 28 of Agenda 21, known as “Local Agenda 21”, which calls on local governments to implement their own sustainability action plans, using participatory methods. Two years after the Earth Summit, International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) organised the First European Conference of Sustainable Cities and Towns, held in Aalborg, Denmark.

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\*Corresponding author. Email: [roseland@sfu.ca](mailto:roseland@sfu.ca)

While the Earth Summit did not produce any kind of legally binding documentation, the Aalborg Charter has been signed by over 2500 local and regional governments from 39 countries, thereby committing themselves to implementing their own Local Agenda 21 through a four-stage process (Sustainable Cities & Towns Campaign n.d.). Through processes like the Earth Summit, local governments have been legitimised as bodies that can make real progress in the realms of social, environmental, and economic sustainability. Indeed, it is difficult to point to concrete action towards sustainability beyond the local government level. The Kyoto Protocol, which commits 37 countries to reducing their greenhouse gas emissions, represents only a meagre example since currently emissions have been reduced only slightly among signatory countries while global emissions have risen considerably above 1990 levels (Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety 2011). Furthermore, international climate conferences, such as those in Cancun and Copenhagen, to reach a new binding agreement to reduce emissions after the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012, have failed. Although we are hopeful for a new global framework to emerge from the Rio+20 conference, given the lack of results from recent international climate conferences, this seems unlikely. Despite these failures, or perhaps because of them, local governments worldwide have embraced sustainability, implementing innovative policies and reducing their own local greenhouse gas emissions. This success needs to be built upon and the capacity of local governments to build environmentally, economically, and socially sustainable communities must be enhanced. We believe that networking is the best way to propel local government forward and strengthen capacity by forming connections between local government staff and sustainability researchers and academics.

Since the 1990s, there has been a notable increase in the number of urban sustainability networks, which aim to facilitate city cooperation and enable the sharing of sustainability knowledge, policy ideas, and strategies across jurisdictions and borders. For example, Keiner and Kim (2007) noted that between 1984 and 2004, the number of such networks worldwide rose from 8 to 49 (p. 1370). Coming together through municipal sustainability networks has been one way for local governments to cope with the numerous challenges presented by sustainability. However, networking as a method of trying to build more sustainable communities is not without its difficulties. These range from the questionable calibre of information flowing through the networks; the reliance on “best practices” as a one-size-fits-all solution to sustainability challenges; and the effect that sharing policy solutions across space tends to erase geographic particularities. However, despite these drawbacks, networking has an enormous potential to be a catalyst for policy innovation around sustainability at the local level by encouraging cross-disciplinary dialogue and connecting various areas of expertise. We contend that connecting local policy-makers and sustainability researchers and academics via networks will produce effectual and innovative sustainability policy solutions for local communities.

This article begins by discussing how particular aspects of sustainability make networking a potentially effective tool for achieving sustainability goals and for enhancing capacity within local governments. In the next section, the central argument will be the overarching need to connect existing sustainability research and researchers with local governments for sustainability policy innovations to emerge. This section will acknowledge the difficulties inherent when researchers and practitioners collaborate but will suggest ways of overcoming these challenges. Finally, the article’s concluding section will focus on a new sustainability network called Pando, which is attempting to connect researchers and practitioners to bring about policy solutions for sustainability in local communities. Through Pando,

sustainability researchers and local governments are connecting to build productive and long-term relationships to achieve sustainability goals.

Throughout this article, the term “researcher” refers to career academics, graduate and doctoral students, and government and non-government consultants who research in the sustainable communities field. The term “practitioner” refers to government staff, elected officials, and those from non-governmental organisations working in the field of sustainable communities.

### **Learning and networking for sustainability policy innovation**

Networking may provide the means through which local governments can enhance their institutional capacity to plan for sustainability. Sustainability is an evolving process that requires long-term planning and goal-setting as well as learning: because government staff personnel are bound to change before many long-term goals can be met, it is crucial that sustainable development be understood intimately throughout local government and that cross-departmental cooperation occurs (Evans *et al.* 2006, Polk 2011). Therefore, successful planning for sustainable development requires strong institutional capacity within local governments. Referring to sustainable development in particular, Polk (2011) defined institutional capacity as comprising knowledge resources (“formal and informal types of expertise”), relational resources (“personal and professional relationships”), and mobilisation capacity (a concrete impact in formal planning processes) (pp. 187–190). A study by Evans *et al.* (2006) of 40 European towns and cities found that successful policy implementation around sustainable development was related to both institutional capacity and institutional learning of local governments. Learning can be seen as a way to increase institutional capacity: in the case of government, this might result in new policies being conceived of and implemented or in new ways of operating (Evans *et al.* 2006). Learning is defined by Toens and Landwehr (2009) as being “based on gaining knowledge, which is manifested in the capacity to draw lessons from the experiences and problems associated with certain policy content, goals, and interventions” (pp. 348–349). Similarly, Campbell (2009, p. 195) defined learning as “the acquisition of knowledge which is then tested, converted, stored for future use, and employed to make change”.

Policy learning tends to be stymied when there is an absence of an organisational learning culture in cities as well as a lack of staff time, resources, and reliable information about policy innovations elsewhere (Levi-Faur and Vigoda-Gadot 2006). One way in which local governments are coping with these challenges is to implement “best practices” policy solutions: the simple idea that what worked well to solve a problem in one municipality may solve similar problems in another place. This is an attractive solution for local governments because there may be a lack of local ideas for how to solve particular problems or current policies may be failing: implementing a policy model from elsewhere is often seen as less arduous than devising a new solution to the problem (Marsden *et al.* 2011). However, lessons learned in one city about how a policy was successfully implemented do not always slide smoothly and easily to another city to solve a related problem. Best practices often carry with them biases about the nature of problems and how they can be addressed. For example, “best practices” on urban sustainability focus largely on economic and environmental aspects, excluding social justice and equity; they tend to emphasise technical solutions to problems; and they neglect particular local conditions and experiences by promoting a “one-size-fits-all” solution to sustainability challenges (Bulkeley 2006, Dale and Newman 2009).

We believe that networking has the potential to provide local government with the opportunity to both learn about sustainability and devise effective policy solutions for their communities while avoiding the pitfalls of best practices policy solutions. Indeed, recent research shows that networks and networking can have a positive impact on policy learning in cities (Benz and Fürst 2002, Seymoar *et al.* 2009, Polk 2011). Seymoar *et al.* (2009) found that there are five ways through which networks can enable municipal government learning around sustainability: (1) by lowering the costs associated with knowledge acquisition; (2) by enhancing organisational memory; (3) by nurturing organisational flexibility; (4) by building bridges between departmental silos; and (5) by making knowledge communal (p. 9). Networks are able to lower the costs involved with finding new solutions to problems while at the same time providing access to a wealth of technical information and expertise (Benz and Fürst 2002, Seymoar *et al.* 2009).

### **Pando | Sustainable Communities**

Pando is a new researcher–practitioner sustainability network that was launched in early 2012 as a partnership between Simon Fraser University’s Centre for Sustainable Community Development, the Pacific Institute for Climate Solutions, and the BC Climate Action Secretariat. Pando was launched originally as a small BC-based network and was scaled up over a period of several months to be global in scope. We contend that the problems to date with networking to produce sustainability policy innovations are rooted in the inability of those seeking information to connect with the appropriate experts. Although there is much sustainability information available, practitioners are unsure how to evaluate its validity: even among those who are active participants in networks, information as well as the “right” people to talk to can be difficult to find (Levi-Faur and Vigoda-Gadot 2006).

Pando was designed explicitly to facilitate partnership-building between academics and practitioners and to overcome many of the problems that arise in other researcher–practitioner partnerships (Nyden and Wiewel 1992, Rynes *et al.* 2001, Kuhn 2002, Alteroff and Knights 2009). Pando is a different kind of sustainability network, aiming to be mutually beneficial for both local government practitioners and sustainability researchers. The overarching goal of the network is to connect local government staff and policy-makers tackling sustainability challenges with researchers and sustainability experts in order to find scientifically sound solutions to local sustainability challenges. It a globally relevant online web tool whose target audience is local government staff, elected officials, academic researchers, non-governmental researchers, senior-level government researchers, consultants/developers, and graduate/doctoral students who all work within the field of sustainable communities. Table 1 illustrates how Pando overcomes the dual challenges of sustainability and academic–practitioner collaboration.

The academic–practitioner divide arises due to two reasons: the kinds of research and information in which each group is interested do not always match and the ways in which each group communicates and transfers knowledge are often very different. For academics, research is usually discipline-oriented and propelled by current debates in a particular academic field, whereas practitioners’ research priorities change often to reflect pressing needs. Academic research tends to look more at broader issues in a flexible manner over the long term in order to find generalisable rules to bolster theory, while practitioners are more concerned with studying specific issues within a narrow time frame, striving for research that produces utilisable results (Nyden and Wiewel 1992, Roper 2002, Cottrell and Parpart 2006). In general, academics have difficulty thinking about the practical applications of their research (Cortes 1998) and may have difficulty matching research with community

Table 1. Overcoming the challenges associated with sustainability and academic–practitioner collaboration.

Aspects of an effective academic–practitioner sustainability network	How Pando incorporates these aspects
Recognition that sustainability is unique to each context	Avoids idea of a fixed “end state” of sustainability and encourages new ideas to emerge
Successful sustainability policy implementation in cities and towns is contingent upon institutional capacity of local governments	Builds institutional capacity of local government by improving the quality of information that policy-makers can access. Facilitates relationship-building between policy-makers and sustainability experts
Policy learning is dependent on trust relationships between learners and information sources	Pando provides local government members direct access to sustainability researchers and experts in the field
Local governments want to learn from experiences of others but do not have the time to do extensive research on policies that worked or did not work	Pando allows local government members quick access to other local governments tackling similar problems and researchers with expertise in the relevant area
Academics often have difficulty doing research that is immediately relevant to communities	Pando provides a forum for academics to communicate directly with local governments and identify research needs

needs. As Cottrell and Parpart (2006, p. 18) put it, “Academics often assume knowledge for its own sake has value, while [practitioners] are less convinced of this point”.

Pando was designed to allow practitioners to approach academics with sustainability challenges that have emerged in their communities, allowing academics to focus on particular problems that require exploration and providing access to a wealth of potential case studies. Through Pando, local government practitioners can connect with academics and solicit advice and research for sustainability-related problems in their communities. The network is designed to give more “passive” users access to resources and news about sustainable communities while at the same time establishing a simple way for more “active” users to connect with researchers/practitioners when they have a specific need. Pando differentiates itself from other online-based networks by including social networking aspects to “humanise” or personalise members’ professional experience and academic research as much as possible. This is done by actively connecting journal articles, case study briefs, best practices, and news articles to real people and showing how each person is connected to others in the network. The overall guiding purpose of the social networking features of Pando is to let users know who they should contact about a particular topic, geographic area, or organisation; help users know who is reputable on a topic or in a geographic area; help users stay in touch online with people they meet offline; and help users meet in real life.

A key concern of Pando is to give time- and budget-constrained local government users easy and quick access to reliable sustainability information. To this end, Pando includes collective intelligence functions to separate good sustainable communities content from the less reliable. Content (i.e. news items, case studies, best practices, journal articles, and book reviews) is submitted by Pando users and the better content items rise to the top of their respective pages. This feature of Pando functions to keep users passively engaged in the website and helps users find relevant and reputable content while saving time looking for information. Pando will be an online companion for other essential sustainability guides and tools (e.g. Roseland 2012).

## Conclusion

Pando will be launched as a global network at the Rio + 20 ICLEI 2012 World Congress in Brazil. Although it will be celebrated as a tangible outcome of the ICLEI World Congress and a piece of infrastructure that will directly aid in local sustainability efforts, the success of Pando will be not only due to ICLEI but also due to *Local Environment*. Board members of *Local Environment* have supported the creation of Pando and provided advice throughout the development process. Through Pando, local governments and researchers will mutually benefit from local and cross-border collaboration and knowledge exchange. We believe it is a real step forward for sustainable community development. However, Pando's success will depend on the number of users that participate by sharing their sustainability challenges, solutions, and expertise. As those who keep apprised of sustainability-related research and information, *Local Environment* readers exemplify Pando participants and have the potential to propel Pando to remarkable success. A dedicated body of participants will ensure that Pando becomes a champion for sustainability and an invaluable instrument for sustainability policy innovation. Please join us at Pando.sc ([www.pando.sc](http://www.pando.sc)).

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