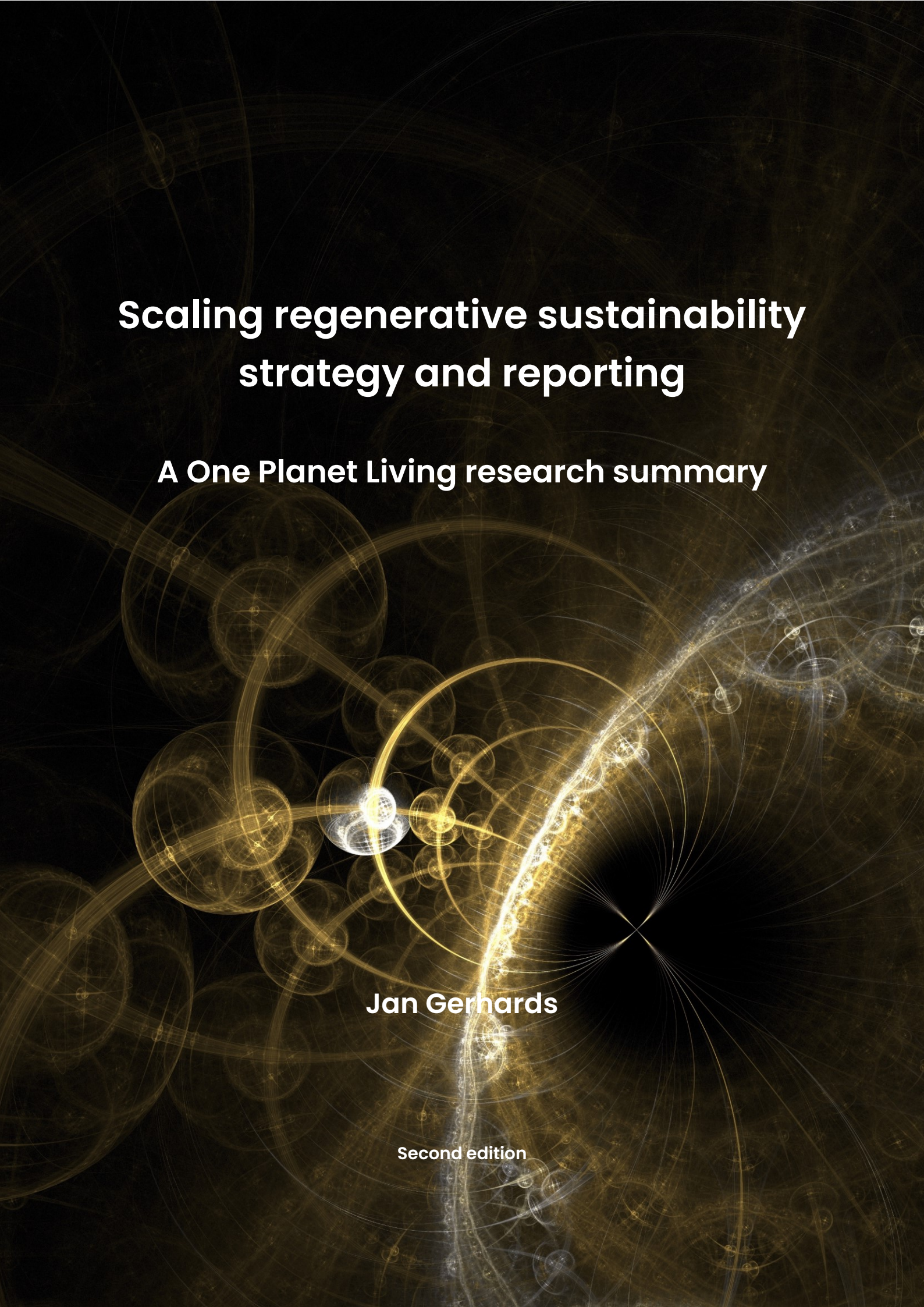

Scaling regenerative sustainability strategy and reporting

A One Planet Living research summary

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Second edition

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About and acknowledgements

This report is a summary of a doctoral research project that analyses and compares different types of sustainability schemes, including Bioregional's One Planet Living® framework (OPL). It is intended to communicate the practical insights of the research to a wider audience, including industry professionals. Whilst the topic is sustainability, the findings are relevant to strategy, monitoring and reporting for any complex, interconnected topic.

Those wishing to read the academic texts can explore the full thesis or the peer-reviewed summary article that I co-authored with my director of studies, Dr Dan Greenwood[1]. The accepted manuscript for the article is available here. These academic texts contain further references and information about the methodology used to come to the findings presented here.

The research was a collaboration between Bioregional and the University of Westminster, and I am grateful to the latter for funding this research. I am indebted to my director of studies, Dr Dan Greenwood, for seeing me through the later stages of my research. Thanks also to earlier supervisors at the University of Westminster: Professor Simon Joss, who organised this research project, and Dr Tony Manzi. Many thanks to Bioregional's Dr Matt Wood, too.

Many thanks to Bioregional's co-founders: to Sue Riddlestone the CEO of Bioregional, for her insights and support, and Pooran Desai, formerly head of OPL at Bioregional and now CEO of OnePlanet, with whom I had many fruitful conversations that left their imprint across these pages. I am also grateful to Bioregional's staff and partners for the time they generously provided, and their warm welcome.

Summary

In response to the ongoing ecological crisis, sustainability experts have attempted to scale their visions of sustainability by producing what may be called sustainability 'schemes', known by names such as standards, frameworks, and certification schemes. These provide guidance on what to work towards (strategy) and/or how to gauge and share progress (monitoring and reporting). They are applied to organisations, communities, and even cities. The schemes are generally voluntary, and are accompanied by marketable public information like a certification, rating or verified report to encourage take-up This is externally assessed to provide trustworthiness.

In recent years, a new, 'regenerative' conception of sustainability has emerged, inspired by ecological systems and based on the notion of people and the planet thriving together. It recognises the idea that sustainability is complex, and interconnected, and requires radical improvements, collaboration, and a shift in values.

Good or 'ideal' sustainability schemes can be described in terms of three functions. They promote excellent programmes, likely embodying some regenerative characteristics. Additionally, they foster widespread take-up and achieve large-scale systemic impact and influence. Finally, since schemes provide public information, this should be high quality, and not 'greenwash' that puts a positive spin on business-as-usual practices.

Differing approaches can be compared according to how they put together various building blocks of guidance. These include aspirational goals, or more easily verifiable criteria such as actions, indicators, targets and processes – which can be standardised.

Standardised approaches have gained widespread acceptance and use and standardised criteria in an attempt to support trustworthy information. Such schemes have achieved scale and can provide helpful technical guidance, but all the approaches reviewed have significant drawbacks when compared with a regenerative perspective, for example lacking ambition and/or holism, and sometimes tending towards greenwash.

These issues highlight the need to explore an alternative approach. The One Planet Living (OPL) framework is built around 10 flexible, ambitious 'principles' that are applied across sectors. Strategies (action plans) are built around these, specifying actions, indicators, and targets. Plans and reports are published to provide transparency, and Bioregional provides a flexible form of public recognition.

This goal-oriented approach has benefits that align with a regenerative perspective. Its principles provide a communicable common language, enabling engagement and collaboration, and the creation of ambitious, holistic and dynamic strategies. However, OPL has struggled to scale, partly reflecting the difficulty of scaling ambitious sustainability. However, a more bespoke, case-by-case approach can lack the replicability of more 'off-the-shelf' schemes. Various challenges arise when translating goals into more detailed and technical aspects of strategies. These are gradually being addressed.

Overall, standardised approaches have achieved scale, but tend to promote weaker programmes and public information. The strengths and limitations of OPL mirror these, tending to promote strong programmes with a good level of transparency but having been less successful in scaling. The challenge facing regenerative approaches is to achieve greater scale. However, they can only be an important part of the bigger picture – a recipe for drawing together ingredients such as people, finance and technology.

Introduction: scaling a sustainability vision

The last few years have been called a climate emergency and a global, biological extinction.[2] Sustainability issues remain pressing, despite the fact that, over the past few decades, professionals have tried to mainstream sustainability through a profusion of standards, frameworks, certification schemes, rating tools, and reporting tools. These sustainability 'schemes', as they may be called, provide guidance on this complex topic, enabling experts to scale and share their vision.

The schemes considered in this report apply to basic units of space and place: organisations, communities, and even cities. They provide guidance on what people need to work towards, which we can call strategy (or plans, designs, targets, etc.), and how they can gauge their progress (i.e., monitoring and reporting).

Generally, schemes are voluntary. The sustainability industry cannot compel people to act and must use persuasion rather than force to achieve scale; a 'carrot', rather than 'stick', approach. Aside from the benefit of providing useful guidance, schemes also provide a 'stamp of approval' to drive take-up; some form of marketable public information, like a certification, rating or report.

Schemes have three parts, therefore. They provide guidance; users apply this; and then someone checks whether the guidance has been applied well, or correctly. If it has, users receive their verification and recognition. In academic terms, these can be called 'governance instruments', as they deal with matters of public interest.

This report analyses and compares different approaches, assessing how close they come to embodying 'regenerative' sustainability. It first provides some concepts that are useful in analysing schemes, before reviewing the standardised approaches that have become widespread in the sustainability industry and comparing these with Bioregional's OPL framework.

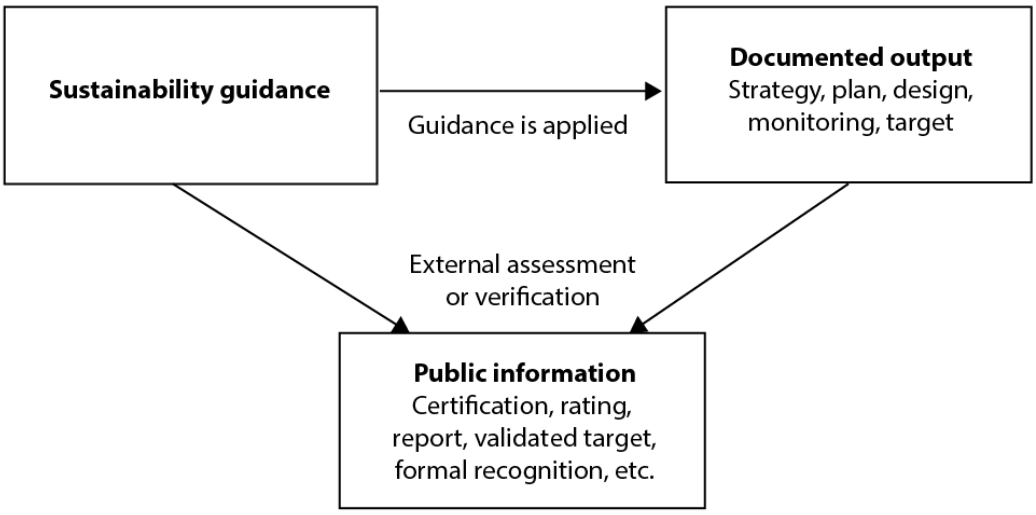

Figure 1. Parts of sustainability schemes.

Analysing sustainability schemes

The following three sections explore background concepts that are important when understanding and comparing sustainability schemes.

Understanding regenerative sustainability

In analysing schemes, it is essential to understand the nature of the sustainability challenges they respond to. These issues can be illustrated by imagining the city, but to some extent, they apply to any complex, varied entity.

Sustainability issues are deep-rooted. For example, greenhouse gases arise from food, transport, building and products. Most material is still sent to landfill. Cities produce invisible impacts on ecosystems globally. Radical changes are needed to prevent further decline, and a positive vision can go further and aim to repair, restore, or *regenerate* Earth.

Sustainability cuts across almost all areas of life. It concerns how people, climate and ecosystems can thrive together, from a local to global level. A comprehensive and joined-up or holistic approach can help people pursue win-wins, like those coming from green spaces, cycling, food growing, the circular economy and efficient homes – and avoid solving one problem whilst contributing to another, like addressing climate change whilst damaging ecosystems.

Achieving sustainability requires many people and organisations to work together, such as the city authority, schools, hospitals, businesses, and individuals, all occupying fragmented land and buildings. Major actors can collaborate, influence, and partner up beyond the boundaries of their organisation. Groups with different areas of expertise can work together.

Creating change is not merely a matter of resources and technical knowledge, but motivations and values are equally important. No technical documentation can guarantee this, but excellent *communication* can help.

Overall, cities can be described as complex systems. Systems thinking has long been popular in academia and, recently, a special kind of systems thinking has emerged[3]:

Regenerative sustainability, the next wave of sustainability, is based on a holistic worldview and aims for thriving whole living systems. It integrates inner and outer realms of sustainability and focuses on shifting deep leverage points in systems for transformational change across scales.

Table 1. Potential characteristics of a regenerative approach.

Characteristic of challenge	Response
Complex	Flexible, context-sensitive
Deep-rooted	Ambitious, restorative
Interconnected	Broad and holistic, considering interrelationships between system parts
Involving many actors	Encouraging collaboration and co-creation across groups, boundaries, and scales
Driven by values and beliefs	Encouraging communication, engagement, learning and inclusion of non-experts
Changing	Dynamic, adaptable

'Ideal' sustainability schemes

When assessing and comparing sustainability schemes, it is helpful to consider what makes a good or even 'ideal' scheme. This can be described in terms of three functions (based on an academic theoretical framework of 'legitimacy'.)[4]

First and foremost, we would hope that schemes promote outstanding sustainability programmes. It is not necessary to agree on exactly what this looks like to know that radical and imminent action is required across areas such as climate and biodiversity. Moreover, most programmes would benefit from some of the (regenerative) characteristics described on the previous page, such as collaboration and engagement.[5]

Second, we may hope that schemes foster sustainability at a large scale, and promote strong outcomes across sectors, countries, or even globally. This means making it as appealing and efficient as possible to be green, given that it is already challenging enough. Furthermore, schemes may drive leadership and spread influence. In reality, it can be difficult to mainstream ambitious (and therefore costly) approaches to sustainability.

Last, schemes use things like certifications, ratings or reports as an incentive. Such information can help society learn and can enable public pressure or accountability. It is therefore important to make this information high quality. In particular, information should avoid putting a positive spin on business-as-usual practices ('greenwashing'), as this could end up reinforcing rather than highlighting systemic unsustainability.

Table 2. Functions of your ideal sustainability scheme.

Function	Outcomes	Processes
Programme level	• Excellent, improved or significantly above-average outcomes	• Collaboration and engagement • Stakeholder input
Systemic level	• Widespread take-up and impact • Wider influence, leadership	• Being well-regarded by motivated users • Providing benefits and minimising resource requirements
Public information and transparency	• Informative certifications, ratings, reports, etc. (not 'greenwash')	• Transparent processes (e.g. assessment)

Building blocks of guidance

Sustainability schemes can be defined and compared in terms of their basic elements, or building blocks. Different schemes emphasise or combine different elements, with implications for how they meet the conditions of an 'ideal' scheme. The elements are as follows:

- **Goals** – the desired results, e.g. thriving biodiversity.
- **Material actions** – activities that produce material outputs, e.g. planting trees.
- **Indicators** – quantitative measures of individual outputs or outcomes, e.g. the number of trees planted.
- **Targets** – desired indicator levels, e.g. plant 100 trees.
- **Processes** – the steps to follow, e.g. collaboration, planning, management, monitoring, and assessment.

A typical approach to strategy would follow most of the order above. It would specify goals, then the actions used to achieve them, how progress will be measured – what targets are aimed for. This follows a set of processes, such as collaboration, planning and monitoring, and reporting.

One of the defining features of sustainability schemes is whether or not they are standardised – whether they rely on assessment criteria that are fairly unambiguous and easier to verify. It is possible to say with a reasonable amount of certainty what a number is, whether a target has been met, or whether an action or process has been implemented. Goals, on the other hand, are generally more ambiguous. Yet they also have many potential benefits discussed later in this report – such as being flexible and communicating an aspirational vision.

Standardised approaches cannot rely too heavily on goals and therefore seek alternative approaches. For example, we may wish to specify what people can aim for: targets specify how far people should go, and material actions specify what they should do. However, they are prescriptive and can be context-inappropriate when applied to complex entities like organisations, communities and cities. Alternatively, indicators or processes may be used, but these do not specify what people should aim for. Such questions are explored in the following section.

Findings and comparisons

This section analyses and compares different types of sustainability schemes. It starts with a review of standardised approaches before examining the OPL framework, more closely aligned with regenerative sustainability. The methodology used is available in the academic research outputs.[6]

Standardised approaches

Voluntary schemes provide marketable public information (such as certifications, ratings or reports) to incentivise take-up. To make this appear trustworthy – *objective,* and *impartial* – the industry has come to rely on standardised assessment criteria. This also enables schemes to scale quickly, as they often make use of third-party assessors who simply apply these criteria. However, this drive to standardisation cuts out more fluid, aspirational goals, around which strategies are typically based.

The sustainability industry has developed creative solutions to this problem of relying mainly on standardised criteria. For example, as noted on the previous page, targets provide an alternative to goals, but these can be overly prescriptive. Standardised schemes, therefore, incorporate *flexibility*, either by being less prescriptive (not telling people specifically what to do) or being less coercive (not forcing people).[7]

The strengths and limitations of four dominant standardised approaches are reviewed on the following page. These have seen very widespread adoption, and often provide helpful technical guidance on areas such as monitoring, and can promote comparability.[8] However, relying primarily on standardised criteria tends to result in limitations. By focusing on 'objective' and 'impartial' criteria, rather than simply focusing on an ambitious and holistic vision, they focus more on what is supposed to tell people *about* that hard work, rather than the quality of the work. This often dilutes the quality of both the programmes they promote (less ambitious, holistic, and so on) and public information about them – which reflects positively on less effective practices. So, an over-focus on standardisation ends up being counterproductive.

Moreover, for the information to act as an incentive for take-up, it needs to reflect positively on a broad range of users. This adds to the risk of portraying unambitious practices in a positive light. Commitment and motivation are essential in producing excellent outcomes – external recognition cannot be relied upon too much as a motivator. On a related note, a reliance on criteria has led many instruments to become uninspiring and fail to communicate a vision of sustainability. More could be done to make the topic accessible, or even inspiring, to non-experts, and to mobilise action.

RATING TOOLS AND INDICES

Rating tools are a popular, seemingly promising approach that detailed technical expertise accessible to a wide range of users. They combine targets, actions and processes into long checklists. All these criteria are assigned a score in terms of 'points' or 'credits'. Most criteria are optional, so users can decide what's best for them. Users add their criteria into an overall rating or total number. It's comprehensive and detailed, yet results in a marketable, simple rating (e.g. 'good') or number (e.g. out of 100).

This approach is popular in urban sustainability, which uses rating tools (e.g. BREEAM, LEED) from the building to the city level, as well as in corporate sustainability (B Corp). Research on urban sustainability reveals that users often chase easier points or credits to simply obtain a rating, rather than focusing on the overall vision and being ambitious. [9] The technical and prescriptive nature, focused on isolated points or credits, can result in perverse outcomes, lack holism, and stifle collaboration.[10] For complex entities, monitoring can be burdensome.[11]

INDICATOR GUIDELINES

An alternative to telling people what to aim for is to simply let them say how well they are currently doing. Indicator guidelines show users how to measure and get them to report on their progress publicly. The hope is that public pressure will ensure that users try to keep improving, and that by knowing how well they are doing, users will better know how much they need to improve.

This approach is common among big companies, which usually use the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI). Yet research shows that reporting is often weakly integrated with strategy, which means that it is unlikely to result in improvement. [12] Moreover, the influence of large companies has led to a model that is less comparable and doesn't include information that helps people judge just how well (or how poorly) they are doing.[13] So, whilst indicators are useful supplements to strategy, it is still necessary to show users how to integrate monitoring into an overall strategic vision.

TARGET-SETTING INITIATIVES

These specify an overall target for a key issue. For example, climate initiatives start with carbon indicators, set targets, and then monitor and report their progress. Focusing on a single issue, giving people leeway in how they set targets, and not punishing under-performance, enables the use of targets, which are generally more prescriptive.

This approach is popular for cities and companies, for example via the Science-Based Targets Initiative. Aside from the fact that practices can be unambitious and inconsistent in practice[14], a more fundamental problem is that in starting from a single issue and a highly technical and measurement-based perspective, it becomes difficult to then take a truly holistic approach[15], even if co-benefits to climate action are considered at a later stage. Target-setting initiatives may be helpful, again, as a supplement to strategy, but we also need to show people how to start from a holistic, comprehensive approach.

PROCESS STANDARDS

Process standards avoid the substantive aspects of sustainability. Rather than providing guidance on carbon, biodiversity, equity, and so on, they focus on processes such as strategy creation, monitoring, reporting, management, communication, or leadership, and let users decide the details that apply in their context.

This is a very popular approach – adopted by the environmental management system ISO 14001. However, without driving an ambitious vision, users sometimes ‘go through the motions’. Many users end up not making many changes. [16]

The One Planet Living framework

In the early 2000s, Bioregional led the creation of a new eco-community called BedZED. They distilled the learning from this into the OPL framework, based on the overall vision of helping people '*live happy, healthy lives within the limits of our planet*.' It consists of flexible, universal sustainability principles, rather than standardised criteria.

These principles are sometimes broken down into further 'goals' or 'outcomes'. The overall approach might be called *goal*-oriented, based on fluidly defined aims. Even 'zero carbon energy' and 'zero waste' are fluid, open-ended and without strict timeframes, boundaries or calculation methods. This may not seem unusual, given that a goal-oriented approach is a classic approach to strategy, and that even the UN has its own Sustainable Development Goals. However, OPL is an outlier among sustainability schemes, indeed, Bioregional worked closely with the UN to promote a goal-oriented approach.

The OPL process takes a more typical approach to strategy than most other schemes. An OPL strategy (which is known as an 'action plan') lists desired outcomes, actions, indicators and targets for each principle. Users can do whatever works in their context, as long as they are in keeping with the overall values and principles. The whole approach is underpinned by a 'hearts and minds' ethos, which emphasises the need for excellent communication, commitment, leadership, 'heroism' and trying to influence the wider system.[17]

Despite being flexible, Bioregional still offer a 'stamp of approval', via its ongoing 'One Planet' status and recent 'leadership recognition'. However, these are discretionary – an opinion – with a level of ambiguity. It is something between a certification and an award. This may make some people uncomfortable in a world infused with the values of objectivity and impartiality. However, since OPL is not limited by criteria, it can take into account things that are harder to standardise – like commitment and motivation. OPL is still open to scrutiny, however. OPL users are expected to publish action plans and reports. This is how it makes public information compatible with flexibility.

Most recently, an affiliated organisation has developed a digital platform, OnePlanet.com, to scale OPL further.

Strengths of OPL's goal-oriented approach

Over the past two decades, Bioregional has worked with partners on around 30 programmes, with influential and often award-winning results. Programmes have been publishing plans and reports, providing a good level of transparency. Over this time, several benefits of the ten principles have become apparent, related to the core aim of promoting excellent sustainability programmes – and the local systems and processes that underpin them. These benefits align with a *regenerative* approach.

First, goals are fluidly defined, flexible and adaptable to contexts. This flexibility is the overarching characteristic that enables other benefits.

Second, aspirational, ambitious aims have produced strong outcomes. For example, all the One Planet Communities are at or, at the very least, close to 'zero carbon', and have been early pioneers of measures such as car clubs, food growing and reused materials. OPL has fostered examples of best practices that have won awards and received considerable attention.

These achievements derive from an aspirational vision of 'true' sustainability, rather than one that is limited to achievable or easily measurable terms. It embraces uncertainty, and embodies the expression, 'it is better to have tried and failed than never to have tried at all.' White Gum Valley, for example, set an aim of zero carbon, attracted a large amount of research grant funding and created a pioneering solar power project that has since led to later similar projects.

Third, the 10 principles form a shared, communicable 'common language'. They are flexible enough to be applied to any sector or any context. OPL branched out from new communities to companies, cities, eco-resorts, an event, and a school. All sectors work towards common aims that apply to everyone, everywhere. The principles facilitate partnership working and collaboration, and encourage users to spread their influence to groups such as residents or customers, rather than focusing just on their own activities.

What follows are some examples of this common language. In Australia, the White Gum Village development was created by selling off individual parcels of land. The developer used OPL to shape their vision and engage plot owners with sustainability. One plot became a One Planet Community in its own right. The whole development is located in the One Planet City of Fremantle, forming three nested systems of users, with a shared, collaborative vision.

In the USA, SOMO Village has become a hub for sustainable businesses. They also use OPL to influence their tenants and encourage them to follow the ten principles. There's a school on site that is using OPL to teach sustainability as part of its curriculum. There is a *culture* of One Planet Living.

In the UK, Cundall, is a large engineering consultancy for the built environment. They have used OPL for their corporate strategy. They also train their staff in sustainability using the 10 principles (something they particularly enjoy), who then flexibly apply OPL to their client's projects. It has become an embedded language of sustainability.

The recent One Planet Cities programme used a more advanced model of collaboration, City or regional stakeholders, like those in Oxfordshire, came together to agree on outcomes for their whole area, based on the 10 principles. They then adopted these agreed outcomes into their separate strategies. This creates an overarching area-wide vision, toward which everyone is working collaboratively, again via a nested system at multiple levels.

Oxfordshire, a hub of OPL activity and part of the One Planet Cities programme

Fourth, the principles form an interrelated system that can be thought of holistically, taking a joined-up approach. Users are encouraged to consider synergies, such as between food growing or cycling efforts, and the principle of health and happiness.

Finally, goals are dynamic. Users keep learning, and so their strategies keep improving. By focusing on goals rather than more prescriptive criteria, OPL enables that change.

Table 3. Regenerative benefits of OPL's goal-oriented approach.

Characteristic	Benefits and supported process
Flexible	Context-appropriate; basis for other benefits
Aspirational, open-ended	Encourages ambition in face of uncertainty; not limited to what is measurable
Shared common language	Encourages collaboration, spreading influence, partnerships, and clusters and nested systems of users
Communicable	Engagement and learning, including non-experts
Holistic	Joined-up strategy creation; principles form an interrelated system
Dynamic	Allows for change over time

Potential pitfalls of a goal-oriented approach, and their solutions

As stated, around 30 programmes have worked with Bioregional and achieved formal recognition. This is a low number relative to many other sustainability schemes. This number is partly reflective of the difficulty of aiming for 'true' sustainability within an unsustainable system. Furthermore, a relatively small organisation such as OPL can only go so far in promoting a framework.

However, the goal-oriented approach itself has several potential pitfalls, described below, which also affect levels of take-up – as well as sometimes the quality of programmes and reports. The issues are not insurmountable – indeed, there are ongoing efforts to address them. Overall, many of these pitfalls arise when moving from goals to the details of strategies and monitoring, such as indicators and targets.

First, OPL has generally been used with a *bespoke*, context-specific approach, tailored on a case-by-case basis. This trusts staff and users to know what works best in any context. However, highly bespoke approaches can lack the replicability of more 'off-the-shelf', standardised approaches.

This is demonstrated by a technical aspect of sustainability: monitoring and reporting. These provide important feedback and learning to OPL users, to Bioregional, and to wider industry and society. They can be resource-intensive and raise many questions that would benefit from structured guidance: how many indicators would be best, and which are the best ones to use? Is it good to set targets, and if so, which ones? By what steps can users progress through the stages of planning and monitoring? And how do these relate to other components of strategies?

A concern might be that by providing more detailed recommendations on areas such as monitoring, the benefits of a goal-oriented approach could be lost, and OPL could drift towards being a standardised, target-oriented approach. To combat this, efforts can be made to underpin OPL with an explicit philosophy of the benefits of goals and the regenerative approach. Then people will understand that indicators and targets play a *supporting* role.

In recent years Bioregional has been publishing updated, enhanced, sector-specific guidance, with many of the indicators provided as part of this research project. A further step could be to create a small set of carefully calibrated, recommended indicators for each sector, which can be combined with locally resonant indicators. These could build on detailed guidance also produced as part of this research project.[18]

A further step could be creating adaptable templates for main sectors, providing a skeleton strategy that can easily be adapted. Rather than either bespoke or 'off-the-shelf', this can be thought of as a 'made-to-measure' approach. This is made trickier by how many sectors you work across, but you have so much expertise to draw on already.

If some users have very few resources available, a lightweight approach could be recommended, focused mainly on tracking actions and providing qualitative monitoring, perhaps even photos. Guidance can ensure that monitoring is appropriate to the resources available.

Second, discretionary assessment processes can be harder to scale. These have relied on Bioregional's opinions rather than those of third parties. Bioregional's solution has been to create a 'peer review' system, meaning that trained third parties can now provide their opinion on the quality of plans. Awarding 'One Planet' status and 'leadership recognition' remain Bioregional's responsibility.

Third, it has not always been easy to take a holistic or joined-up approach, based on emphasising the interconnections between

aspects of strategies. Some OPL users took a more siloed approach, with different teams and managers assigned to different principles. OPL could benefit from guidance on taking a holistic approach, and some form of cross-referencing within documents. Whilst not essential for using OPL, the new digital platform illustrates joined-up thinking in a visual format. Many aspects of the conceptual architecture arose as a result of recommendations made during this research collaboration.

The mindmap function on OnePlanet.com

Fourth, issues can arise when translating flexible goals into targets. Should highly ambitious goals be translated into similarly ambitious targets, or could this make people nervous about criticism at a later stage? It can be made explicit that targets are aspirational, or leave them open-ended. Instead, *actions* can be the focus of commitments.

Fifth, similarly, an issue arises when translating shared aims into targets. Who owns city-wide targets, for example? During this research a recommendation was made that the digital platform use shared 'ecosystem' plans, containing shared outcomes and indicators, which can be adopted into multiple strategies.

Overall, the ongoing development of OPL continues to take inspiration from many areas, such as passionate green leaders, systems thinkers and technical sustainability professionals.. The digital platform was indfluenced by international development literature and graph databases. This in itself represents a holistic, interdisciplinary approach.

Table 4. Challenges of a goal-oriented approach and potential solutions.

Characteristic	Challenges/pitfalls	Solutions
Flexible	More challenging to create bespoke plans and monitoring; less structured processes; less scalable assessment	Enhanced guidance and templates; peer review system for assessment
Aspirational, open-ended	Ambitious targets have the potential to be criticised if missed	Communicate the aspirational nature of targets; focus on actions for accountability
Shared common language	Ownership of area-wide targets; multiple sectors require more guidance	Shared indicators (digital platform)
Holistic	Understanding interconnections in traditional formats; tendency to adopt siloed working	Guidance on joined-up strategy; cross-referencing within documents; Visual Mindmap (digital platform)
Dynamic	Changing monitoring practices	Calibrated monitoring guidance; reduce need for change

Lessons and recommendations

Regenerative thinking can be used to analyse or design sustainability schemes. Sustainability is:

- Complex and varied, requiring a context-sensitive, flexible approach
- Deep-rooted, requiring an ambitious, restorative approach
- Interconnected, benefitting from a holistic, joined-up approach
- Involving many actors, requiring collaboration across boundaries
- Values-driven, requiring strong communication and engagement
- Changing, requiring a dynamic approach.

Sustainability schemes can be analysed or designed according to what makes them good or 'ideal'. Such schemes:

- Promote ambitious sustainability programmes aligned with regenerative sustainability
- Are efficient and scalable, promoting widespread adoption
- Provide high-quality information and transparency (not just reflecting positively on business-as-usual practices).

Potential strengths of standardised approaches can be learned from/emulated:

- Replicable technical expertise
- Comparability.

Potential drawbacks of standardised approaches (discussed on page 11) can be avoided/mitigated:

- A failure to drive an ambitious vision
- Over-prescriptiveness
- A lack of holism
- Failure to facilitate collaboration
- Public information that portrays business-as-usual practices in a positive light.

OPL is based on an overall vision, complemented by fluidly defined goals (principles) that enable regenerative approaches that are:

- Flexible and context-appropriate
- Ambitious and aspirational
- Shared as a 'common language'
- Easy to understand and communicate
- Holistic, joined-up
- Dynamic.

OPL demonstrates an approach to assessment and public information that is compatible with flexibility. It entails:

- Embracing the role of discretion in assessment processes
- A focus on the commitment of users, as well as their resources and expertise
- Providing transparency on a more context-specific basis, via plans and reports.

Potential drawbacks of more bespoke, goal-oriented approaches can be mitigated by:

- Promoting efficient monitoring, and comparability where possible
- Providing adaptable templates
- Providing guidance on processes such as engagement, monitoring and collaboration
- Making a holistic approach explicit, within processes, documents or digital tools
- Communicating the strengths of the goal-oriented approach to maintain their benefits.

Conclusion: towards regenerative sustainability?

This report analysed and compared different types of sustainability schemes, including Bioregional's One Planet Living framework, exploring their strengths and limitations, and to what extent they aligned with the regenerative perspective.

Standardised approaches have gained widespread acceptance and use within the sustainability industry, relying on standardised criteria to support trustworthy public information. This reliance on standardised criteria tends to result in limitations in some way. Standardised approaches have achieved scale and can provide helpful technical guidance. However, a reliance on standardised criteria tends to result in limitations. The approaches reviewed fall short of embodying regenerative systems thinking, in terms of promoting a truly ambitious, collaborative, holistic, engaging, and dynamic approach.

Bioregional has been thinking in regenerative terms for a long time. It promotes a 'hearts and minds' approach that recognises the importance of engaging and inspiring people. One Planet Living's 10 principles support flexible, ambitious strategies. They form a holistic, interrelated system, and a communicable common language that encourages working together across sectors and scales. The approach is flexible, and plans are created on a more bespoke, case-by-case basis. This can lack the replicability of more standardised approaches, causing challenges when moving into the technical details of sustainability. Such issues are gradually being addressed in various ways.

Overall, whilst standardised approaches have achieved scale, they are weaker at the programme level, and can contribute to poorer public information. The strengths and limitations of OPL mirror these, tending to promote strong programmes with a good level of transparency but having been less successful in scaling. The challenge facing regenerative approaches is to achieve greater scale.

Regenerative sustainability is needed more than ever, and OPL provides an important example of how such a vision may be realised in practice. However, no sustainability scheme can be a 'silver bullet'. The challenge of scaling OPL is a reflection of wider systemic unsustainability. Any scheme can only be a recipe for combining ingredients, such as people, technology, finance and policy. which are needed to achieve highly ambitious, regenerative sustainability programmes. Schemes such as OPL remain an important part of the bigger picture.

Notes and references

Notes

[1] Gerhards and Greenwood, “One Planet Living and the Legitimacy of Sustainability Governance: From Standardised Information to Regenerative Systems.”

[2] IPCC, “Global Warming of 1.5°C"”; UNEP, “The Emissions Gap Report 2018”; Jackson, “Zero Carbon Sooner—the Case for an Early Zero Carbon Target for the UK”; Ripple et al., “World Scientists’ Warning of a Climate Emergency.” Ceballos, Ehrlich, and Dirzo, “Biological Annihilation via the Ongoing Sixth Mass Extinction Signaled by Vertebrate Population Losses and Declines”; Grooten and Almond, “Living Planet Report - 2018: Aiming Higher.” World Bank, “Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2018: Piecing Together the Poverty Puzzle.”; Alvaredo et al., *World Inequality Report 2018*.

[3] Gibbons, “Regenerative-The New Sustainable?”

[4] My thesis included an open-ended, interpretive theoretical framework based on the idea of ‘legitimacy’, a concept from governance theory. For an example see: Suchman, “Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches.” The concept has been applied extensively to certification schemes, e.g. Bäckstrand, “Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships for Sustainable Development: Rethinking Legitimacy, Accountability and Effectiveness.”

[5] See reports cited in notes one and two.

[6] Gerhards and Greenwood, “One Planet Living and the Legitimacy of Sustainability Governance: From Standardised Information to Regenerative Systems.”

[7] We can think about standardisation as degrees of prescriptiveness (how specifically tools define what measures or targets to set), coerciveness (whether optional or required), and replicability (how easily things can be copied across contexts). Adapted from: Gunningham, Grabosky, and Sinclair, *Smart Regulation: Designing Environmental Policy*.

[8] Steering Committee of the State-of-Knowledge Assessment of Standards and Certification, “Toward Sustainability. The Roles and Limitations of Certification.”

[9] Burnett, “City Buildings — Eco-Labels and Shades of Green!”; Elgert, “Rating the Sustainable City: ‘Measurementality’, Transparency, and Unexpected Outcomes at the Knowledge-Policy Interface”; Garde, “Sustainable by Design?: Insights From U.S. LEED-ND Pilot Projects.”

[10] Boyle, Michell, and Viruly, “A Critique of the Application of Neighborhood Sustainability Assessment Tools in Urban Regeneration”; Conte, “The Era of Sustainability: Promises, Pitfalls and Prospects for Sustainable Buildings and the Built Environment”; Conte and Monno, “Beyond the Buildingcentric Approach: A Vision for an Integrated Evaluation of Sustainable Buildings.” Greenwood, Congreve, and King, “The Future of Policy and Standards for Low and Zero Carbon Homes”; Schweber, “The Effect of BREEAM on Clients and Construction Professionals.

[11] Elgert, “The Double Edge of Cutting Edge: Explaining Adoption and Nonadoption of the STAR Rating System and Insights for Sustainability Indicators”; Elgert, “Rating the Sustainable City: ‘Measurementality’, Transparency, and Unexpected Outcomes at the Knowledge-Policy Interface.”

[12] Barkemeyer, Preuss, and Lee, “On the Effectiveness of Private Transnational Governance Regimes - Evaluating Corporate Sustainability Reporting According to the Global Reporting Initiative”; Thijssens, Bollen, and Hassink, “Managing Sustainability Reporting: Many Ways to Publish Exemplary Reports.”

[13] Landrum and Ohsowski, “Identifying Worldviews on Corporate Sustainability: A Content Analysis of Corporate Sustainability Reports”; Dingwerth and Eichinger, “Tamed Transparency: How Information Disclosure under the Global Reporting Initiative Fails to Empower”; Landrum, “Stages of Corporate Sustainability: Integrating the Strong Sustainability Worldview.”

[14] Giesekam et al., “Science-Based Targets: On Target?”

[15] Haffar and Searcy, “Target-Setting for Ecological Resilience: Are Companies Setting Environmental Sustainability Targets in Line with Planetary Thresholds?”

[16] Hertin et al., “Are EMS Environmentally Effective? The Link between Environmental Management Systems and Environmental Performance in European Companies”; Potoski and Prakash, “Do Voluntary Programs Reduce Pollution? Examining ISO 14001’s Effectiveness across Countries.”

[17] Bioregional, “Implementing One Planet Living - A Manual.”

[18] Gerhards, “One Planet Living for Local Governments and Stakeholders: Guidance on Outcomes and Indicators.”Gerhards, “One Planet Living for Local Governments and Stakeholders: Good Practice Guidance on Actions”; Gerhards, “One Planet Living for New Communities: Guidance on Outcomes and Indicators”; Gerhards, “One Planet Living for New Communities: Guidance on Household Surveys.”

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