



In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
Muriel Adams

will defend her dissertation

**Reimagining Sustainability: Acknowledging and Removing
Barriers to Sustainability in Poor Marginalized
Communities of Color**

November 6, 2020

10:00 AM

<https://asu.zoom.us/j/98708429489>

Faculty, students, and the public are invited.

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Nalini Chhetri, Co-Chair
Dr. Sonja Klinsky, Co-Chair
Dr. Chris Boone, Member
Kay Pranis, Member

Abstract

Sustainable communities discourse, literature and initiatives have essentially excluded poor marginalized communities at a time when sustainability efforts require more stakeholders and stakeholder involvement. The families in poor communities of color in the United States are struggling to meet basic needs (food, medicine, shelter, safety). Additionally, in these communities there is a disproportionate level of forced mobility to prisons, jails and detention centers. These communities are unsustainable. This dissertation is comprised of three articles. In the first article (published in the Sustainability Journal 2020), I present an argument for a definition of sustainability that includes recognition of the major, complex and persistent problems faced daily by poor, marginalized communities of color (African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native Americans), including those connected to mass incarceration and high recidivism rates (e.g., prison cycling). In the paper, I address the interlinking criminal justice, prison-industrial complex and foster care systems and their

tremendous negative impact on the ability of these communities to build sustainable communities to meet the needs of the present and future generations. In this context, I argue that present sustainability paradigms only work for some communities and I propose a system-of-communities conceptual framework to address this limitation. This paper offers a way of thinking about transitioning unsustainable communities into sustainable ones and to engage new stakeholders in sustainability efforts.

Sustainability assessment tools are used to provide important information for decision-making and according to the Environmental Protection Agency should be developed with those stakeholders who are affected by the sustainability problems (Bond 2012). However, in my second article, I explored a variety of global, national and local sustainability assessment, indexes and indicators tools and found them to be inadequate for measuring the progress toward sustainability of poor marginalized communities with high incarceration and recidivism rates. In order to fill this gap for these communities, I developed the Building Sustainable Communities Framework and a Social Reintegration, Inclusion, Cohesion, Equity (Social R.I.C.E.) transition tool, a precursor to a sustainability assessment tool, to create a foundation for the development of a sustainability assessment tool to be created in the future that would adequately address issues related to reentry of formerly incarcerated individuals. A focus group was convened to review the adequacy of the Building Sustainable Communities framework, and confirmed that it was representative of the phases formerly incarcerated individuals use to reintegrate into their home communities.

In the third article, I tested the utility of the Building Sustainable Communities Framework and the Social R.I.C.E. transition tool through a community-based participatory action study. The five week Building Sustainable Communities-Repairing the Harm of Incarceration Pilot Project included two groups of community members (24 in total), each of which was composed of three types of participants: formerly incarcerated individuals, family members with incarcerated or formerly incarcerated relatives, and community members. The Restorative Justice Circle process (based on a Native American and other indigenous peoples practice) was also introduced to the groups for the purpose of having discussions and sharing personal stories in a safe, nonthreatening, confidential and equitable space. During the study, data was gathered for thematic analysis from nine in-depth interviews using the Social R.I.C.E. transition tool, weekly short surveys and focus group activities. The findings from the data reflected a host of emotions, stories of struggle, isolation, persistence, resilience, faith and hope. Among stories of prison cycling were a few about determination, overcoming struggles and pride in accomplishing goals.

All in all, the data showed that the community was in dire need of a path to stability and sustainability. The Building Sustainable Communities Framework lays out a path to increasing community cohesion, sustainability and reducing recidivism. Poor marginalized communities now need the knowledge and tools to help them make collective community decisions about present and future sustainability issues. I hope this dissertation inspires others to find ways to work with and assist these communities in their efforts to become sustainable.