

***‘It is impossible to effectively balance the needs of the economy, society and the environment in the contemporary world’***

The purpose of this assignment is to explore the validity of the title statement and determine, using a recognised model of sustainability, whether the declaration is true or false. Exploring relevant examples of theory, policy and practice, it will conclude with a reasonable assumption, based on the evidence and research, explored within the assessment.

The concept of balancing the three elements of economy, society and environment is not new and Jackson, Boswell and Davis (2011) argue that in a world of finite resources and with ever-growing pressure from stakeholders, companies are being forced to evaluate the sustainability of their business models and consider the impact on future generations. To address the need for accountability – *not just purely in terms of finance* – stakeholders are being given a more in-depth understanding of a company’s impact on the environment and society, too. They refer to this three-way method of reporting as ‘Triple Bottom Line’ (Jackson, Boswell and Davis, 2011, p. 56).

The interrelationship between economy, society and environment can vary, dependant up not only the type of business, but also the location and objectives. Different organisations will depict and label the three aspects according to their needs or ideology (Abdelkafi and Täuscher, 2015). Lüdeke-Freund (2009) suggests that in past, this was largely due to a certain amount of rhetoric regarding sustainability strategy, rather than clear models based on generic templates. One such model was proposed by Munasinghe (2010) in a theory referred to as ‘Sustainonomics’, the core principle of which was to find a balance between those keys elements of society, environment and economy, in format that organisations could relate to.

**Sustainonomics Triangle (Munasinghe, 2010)**



Image 1: Fonseca (2019)

Similar sustainability models are used by local governments and are the heart of planning and development projects. An Environment strategy document (RBKC.GOV, 2006) published by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) set out a long-term policy to tackle issues of climate change, alongside the growing demand for affordable energy. Using robust performance measures, they proposed a strategy of co-production, involving local residents and focus groups. In 2011, a baseline demographic study was published for the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham (LBHF) and RBKC, using statistics from the ONS (RBKC.GOV, 2011). Although some comparisons can be made, the focus will be on RBKC.

The study revealed a culturally diverse population across both boroughs, as well as a high number of single residents – *above the UK average* – with LBHF at 62% and RBKC at 56% respectively. This, it was suggested, was partly due to a large number of residents aged over forty, but also to the high portion of single professionals living in London, compared to married professionals who often lived outside of London and commuted in (RBKC.GOV, 2011). The study also revealed high levels of disparity in household deprivation. Although life expectancy in RBKC was slightly above the average for England, it varied by as much as seven years between the poorest and the most affluent. The study highlighted the ‘Decent Homes Standard’ as part of important relationship between housing, health and sustainability, but acknowledged there was no definitive data on the existing condition of housing stock. A study of almost four thousand residents across fifteen deprived areas by Bond *et al.* (2012) concluded that neighbourhood aesthetics and housing security formed an important part of the residential psychosocial environment, in terms of mental health and emotional wellbeing. Regeneration, they suggested, helped to promote respect and elevate the status of those who resided there.

Around the time of the study, a planning application was published by RBKC for the redevelopment of a large tower block within the borough. The Grenfell Tower Regeneration Project (RBKC.GOV, 2012) outlined a comprehensive plan to provide a complete over-cladding of the exterior, redesign the four lower floors and upgrade the heating system throughout the whole building. The key objectives were to provide a long-term solution for efficient, affordable energy, extend the lifespan of the building and improve the general appearance. There was also an intention to identify further opportunities to provide affordable homes, through improved layout. Sustainability was an important aspect of the project as the tower had been deemed grossly inefficient and wasteful of energy (RBKC.GOV, 2012, p.

21). There were no concerns as to the integrity of the concrete frame of the tower and low-maintenance zinc and aluminium composite cladding had been proposed, with an estimated lifespan of 30-50 years, after which, it could be easily replaced and recycled.

However, the lifespan of the tower, the cladding and more importantly many of the residents, were all cut tragically short. During the early hours of Wednesday morning, June 14<sup>th</sup> in 2017, a fire broke out in a residential apartment in Grenfell Tower (BBC News, 2018). Forty fire engines arrived in response with over two-hundred fire-fighters. The Metropolitan Police estimate around three-hundred and fifty people would normally be expected to occupy the twenty-story tower, of which seventy-two tragically died either during, or as a result of that terrible disaster. A year on from the tragedy, amidst what at the time an ongoing inquiry, an associate professor of structural engineering reflected on what had been learned from what was the greatest loss of life in Britain since World War II (Tsavdaridis, 2018). Taking into account that some forensic evidence was yet to be presented, early evidence and accounts indicated that the external cladding contributed significantly to the rate at which the fire had spread between floors, both in material compound and by the way it had been fitted. A gap had between the concrete structure and the external cladding had been installed without fire breaks, effectively turning the building into twenty-story chimney. The fallout from the tragedy, it was suggested, left serious questions regarding similar accommodation throughout London, and the country as a whole.

Within weeks of the tragedy, the mainstream media was awash with reports surrounding the cladding. *BBC News* claimed to have obtained leaked documents that suggested the zinc cladding that was originally proposed for the facade was changed by the contractors – *at the request of RBKC council* – in an effort to reduce the cost. The budget was reportedly cut from £9.2m to £8.5m, £293.368 of which was saved through the use of cheaper cladding (Symonds and De Simone, 2017). *The Guardian* also highlighted cuts to the materials used for the window frames, as well as the scrapping of all external landscaping works (Booth and Grierson, 2017). An article in *The Independent* accused the council ‘unacceptable financial practices’, stating that it had been sitting on a reserve budget of £274m (Pasha-Robinson, 2017). The public outrage and high-profile media attention also prompted an independent review of building regulations for high-rise complexes. The review, lead by Dame Judith Hackitt, sought to rectify the lack of accountability and establish a clear audit trail for safety

works on high-rise buildings, where it was felt the views and concerns of residents were often ignored (Hackitt, 2018).

The findings in Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry (2019), detailed a comprehensive account of the tragic circumstances that transpired the night of the fire. Shortly before 1am, a fire was reported in Flat 16, on the fourth floor. Within a matter of minutes, the fire had spread to the external cladding and then rapidly risen to the floors above. The original source was cited as a faulty electrical fridge-freezer, no blame attributed to the resident owner of the appliance. Once the external cladding ignited though, the polyethylene core of the panels acted as an accelerant. The inquiry appeared to confirm the initial media accusations regarding the unsuitability of the cladding and found compelling evidence that the cladding failed to comply with building regulations. Not only did the panels not resist the spread of the fire, they ‘actively promoted’ it (Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry, 2019, p. 5). The inquiry also examined the role of the London Fire Brigade (LFB) in response to the blaze. Although the brave actions of the fire-fighters in attendance were praised, there had been ‘serious deficiencies’ in command and control (Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry, 2019, p. 6). The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) however, have been vocal in light of the previous cuts to services in London. General Secretary, Matt Wrack was critical of cuts made under the then London Mayor, Boris Johnson, which he believes directly impacted on the LBR’s response to the Grenfell fire (Fire Brigades Union, 2020).

Shildrick (2018) points to the Grenfell Tower tragedy as a perfect example of some of the most pressing issues of poverty, inequality and austerity. Punitive policies, they infer, have led to an increase in poverty, as well as the stigma surrounding it. There is evidence they suggest, that the general public are becoming increasingly intolerant of the disparity in wealth between rich and poor, but at the same time believe the reality of the extent to which it exists is grossly underestimated. Watt (2017) believes the tragedy highlights a broader underlying problem of inequality. The *British Medical Journal*, it states, prohibited the use of the term ‘accidents’ in its publications, some years ago. The rationale for this was that tragedies such as the Grenfell Tower fire are not merely chance circumstances, but a result of complex, interwoven events. Although the economic circumstances of those affected are not fully understood, it is clear they say that the majority of those affected are from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds. They go on to say that national policies – *from governments of all political persuasions* – have failed to adequately address issues of affordable housing.

Despite the soul-searching, the reviews and the inquiries, three years on there remains over 2,000 high-rise buildings across the country, still fitted with potentially dangerous cladding material (Apps, 2020). According to Robbins (2020), housing has become one of the most defining policies of modern times. The crisis in social housing highlights the gulf in disconnect between the public and their elected representatives. This problem extends way beyond London and the South-East, with 79% of those on housing waiting lists residing outside of the capital. They do not suggest the problem should not be attributed to any one individual piece of legislation, but they do however, cite a watershed moment in housing policy when the Conservative party introduced their 'Right to Buy' scheme as part of the Housing Act (1980). The author attributes that policy for the substantial transfer of social housing stock to the private sector market, pricing many tenants out of affordable housing.

On the third anniversary of the tragedy, Newham Council (2020) highlighted the plight of survivors who three years later it is alleged, are still being housed in temporary accommodation. They refer to reports that a charity that was set up to support the victims has been accused of discriminatory practice, bullying and indifference. They also draw attention to a government report (GOV.UK, 2019), that estimates there were still around 262 high-rise blocks clad in the same material as Grenfell, and around 1,700 across the country that remain clad in some form of hazardous material, despite a government initiative to replace these.

An improvement to housing standards is not the only aspect of the project that appears to have failed its original objective. Stec *et al.* (2019) studied charred and semi-burnt remains, first at 1 month, and then 6 months after the blaze. In addition, dust samples were collected from a flat that was 160 m from the tower, at around 17 months . A range of toxic chemicals were found, some at levels around 60 times higher than would normally be expected. There were serious health concerns surrounding such high levels of toxins, but they acknowledged there were 'surprisingly' few studies that focused on the long-term effects of accidental fires (Stec *et al.*, 2019, p. 2). The study became the subject of discussion in Parliament (Parliament.UK, 2019) that included a response from Public Health England, who whilst conceding there were high levels of toxins, did not believe they were high risk and were in fact, comparable to levels in London in general.

The uncomfortable emotions stirred up by tragedies such as Grenfell should not impede the lessons that can be learned, but rather provide a platform for meaningful sociological change.

Connelly and Joseph-Salisbury (2019) believe that with the introduction of 'bounded social change' through sociology, progress can be made to resist the neoliberal influence on Higher Education. As lecturers within universities, they hoped that teaching sociology with highly emotive content, would then encourage dialogue and inspire students to champion issues of social justice, in effect seeing themselves as what they term 'scholar-activists'. As one of the first social workers in attendance following the fire, Mariam Raja witnessed first-hand the trauma experienced by the Grenfell residents (BASW, 2020). The obvious initial needs such as medical attention and housing issues soon extended to long-term health concerns, including the need for access to mental-health services and counselling. Smaller, more intense caseloads helped to understand the pain and trauma of a community already lacking in agency.

Despite a prevalence of sustainability models and theories, Purvis, Mao and Robinson (2018) believe the task of balancing those three pillars of economy, society and environment remains problematic, due in part to a lack of theoretical development. There is a lack of rigor and understanding regarding the interplay or 'trade-offs' of the three elements and the discourse will always be driven by ideology, rather than a clear, developed framework. As Booth and Grierson (2017) reported, in respect of Grenfell, the residents were consulted on the materials to be used in the cladding but ultimately that was overridden in favour of a cheaper alternative. It could be argued that there was a level of cognitive dissonance in this decision, knowing that the retardant properties of the two cladding types were not comparable.

In conclusion, the evidence would suggest that the assessment statement appears to be true, at least as explored within the limited scope of this assignment. In this instance, there was a significant detrimental impact sociologically, as well as ecological and financial. Booth (2019) points out the substantial economic cost of the public inquiry, something that has already cost taxpayers around £40m. That is more than 100 times that of the savings made through use of cheaper cladding. Danewid (2019) infers that the ideology at the heart of decisions that lead to the Grenfell tragedy goes far deeper than merely capitalist principles and has a history of imperialism at its roots, where minorities are regularly marginalised. Although RBKC is perhaps fairly typical of a number of London boroughs, it is certainly not typical of the country as a whole. If you expand the parameters to the whole of the UK, then include factors specific to rural communities such as larger green spaces, lower levels of

pollution and fewer employment opportunities, the variables and dynamics could differ significantly. For rural sustainability, Curry (2012) gives consideration to issues of ethical development and strict planning regulations, as different but equally problematic challenges. Expand further still and look at the issue from a global perspective and the complexities would yet again. Whatever community is researched, each will have its own unique requirements, in the much same way each individual does. Finding a balance that satisfies all, regardless of motivation, values and needs may well prove impossible. Sustainable Development is often portrayed as a 'win-win' situation without the need for trade-offs, but Laine (2005) believes in reality, this is merely corporate rhetoric and that the economy is invariably measured in terms of growth, something that many feel is incompatible with environmental preservation.

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