Reviewer’s report

Title: Developing a comprehensive definition of sustainability

Version: 0 Date: 28 May 2017

Reviewer: Andrew Booth

Reviewer’s report:

This is an interesting and important piece of work that engages with contemporary concerns and which makes a potentially important contribution to the field.

My first observation on reading the title was that systematic reviews with their aggregative function and their tendency towards homogenising would not be a good source for an interpretive purpose such as arriving at a definition. Fortunately, however, the title is misleading - the authors are not reviewing the reviews they are reviewing data from included studies identified from the reviews. I suggest that the title be amended to "Developing a comprehensive definition of sustainability: A review of included studies from published systematic reviews"

The Abstract is exemplary, not only clearly describing Methods but also giving a clear and full interpretation of the findings.

The Authors make a clear case for the need for their research and support this with a well-written Background section.

It is unclear why the Authors chose to use the PubMed Clinical Queries search rather than a more sensitive way of identifying reviews. That apart they should make it explicit that they were using the Systematic Reviews facility on PubMed Clinical Queries as it has three default options. They should also discuss this later as a possible limitation of the study along with the fact that they developed their definition using only a medical/healthcare database.

Although revisiting the included studies to ensure the definition accommodated them is good, it would have been better to have tested the new definition on another different test set e.g. on studies using sustainability in their titles and abstracts in a different disciplinary database. Again the authors should discuss this limitation. (They do mention two related limitations but not specifically the disciplinary limitation or the possible non-retrieval of relevant systematic reviews).

"program and he environment" - presumably a typo, unless reflecting male dominance?

As sustainability is often referenced alongside "spread" it may be helpful to distinguish these concepts explicitly in the article i.e. that sustainability indicates continuation in its original setting whereas spread means the migration of the intervention to a new, and potentially different setting.
Table 1 would be best split into a Summary Table of studies with associated concepts and crosses (to be included in the main body of the text) and the current version of the Table (to be included in Supplementary material). At the moment the Table falls between the two purposes. The Summary Table could use brief labels for the concepts with the fuller version in the supplementary material.

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An article of importance in its field

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