



Introduction to Sustainable Development

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Background

For at least 30 years now, going back to the 1970s when environmental activists established the first Earth Day, the ideas of protecting ecosystems and growing economies have been at odds. The concept of "Sustainable Development" brings them together. It challenges advocates from both sides of the fence to work together on how they can keep a prosperous marketplace without continuing to sacrifice the health of the planet.

Sustainable Development

The World Commission on Environment and Development was initiated by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1982, and its report, *Our Common Future*, was published in 1987. It was chaired by then–Prime Minister of Norway Gro Harlem Brundtland, thus earning the name the “Brundtland Commission.” The commission’s membership was split between developed and developing countries. Its roots were in the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment—where the conflicts between environment and development were first acknowledged—and in the 1980 World Conservation Strategy of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, which argued for conservation as a means to assist development and specifically for the sustainable development and utilization of species, ecosystems, and resources. Drawing on these, the Brundtland Commission began its work committed to the unity of environment and development. As Brundtland argued:

The environment does not exist as a sphere separate from human actions, ambitions, and needs and attempts to defend it in isolation from human concerns have given the very word “environment” a connotation of naivety in some political circles. The word “development” has also been narrowed by some into a very limited focus, along the lines of “what poor nations should do to become richer,” and thus again is automatically dismissed by many in the international arena as being a concern of specialists, of those involved in questions of “development assistance.” But the “environment” is where we live; and “development” is what we all do in attempting to improve our lot within that abode. The two are inseparable.

Finally the World Commission on Environment and Development succeeded to address the problem of conflicts between environment and development goals by formulating a definition of sustainable development and this was achieved from the [Brundtland Commission](#) report of the [United Nations](#) on March 20, 1987. This definition remains the most often quoted definition of Sustainable Development.

The Definition

“Sustainable Development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” In the word “ability” there is the conceptual link to the human development approach.

The Brundtland Commission’s brief definition of sustainable development is surely the standard definition when judged by its widespread use and frequency of citation. This definition remains the most often quoted definition of Sustainable Development.

Sustainability Efforts

The three main pillars of sustainable development include:

- Economic growth,
- Environmental protection and
- Social equality

While many people agree that each of these three ideas contribute to the overall idea of **sustainability**, it is difficult to find evidence of equal levels of initiatives for the three pillars in countries' policies worldwide. With the overwhelming number of countries that put economic growth on the forefront of sustainable development, it is evident that the other two pillars have been suffering, especially with the overall well being of the environment in a dangerously unhealthy state.

The Brundtland Commission has put forth a conceptual framework that many nations agree with and want to try to make a difference with in their countries, but it has been difficult to change these concepts about sustainability into concrete actions and programs. Implementing sustainable development globally is still a challenge, but because of the Brundtland Commission's efforts, progress has been made. After releasing their report, "Our Common Future," the Brundtland Commission called for an international meeting under UN to take place where more concrete initiatives and goals could be mapped out.

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (the so-called “Earth Summit”) issued a declaration of principles, a detailed Agenda 21 of desired actions, international agreements on climate change and biodiversity, and a statement of principles on forests. Ten years later, in 2002, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, the commitment to sustainable development was reaffirmed.

In the interim, sustainable development as a concept, as a goal, and as a movement spread rapidly and is now central to the mission of countless international organizations, national institutions, corporate enterprises, “sustainable cities,” and locales.

At the same time the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and the World Summit in Johannesburg in 2002 marked the development path of the UN that reached the new and wider concept of Sustainable Human Development. Human Development as a participatory and dynamic process is a definition that fits the description of Sustainable Development in the well-known **Brundtland Report** perfectly.

The use of the above definition has led many to see sustainable development as having a major focus on relating to more than one generation equity. Although the brief definition does not explicitly mention the environment or development, the subsequent paragraphs of the report, while rarely quoted, are clear. On development, the report states that human needs are basic and essential; that economic growth—but also equity to share resources with the poor—is required to sustain them; and that equity is encouraged by effective citizen participation. On the environment, the text is also clear.

Sustainable Development challenges us to consider how people and the planet co-exist in complex systems. If we are to move forward without depleting natural resources, disregarding pollution, or exploiting one social group for the profit of another, we need some very different thinking.

Sustainable Development stands for meeting the needs of present generations without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their own needs – in other words, a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come. It offers a vision of progress that integrates immediate and longer-term objectives, local and global action, and regards social, economic and environmental issues as inseparable and interdependent components of human progress.

In the extensive discussion and use of the concept since then (see e.g. Holmberg, 1992; Reed, 1997; Harris et al., 2001), there has been a growing recognition of three essential aspects of sustainable development:

- **Economic:** An economically sustainable system must be able to produce goods and services on a continuing basis, to maintain manageable levels of government and external debt, and to avoid extreme sectoral imbalances which damage agricultural or industrial production.
- **Environmental:** An environmentally sustainable system must maintain a stable resource base, avoiding over-exploitation of renewable resource systems or environmental sink functions, and depleting non-renewable resources only to the extent that investment is made in adequate substitutes. This includes maintenance of biodiversity, atmospheric stability, and other ecosystem functions not ordinarily classed as economic resources.
- **Social:** A socially sustainable system must achieve fairness in distribution and opportunity, adequate provision of social services including health and education, gender equity, and political accountability and participation.

These three elements of **sustainability** introduce many new issues to the original, simple definition of economic development (Beyond GNP).

From Income to Human Development Approach

The origin of criticism to the use of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita for measuring the level of development in different countries can probably be traced back to the pioneering United Nations Reports in which specific recommendations were made against the use of this indicator as a measure of the level of living (Noorbakhsh, 1996). As a result, the academic world, especially from the 70s onwards, started to look for other kinds of indicators to explain economic development.

The main objective of human development, as stated in the 2011 Human Development Report (HDR) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy, and creative lives. In this context, income and economic growth are a means and not an end to development. The title of the report is : Sustainability and Equity - A Better Future for All. People's well-being depends on how income is used to achieve higher quality of life standards. This first approach to human development has changed over the last ten years due to an increasing focus on the environmental aspects of daily life. The Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and the World Summit in Johannesburg in 2002 marked the development path of the UN that reached the new and wider concept of Sustainable Human Development. Human Development as a participatory and dynamic process is a definition that fits the description of Sustainable Development in the well-known Brundtland Report perfectly.

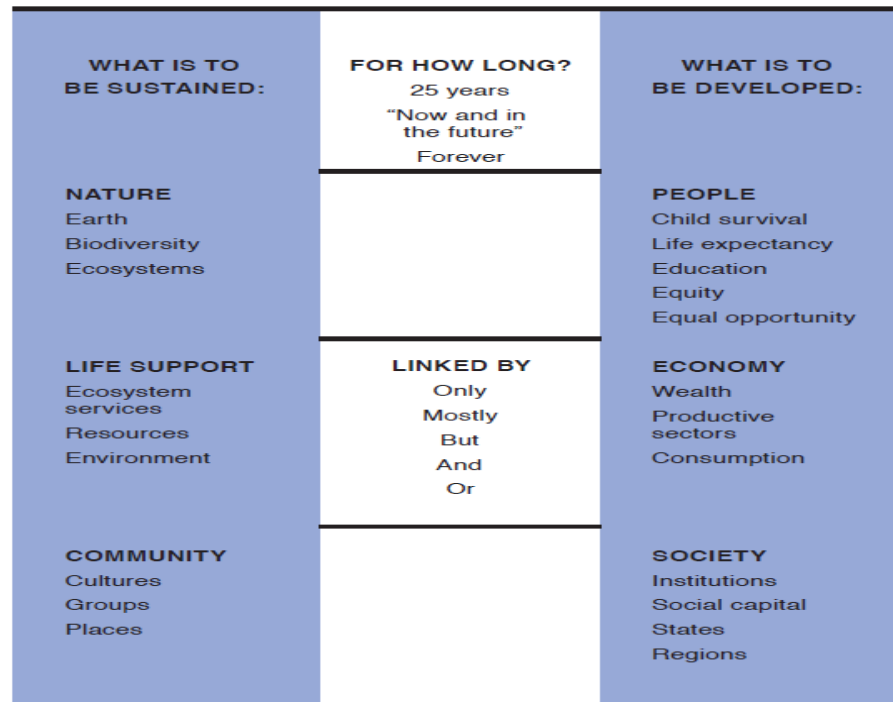
The goals expressed or implied are multidimensional, raising the issue of how to balance objectives and how to judge success or failure.

This flexibility allows programs of environment or development; places from local to global; and institutions of government, civil society, business, and industry to each project their interests, hopes, and aspirations onto the banner of sustainable development. However the next big question about Sustainable Development is **what to sustain and what to develop?**

What to Sustain and what to Develop

In the years following the Brundtland Commission's report, the creative ambiguity of the standard definition, while allowing a range of disparate groups to assemble under the sustainable development tent, also created questions what sustainable development really means.

One important study—by the Board on Sustainable Development of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences—sought to bring some order to the broad literature its members reviewed. In its report, *Our Common Journey: A Transition toward Sustainability*, the board focused on the seemingly inherent distinction between what advocates and analysts sought to sustain and what they sought to develop, the relationship between the two, and the time horizon of the future (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Definitions of sustainable development

SOURCE: U.S. National Research Council, Policy Division, Board on Sustainable Development, *Our Common Journey: A Transition Toward Sustainability* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1999).

Thus under the heading **“what is to be sustained,”** the board identified three major categories:

1. **Nature**
2. **Life support systems, and**
3. **Community**

Also the board identified as intermediate categories for each, such as Earth, environment, and cultures. Drawing from the surveyed literature, the board found that most commonly, emphasis was placed on life support systems, which defined nature or environment as a source of services for the utilitarian life support of humankind. The study of ecosystem services has strengthened this definition over time. In contrast, some of the sustainable development literature valued nature for its intrinsic value rather than its utility for human beings. There were also parallel demands to sustain cultural diversity, including livelihoods, groups, and places that constitute distinctive and threatened communities.

Similarly, there were three quite distinct ideas under the heading **“what should be developed”**:

1. **People,**
2. **Economy, and**
3. **Society.**

Much of the early literature focused on economic development, with productive sectors providing employment, desired consumption, and wealth. More recently, attention has shifted to human development, including an emphasis on values and goals, such as increased life expectancy, education, equity, and opportunity. Finally, the Board on Sustainable Development also identified calls to develop society that emphasized the values of security and well-being of as well as the social capital of relationships and community ties. There was ready agreement in the literature that sustainable development implies linking what is to be sustained with what is to be developed.

The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development marked a further expansion of the standard definition with the widely used three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental. The Johannesburg Declaration created “a collective responsibility to advance and strengthen the interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable development—economic development, social development and environmental protection—at local, national, regional and global levels.” In so doing, the World Summit addressed a running concern over the limits of the framework of environment and development, wherein development was widely viewed solely as economic development. For many under the common tent of sustainable development, such a narrow definition obscured their concerns for human development, equity, and social justice.

Thus while the three pillars were rapidly adopted, there was no universal agreement as to their details. A Web search of the phrase “three pillars of sustainable development” finds a wide variety of environmental, economic, and social pillars with differences most pronounced in characterizing the social pillar.

Three major variants of social development are found, each of which seeks to compensate for elements missing in the narrow focus on economic development. The first is simply a generic noneconomic social designation that uses terms such as “social,” “social development,” and “social progress.”

The second emphasizes human development as opposed to economic development: “human development,” “human well-being,” or just “people.” The third variant focuses on issues of justice and equity: “social justice,” “equity,” and “poverty alleviation.”

Sustainable Development may seem an insurmountable task, yet every individual effort will make a difference. At first, the benefit of your individual effort might not be perceptible, however history has shown that perseverance is indeed rewarded.