

Determining Sustainability



Sustainable development, sustainable community, sustainable industry, sustainable agriculture. You may have heard these words used in many different ways, but what does "sustainability" really mean and how can you tell if your community is sustainable? Sustainability is related to the quality of life in a community -- whether the economic, social and environmental systems that make up the community are providing a healthy, productive, meaningful life for all community residents, present and future.

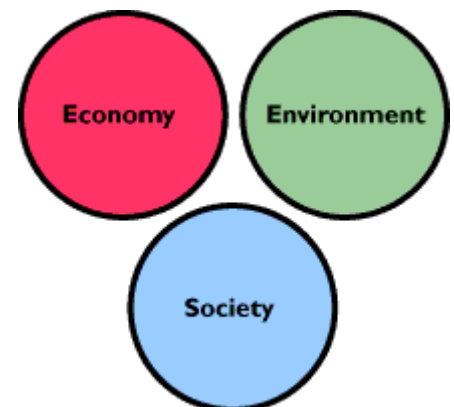
How has the quality of life in your community changed over the last 20 or 40 years?

- How has your community changed economically?
 - Are there fewer or more good-paying jobs -- are people working more and earning less or are most people living well?
 - Is there more or less poverty and homelessness?
 - Is it easier or harder for people to find homes that they can afford?
- How has your community changed socially?
 - Is there less or more crime?
 - Are people less or more willing to volunteer?
 - Are fewer or more people running for public office or working on community boards?
- How has your community changed environmentally?
 - Has air quality in the urban areas gotten better or worse?
 - Are there more or fewer warnings about eating fish caught in local streams?
 - Has the water quality gotten better or worse?

These are traditional measures of communities. We use numbers to show progress: "Unemployment rose 0.4 percent in January," or "The economy grew 2% last year." However, the traditional numbers only show changes in one part of the community without showing the many links between the community's economy, society and environment. It is as if a community were made of three separate parts -- an economic part, a social part and an environmental part that do not overlap like the picture below:

A view of community as three separate, unrelated parts: an economic part, a social part and an environmental part.

However, when society, economy and environment are viewed as separate, unrelated parts of a community, the community's problems are also viewed as isolated issues. Economic development councils try to create more jobs. Social needs are addressed by health care services and housing authorities. Environmental agencies try to prevent and correct pollution problems.



This piecemeal approach can have a number of bad side-effects:

- Solutions to one problem can make another problem worse. Creating affordable housing is a good thing, but when that housing is built in areas far from workplaces, the result is increased traffic and the pollution that comes with it.
- Piecemeal solutions tend to create opposing groups. How often have you heard the argument 'If the environmentalists win, the economy will suffer,' and its opposing view 'If business has its way, the environment will be destroyed.'
- Piecemeal solutions tend to focus on short-term benefits without monitoring long-term results. The pesticide DDT seemed like a good solution to insect pests at the time, but the long-term results were devastating.

Rather than a piecemeal approach, what we need is a view of the community that takes into account the links between the economy, the environment and the society. The figure below is frequently used to show the connections:

A view of community that shows the links among its three parts: the economic part, the social part and the environmental part.

Actions to improve conditions in a sustainable community take these connections into account. The very questions asked about issues in a 'sustainable' community include references to these links. For example, the question 'Do the jobs available match the skills of the available work force?' looks at the link between economy and education. Understanding the three parts and their links is key to understanding sustainability, because sustainability is about more than just quality of life. It is about understanding the connections between and achieving balance among the social, economic, and environmental pieces of a community.

