

# Sustainability at the United Nations

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The United Nations **Conference on the Human Environment** in Stockholm in 1972, helped to focus attention on environmental concerns and in the years following the conference, the global community acknowledged that more exploration was needed of the inter-relationships between the environment and socio-economic issues of poverty and underdevelopment. Thus the concept of sustainable development emerged in the 1980s in response to a growing realization of the need to balance economic and social progress with concern for the environment and the stewardship of natural resources.

The concept gained worldwide momentum with the publication of ***Our Common Future*** by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987. The Commission defined sustainable development in the publication as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” This definition considers that while development may be essential to satisfy human needs and improve quality of life, it should occur in such a way that the capacity of the natural environment to meet present and future needs is not compromised.

The publication ***Caring for the Earth: A Strategy for Sustainable Living*** by the World Conservation Union (IUCN), the United Nations Environment Program, and the World Wide Fund For Nature (WWF) in 1991, contains a definition of sustainable development which complements the one from *Our Common Future*. It defined sustainable development as “improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems.”

The **Brundtland Commission** definition emphasizes meeting human needs in a manner that respects intergenerational responsibility and the IUCN definition emphasizes improving the quality of human life while protecting the Earth’s capacity for regeneration. The two definitions together give a good understanding of the meaning of sustainable development as benefiting both people and ecosystems.

The UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, the “**Earth Summit**”, gave high priority in its *Agenda 21* to the role of education in pursuing the kind of development that would respect and nurture the natural environment. It focused on the process of orienting and re-orienting education in order to foster values and attitudes of respect for the environment and envisaged ways and means of doing so.

The 2002 **Johannesburg Summit** broadened the vision of sustainable development and re-affirmed the educational objectives of the Millennium Development Goals and the Education for All Dakar Framework for Action, the Summit proposed the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development and the United Nations General Assembly in its 57th Session in December 2002, proclaimed the **UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development** for the period 2005 – 2014.

