

What is Sustainability?



The modern concept of environmental sustainability goes back to the post-World War II period, when a utopian view of technology-driven economic growth gave way to a perception that the quality of the environment was linked closely to economic development. Interest grew sharply during the environmental movements of the 1960s, when popular books such as *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson (1962) and *The Population Bomb* by Paul R. Ehrlich (1968) raised public awareness.

Sustainability is the ability to provide for the needs of the world's current population without damaging the ability of future generations to provide for themselves.

The FAO has identified considerations for technical cooperation that affect three types of sustainability:

- **Institutional sustainability.** Can a strengthened institutional structure continue to deliver the results of technical cooperation to end users? The results may not be sustainable if, for example, the planning authority that depends on the technical cooperation loses access to top management, or is not provided with adequate resources after the technical cooperation ends. Institutional sustainability can also be linked to the concept of social sustainability, which asks how the interventions can be sustained by social structures and institutions.
- **Economical and financial sustainability.** Can the results of technical cooperation continue to yield an economic benefit after the technical cooperation is withdrawn? For example, the benefits from the introduction of new crops may not be sustained if the constraints to marketing the crops are not resolved. Similarly, economic, as distinct from financial, sustainability may be at risk if the end users continue to depend on heavily subsidized activities and inputs.
- **Ecological sustainability.** Are the benefits to be generated by the technical cooperation likely to lead to a deterioration in the physical environment, thus indirectly contributing to a fall in production, or well-being of the groups targeted and their society?