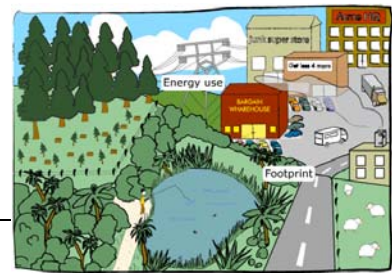


Defining Sustainability



Sustainable development is an ambiguous, controversial, and perhaps overworked concept. In theory, it means using Earth's resources and improving quality of life for all without degrading and using up those resources so as to compromise their ability to future generations. However, practical interpretations of the term vary widely. Some people, including some with traditional ecological knowledge, say it is incongruous and impossible to have the two words together; that continued growth and development (improving quality of life) cannot be sustained in a finite world.

Some people focus on the sustainable part of the concept and believe that we must consider the health of Earth's life-support systems and its biodiversity as long-term priorities in our decision making and behaviours. Others focus more on the development side of the term and are in favour of continued growth and an increase in demands on the planet's resources. They believe that technology and substitution of one resource for another will enable us to stay within acceptable limits of growth. Despite these differing points of view, a transition to more sustainable ways of improving the quality of life for billions of people has begun in many places.

GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS & AGENCIES

“Each generation is entitled to the interest on the natural capital, but the principal should be handed on unimpaired.”

Canada's Commission on Conservation (in 1915)

“Sustainable development means implementing a process that integrates environmental, economic and social considerations into decision making. This reinforces the World Commission on Environment and Development's conclusion that development should be sustainable for the benefit of current and future generations.”

Environment Canada

“Development which ensures that the utilization of resources and the environment today does not damage prospects for their use by future generations.”

Canada's National Task Force on Environment and Economy

“Living on the earth's income rather than eroding its capital. It means keeping the consumption of renewable natural resources within the limits of their replenishment. It means handing down to successive generations not only man-made wealth, but also natural wealth, such as clean and adequate water supplies, good arable land, a wealth of wildlife, and ample forests.”

The United Kingdom's Sustainable Development Strategy

“Sustainable development is not a fixed state of harmony, but rather a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are made consistent with future as well as present needs.”

Office of the Auditor General of Canada

ORGANIZATIONS

“Sustainable development requires environmental health, economic prosperity, and social equity.”

Earth Council

“Sustainable development is the achievement of continued economic and social development without detriment to the environment and natural resources. The quality of future human activity and development is increasingly seen as being dependent on maintaining this balance.”

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

“Sustainability means resolving the conflict between two competing goals: the sustenance of human life and the integrity of nature. Why two competing goals? Living beyond our ecological means will lead to the destruction of humanity's only home. Having insufficient natural resources, and living in unsatisfactory and inequitable ways will cause destructive conflict and degrade our social fabric. In a sense, we are putting a new spin on the old nature vs. nurture question. How can we get nurture without destroying its ultimate source, nature?”

Redefining Progress

“Sustainable development involves the simultaneous pursuit of economic prosperity, environmental quality and social equity. Companies aiming for sustainability need to perform not against a single, financial bottom line but against this triple bottom line.”

World Business Council for Sustainable Development

“Improving the quality of life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems.”

World Conservation Union

“Sustainable development is a process of changing the character of a society. It is a set of attitudes and values we need to incorporate into our way of life. It involves fundamental changes in the way business is done, what is taught to our children, how we as individuals live and conduct our lives, and how government and societies' public institutions address the essential problems affecting our life.”

International Institute for Sustainable Development

EXPERTS

“Sustainable development is a journey rather than a destination.”

David Buzzelli, former member of Canada's National Round Table on Environment and Economy, and former president of Dow Chemical Canada Inc.

“Growth in harmony with our environment, preserving our resource base for our economic well-being, and planning for our children's future.”

Gary Filmon, former Premier of Manitoba and Chair of the Manitoba Round Table on Environment and Economy

“Development without destruction.”

Maurice Strong, Secretary-General of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit.

“That ‘buzz-word’ sustainable development is not a destination but a direction. In reality, we surpassed our own needs a long time ago. Now it’s all about achieving balance. We will never know what it looks like, so we need to break it down into bite-sized pieces. In an 100 000 piece puzzle of a sustainable future, sustainable development is perhaps only 100 pieces.”

David McGuinty, Executive Director of the National Round Table on the Environment and Economy

“To be sustainable, development must be economically viable, ecologically supportable, and socially acceptable. If any one of these is not delivered, the others collapse. To be sustainable, development must provide fulfilling jobs and enrich lives and rehabilitate ecosystems. It must redistribute wealth and power, reduce material and energy use, foster civility, build cooperative social involvement, and prepare for surprises. It must do all these things more or less at once, because they are all mutually interdependent.... It is not surprising, then, that some of the best development work is done by small, flexible groups with modest projects and the active involvement of local residents.”

Robert Gibson, Faculty of Environmental Studies, University of Waterloo

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1. Create a list of criteria that could be used to complete one of the following statements:
 - a. Development is sustainable if it....
 - b. A sustainable future environment implies that....
 - c. A sustainable community is one that....
 2. Given all of the different definitions of sustainable development above, make a list of the criteria that must be met before development can be considered sustainable.
 3. Design a 10-point checklist of indicators that could be used to test the sustainability of your local community.
 4. In summary, an often used basis for the definition of sustainable development is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” *World Commission on Environment and Development, “Our Common Future” – The Brundtland Report.*