



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



What is Sustainable Development?

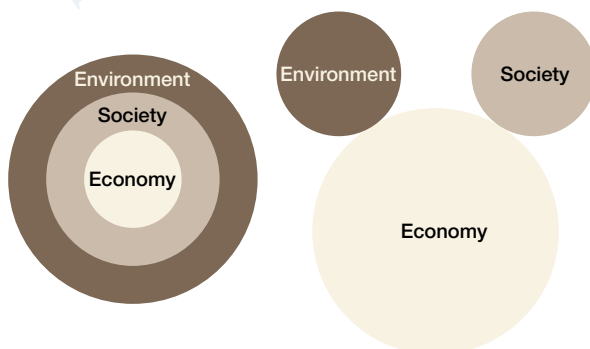
“We hold the future in our hands. Together, we must ensure that our grandchildren will not have to ask why we failed to do the right thing, and let them suffer the consequences.”

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, 2007

Sustainable development is the overarching paradigm of the United Nations. The concept of sustainable development was described by the 1987 Bruntland Commission Report as *“development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”*

Sustainability is a paradigm for thinking about a future in which environmental, social and economic considerations are balanced in the pursuit of development and an improved quality of life. These three spheres – society, environment and economy – are intertwined. For example, a prosperous society relies on a healthy environment to provide food and resources, safe drinking water, and clean air for its citizens.

The sustainability paradigm is a major change from the previous paradigm of economic development with its damaging social and environmental consequences. Until recently these consequences have been seen as inevitable and acceptable. However, we now realize that major damage or serious threats to the well-being of humans and the environment in pursuit of economic development have no place within the sustainability paradigm.



VISUALIZING SUSTAINABILITY

We might then ask, what is the difference between sustainable development and sustainability? Sustainability is often

thought of as a long-term goal (i.e. a more sustainable world), while sustainable development refers to the many processes and pathways to achieve it (e.g. sustainable agriculture and forestry, sustainable production and consumption, good government, research and technology transfer, education and training, etc.).

Principles of Sustainable Development

All sustainable development programmes must consider the three spheres of sustainability – environment, society and economy – as well as an underlying dimension of culture. Since sustainable development addresses the local contexts of these three spheres, it will take many forms around the world. The ideals and principles that underlie sustainability include broad concepts such as equity among generations, gender equity, peace, tolerance, poverty reduction, environmental preservation and restoration, natural resource conservation, and social justice. The Rio Declaration¹ contains 27 principles, including:

- People are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature;
- The right to development must be fulfilled so as to meet developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations in an equitable way;
- Eradicating poverty and reducing disparities in living standards in different parts of the world are essential to sustainable development.
- Environmental protection is an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it.

¹ The Rio Declaration emerged from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, also called the Earth Summit, which was held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. A total of 172 governments participated, including 108 heads of state or government. Agenda 21 is the official document of the Earth Summit.



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- International actions in the fields of environment and development should also address the interests and needs of all countries.
- To achieve sustainable development and a higher quality of life for all people, countries should reduce and eliminate unsustainable patterns of production and consumption and promote appropriate demographic policies.
- Women play a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is therefore essential to achieving sustainable development.
- Warfare is inherently destructive to sustainable development. Peace, development and environmental protection are interdependent and indivisible.
- Seeing all humans as having universal attributes.
- Knowing that technology and science alone cannot solve all of our problems.
- Emphasizing the role of public participation in community and governmental decision-making. People whose lives will be affected by decisions must be involved in the process leading to the decisions.
- Calling for greater transparency and accountability in governmental decision-making.
- Employing the precautionary principle – taking action to avoid the possibility of serious or irreversible environmental or social harm even when scientific knowledge is incomplete or inconclusive.

These principles can guide the efforts of governments, communities and organizations to define sustainability goals and create programmes to help achieve those goals.

Perspectives of Sustainable Development

Not all the concepts associated with sustainability are incorporated in the 27 principles of sustainable development in the Rio Declaration. Accompanying principles of sustainable development are perspectives that have become part of the global sustainability dialogue, such as:

- A systems thinking approach², rather than an approach that looks at problems in isolation should be used. Sustainability issues are linked and part of a “whole.”
- Understanding local issues in a global context and recognizing that solutions to local problems can have global consequences.
- Realizing that individual consumer decisions affect and give rise to resource extraction and manufacturing in distant places.
- Considering differing views before reaching a decision or judgement.
- Recognizing that economic values, religious values, and societal values compete for importance as people with different interests and backgrounds interact.

² *Systems thinking* is the process of understanding how elements of a system influence one another within the whole. Systems thinking, also called a whole-systems approach has been defined as an approach to problem solving, in which “problems” are viewed as parts of an overall system, rather than as isolated parts, outcomes or events.

It is important that educators, leaders, and citizens recognize that sustainable development is an evolving concept and that the list of sustainability perspectives can therefore grow and change.

Values within the Sustainability Paradigm

Throughout its history, the United Nations has been a champion of values related to human dignity, fundamental freedoms, human rights, equity, and care for the environment. Sustainable development takes these values a step further, extending them beyond the present generation to future generations. Sustainable development means valuing biodiversity and conservation along with human diversity, inclusivity, and participation. In the economic realm, some embrace sufficiency for all while others uphold equity of economic opportunity. Another vehicle for the values inherent in the sustainability paradigm is the Earth Charter, a declaration of fundamental ethical principles for building a fair, sustainable, and peaceful global society.

Sustainable Development Topics

Sustainable development includes a number of topics, which U.N. Member States have agreed to address. With their environmental, social, economic and political roots, these topics are complex and are often difficult to define as well as find solutions for. They include reducing poverty, changing consumption patterns, global population growth, and protecting human health, all of which present challenges to our social and economic systems. In addition, the topics also include protecting the land we live on, the water we



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drink, the air we breathe, and the resources we use as well as major contemporary challenges like climate change and loss of biodiversity. The list is extensive. All of these and related topics can be approached from a sustainability perspective.

Creating Sustainability Goals and Plans

Following the Earth Summit in 1992, governments and communities were charged with the responsibility of creating sustainability plans. In order to do so, governments and civil society must identify priorities and create sustainability goals. Then, they can create plans to achieve them. Ideally, at the national level, every ministry or department would include sustainability in its goals, plans and policies given that it is the responsibility of all sectors of governments and societies to work towards a more sustainable future.

Coordinated Efforts

Governments and civil society as well as individuals must hold the responsibility for a more sustainable future. All must contribute in their own way. The 40 chapters of Agenda 21 describe ways forward in many areas, from agriculture to waste disposal. Nevertheless, the education community has a special role to perform. Explicitly mentioned in each of the chapters, education is an essential ingredient for a more sustainable future. For example, it is through education that the next generation of citizens, voters, workers, professionals and leaders are prepared for life-long learning. Without education, progress towards a more sustainable future will be compromised. Indeed, we must learn our way forward.

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