

Think piece: Why sustainable development is important

These notes are intended as preparatory reading for the SEAL and the Global Dimension unit on sustainable development entitled "What is Sustainability?"

There is a growing consensus that current forms of development are not sustainable. For example, if all countries followed the European model of development we would need at least another two planets to provide the resources, absorb the wastes and provide life support systems. One North American uses as much energy as over 200 West or East Africans.

Sustainable development looks at issues of equality - 80% of the world's resources are used by 20% of the world's population; can we allow this to continue? It also considers ecological issues - we are losing up to 137 species worldwide each day from tropical rainforests alone due to the effects of human "development"¹.

It is becoming increasingly clear that current forms of development are undermining the environmental support systems on which the human race (not to mention all the other species) depends for survival.

Economic development today is usually measured by the increase in average incomes but, in origin, "economy" means managing resources. Sustainable development is important, as it takes into account equity (social justice) and environment, as well as economic factors (beyond the narrow definition), in order to ensure a more balanced form of development.

Many organisations use the three circles model² (*Figure 1*) showing the need for balance between Environment, Equity and Economy, to bring about sustainable development.

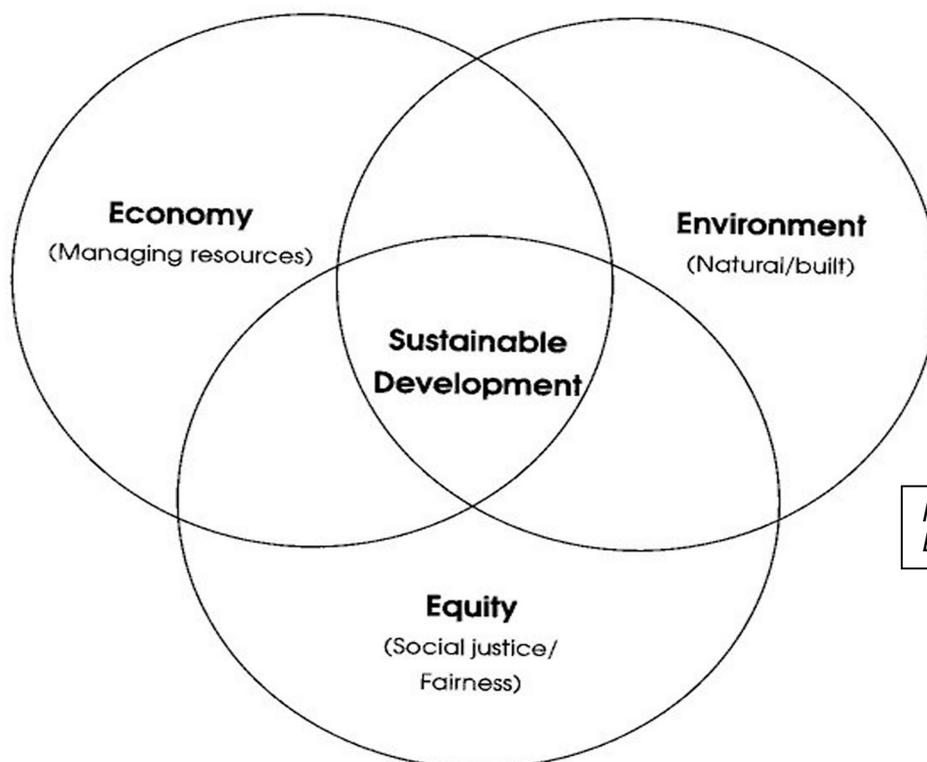


Figure 1: Sustainable Development Venn Diagram

¹ NASA http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/Library/Deforestation/deforestation_3.html

² Originally proposed by the World Bank, but no longer available on their website: www.worldbank.org

In practice, there is debate about whether all the circles are equal. Most governments and businesses seem to see the Economy (and economic growth) as most important, although conventional economic growth may be unsustainable and is often very unequal. Those from a world development background usually see the Equity / Social circle as most important, as they would argue that sustainable development will come about or not by human actions.

A more radical view of sustainable development questions the whole way we look at the world and our relationship to it. This can be seen in the Ecological Limits model (*Figure 2*). In this model, the defining limit is the ecology of the planet – we have to accept that we depend on the biosphere for survival (unless we are going to colonise other planets). The economy should serve to support human needs *within these ecological limits*. Those from an environmental action background would connect more readily with this view, though a truly global perspective needs to be taken on board. WWF has started to talk about “One Planet Living” to reflect this idea³.

‘Ecological Limits’ model of Sustainable Development

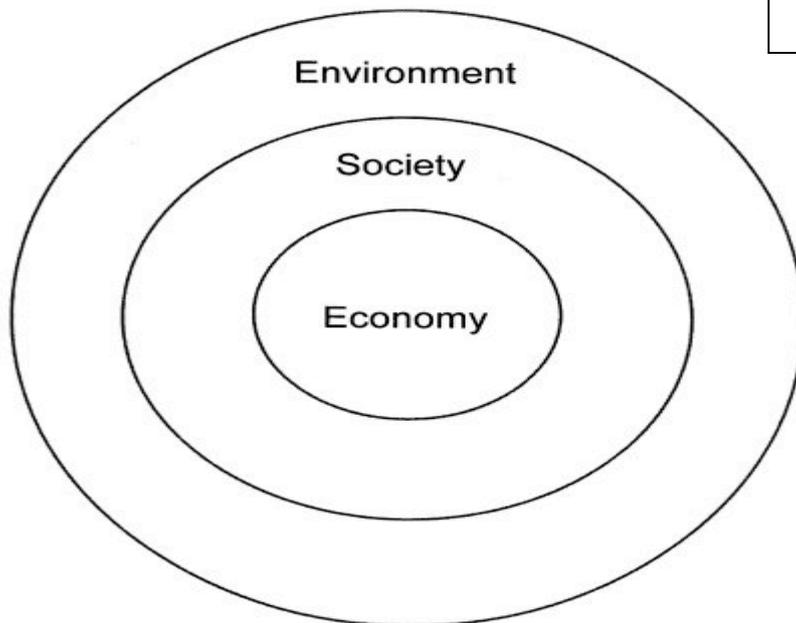


Figure 2: Ecological Limits Model

³ www.wwf-uk.org/filelibrary/pdf/livingplanet2002.pdf

Some feel that we will not achieve sustainability without some form of spiritual transformation - that we need to see ourselves as part of something greater⁴. This does not necessarily mean believing in a creator, but appreciating that humans are just a part of a bigger picture and that we diminish ourselves by viewing nature in terms only of its value to human kind. Most pre-industrial societies had (and have) this sense of connectivity from their daily dependence on natural cycles. How those growing up in urban areas achieve a sense of reverence for the natural world is a challenge for parents and educators. There is also a need to examine the values needed for sustainable living and to question the prevalent culture of consumerism and materialism (*Figure 3*), by which young people are increasingly bombarded from an early and impressionable age.



Figure 3: Rats by Polyp

Critics of sustainable development (or what is often simplistically termed “green thinking”) say that to put such store on the environment implies reverting to living pre-modern lifestyles. However, a counter argument is the need to think smarter about how we use resources, embodied in such theories as Factor Four and Factor Ten⁵. Sustainability is essentially about focussing on issues about the quality of life rather than the standard of living, and promoting a far more efficient and equitable use of resources.

Ultimately, the development path chosen nationally or internationally is significantly determined by political decisions. However, one of the drawbacks of most contemporary

⁴ “Being, not doing”, Martin Palmer _ www.wflearning.co.uk/news/viewpoint_000000533.asp

⁵ Factor Four is the idea that resource productivity should be quadrupled so that wealth is doubled, and resource use is halved. The concept has been summed up as “doing more with less”. It is argued that this would result in substantial macro-economic gains. Factor Ten is the idea that per-capita material-flows from rich countries need to be reduced by 90% to hit the Factor Four target, because they are responsible for five times as much resource use as Southern countries. See www.bsdglobel.com and follow the trail “strategies and tools”, “guiding principles”, “factor four”.

political systems is an absence of emphasis on long-term future planning - most electoral programmes only look a few years ahead, whereas sustainability requires thinking fifty to a hundred years or more ahead.

We have to be brave, both in the decisions we make individually and collectively today, and in revising our visions and dreams of the future.

Discussion points:

- What kind of vision do you have of the future? Is it one based on technological development solving current problems, is it a doom and gloom scenario – or is it something completely different?
 - Has the time come for us to make difficult decisions now about how we plan to develop and use resources? Or is this something we can leave to a later date – perhaps even to the next generation?
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