



Sustainable Development: an Evolving Concept

Sustainable development is a dynamic concept with many dimensions and many interpretations. Some argue that there is no need for one agreed definition of sustainable development; instead, sustainable development should be seen as a process of change that is heavily reliant upon local contexts, needs, and priorities. Clearly, while there is no one definition, the global dimensions and impacts of the challenges facing the 21st Century require extensive international co-operation, political commitment and stewardship, and energy to move forward into a sustainable future.

World Commission on Environment and Development

The concept of *sustainable development* emerged in the 1980s in response to a growing realisation of the need to balance economic and social progress with concern for the environment and the stewardship of natural resources. The 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm helped to focus attention on environmental concerns and led to the creation of many environmental ministries and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working to conserve the planet's resources. But in the years following the conference, the global community acknowledged that a closer examination was needed of the inter-relationships between the environment and socio-economic issues of poverty and underdevelopment.

The concept of sustainable development gained worldwide support 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.”¹ 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.

Earth Summit

Sustainable development was a key issue on the agenda at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), or the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro. The Summit brought together representatives of Governments, international and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and civil society to discuss the challenges of the next century and to adopt a global plan of action to meet these challenges. The action plan, known as Agenda 21, provided a comprehensive set of principles to assist Governments and other institutions in implementing sustainable development policies and programmes. It also suggested that economic, social and environmental considerations were intertwined with issues of poverty, equity, quality of life, and global environmental protection.

Over 170 countries adopted Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, in a great show of commitment to a “global partnership to conserve, protect and restore the health and integrity of the Earth's ecosystem.”² Following the Earth Summit, the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) was created to ensure follow-up of UNCED; to monitor and report on the implementation of Earth Summit agreements at all levels; and to act as a forum for the ongoing negotiation of international policies on sustainable development. The CSD appointed UNESCO to be the Task Manager for Chapter 36 of the Agenda, responsible for accelerating education reforms and coordinating stakeholder activities. UNESCO was also charged with providing professional and technical support to Member States; developing sample curriculum and training materials; and disseminating innovative policies, programmes, and practices on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

From Rio to Johannesburg

During the 1990s, thinking about sustainable development evolved further through many UN conferences including the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, the International Conference on Population and Development (1994), the World Summit for Social Development (1995), the Fourth World Conference on

¹ *World Commission on Environment and Development, Our Common Future, 1987, p 43.*

² *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, Principle 7.*

Women (1995), the Conference on Human Settlements (1996), the World Food Summit (1996), and subsequent five- and ten-year reviews.

“Our biggest challenge in this new century is to take an idea that seems abstract - sustainable development - and turn it into a reality for all the world’s people.” -Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, March 14, 2001, Bangladesh³

While considerable progress has been made developing the concepts of sustainable development, achievement of the UNCED goals has been lagging. Pressures on the environment and natural resources has kept the state of the world’s environment fragile; poverty has increased in absolute terms; and unsustainable production and consumption patterns abide in many parts of the developed world. And while notable achievements have been made in improving health, new problems such as HIV/AIDS have reversed hard-won gains in infant survival and life expectancy in a growing number of countries and communities worldwide.

Johannesburg: Into a Sustainable Future?

Ten years after Rio, the world community came together to review accomplishments and outcomes of the Earth Summit, and to adopt concrete measures and identify quantifiable targets for better implementation of Agenda 21, and the more recent Millennium Development Goals. At the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, a more fully developed paradigm of sustainable development was endorsed at the highest political levels. The Political Declaration states that sustainable development is built on three “interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars” - economic development, social development and environmental protection - which must be established “at local, national, regional and global levels” (Para. 5). This paradigm recognises the complexity and interrelationship of critical issues such as poverty, wasteful consumption, environmental degradation, urban decay, population growth, gender inequality, health, conflict, and the violation of human rights.

The Summit noted that practical and sustained steps were required to address many of these interlinked problems. As an implementation-focused Summit, Johannesburg resulted in major commitments to expand access to safe water, proper sanitation and modern, clean energy services, as well as to reverse the decline of ecosystems. In addition to those commitments, the Summit resulted in the launch of more than 300 voluntary partnerships between Governments, NGOs and businesses to support sustainable development efforts. This included three partnerships that UNESCO forged on education for sustainable development including:

- *Global Higher Education for Sustainability Partnership*: between UNESCO and the International Association of Universities, Copernicus Campus, Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future;
- *New Flagship Programme for Rural People*: between UNESCO, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the Government of Egypt and various NGOs; and the
- *International Marketing and Communications Initiative for Sustainable Development*: between UNESCO, J. Walter Thompson Advertising Company, the Canadian Federal Department of Industry and Environment, and York University.

Sustainable development is not a neatly defined concept, but a catalytic vision. Translating this vision into commitment and action will be the yardstick of success or failure in the attainment of sustainable development goals.

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³ United Nations Press Release: SG/SM/7739 “Secretary General Calls for Break in Political Stalemate over Environmental Issues,” 15/03/01.
